PERCEIVED TOXICITY IN GAMING COMMUNITIES AND THEIR IMPACT ON BRAND IMAGE

A study of how the toxicity of a gaming community affects the brand image of the game League of Legends and its sponsors, as well as how this phenomenon can be researched

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Master's thesis in international business

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Åbo 2023

ÅBO AKADEMI UNIVERSITY – Faculty of social sciences business and economics

Abstract for a master's thesis

Subject: Branding
Author: Jenna Turpeinen
Thesis title: **Toxic gaming communities and their impact on brand image**   A study of how the toxicity of a gaming community affects the brand image of the game League of Legends and its sponsors, and how this phenomenon can be researched
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Abstract: League of Legends (LoL) is a computer strategy game, a so-called multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA). LoL counted over 180 million players in April 2022, which makes it one of the most popular MOBAs, thirteen years after its introduction by Riot Games. LoL features two teams with the aim of destroying the other teams' base. While LoL has attracted researchers' attention from various disciplines, e.g., performance analysis, the role of the individual in team performance and gender disparity, toxicity is a poorly researched topic in the context of LoL. Toxicity in virtual spaces is defined as when a player uses disrespectful language intending to humiliate or insult another player.   The game has over 140 unique *champions* to choose from, and five different roles to play in each team. The roles in the game are *Attack damage carry (ADC), Support, Mid-Laner, Top-Laner* and *Jungler.* Different champions are more suitable to certain roles, but one can play whichever champion, in whichever role.   LoL has tried to decrease toxic behaviour through *reporting*, which means that players themselves act as moderators and are thus able to report another player whom they perceive to behave toxically in a game or chat. Nevertheless, reporting can be misused, and therefore needs more scientific attention from scholarly academics. Therefore, keyquestions remain: how do players and non-players perceive toxicity in LoL and which consequences do these perceptions have on a sponsor's and the game's brand images, and how can this phenomenon be studied? If a game is perceived as highly toxic, there is a risk of brands averting from sponsoring and/or marketing in a particular game genre. Researchers have already shown that sponsoring esports can have positive effects on a sponsor's brand, nevertheless, the results depend on many different variables.   This thesis aims to explore toxicity in LoL from both players' and non-players' perspectives to gain a deeper insight into how toxicity unfolds and manifests itself in this context. Furthermore, the aim is to investigate the link between toxicity and brand image in the LoL context. The research design is based on a mixed-method approach, including both qualitative (interviews) and quantitative data (survey). Data collection will cover three different sources: (a) players of LoL, (b) non-players of LoL, and (c) someone who works with a game developer.   Because most of the data was acquired from qualitative methods, the study is based on research questions. The research questions are: What does toxicity mean in gaming? Do players of LoL perceive the player base as toxic and if so, how does this toxicity affect their image of LoL's and its sponsors' brands? Do players who do not play LoL but know what LoL is perceive the player base as toxic, and if so, how does this toxicity affect their image of LoL's and its sponsors'

brands? How to study the impact a toxic gaming community has on a game's and sponsors' brand images? The questions will be answered through the different data collection methods and by reviewing former research on toxicity, brand image and sponsoring.

The key findings in this thesis were that according to the collected data a sponsor's brand image is not tainted because of the type of toxicity occurring in LoL. The data from the focus groups suggest that more severe misconduct needs to occur in the community or LoL to taint the reputation of a sponsor. The answer to the impact the player community has on LoL's brand image was somewhat inconclusive because the data collected leaves room for interpretation. However, it can be argued that the player base of LoL was deemed toxic, and from some of the respondents' answers imply there is some impact on LoL's brand image. To validate this, further quantitative research is suggested. This thesis has also provided new definitions to competitive trash talk, non-verbal and verbal toxicity, as well as to internal and external negativity in team-based games.

Date: 8.5.2023 | Number of pages: 104

Acknowledgements

Please cite this thesis as Turpeinen, J. (2023). Perceived toxicity in gaming communities and their impact on brand image, Åbo Akademi.

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1 Introduction

Brands have existed for years, and as consumers connect with a brand that resonates with them, they tend to become loyal to the brand and start promoting it to others. However, different brands have different reputations and different images that are shaped in the minds of consumers. Even if someone is not a consumer of a particular brand, they may still hold preconceptions about the brand that contribute to its overall image. Brand image is not necessarily always positive. For example, in the 1980's an Italian clothing brand, Stone Island, became a symbol for British football hooliganism, associated with violence and aggression. As British football fans started preferring the brand's clothing, a very strong but slightly unexpected bond between the Stone Island clothing brand and British football hooligans was born: the Stone Island Hooligans (Take Flight 214, 2023) (Halil, 2021). This is a prime example of how a brand's community and the community's behaviour can affect a brand's image. Building on this thought, the author of this thesis has chosen to research this phenomenon in a more modern setting through a guiding research question: How does the reputation of a gaming community affect the brand image of a game and its sponsors, if at all?

League of Legends (hereafter LoL) is one of the world's most popular *multiplayer online battle arena* (hereafter MOBA) games, a game type where people play against other real people in real-time. The game was released in 2009 by Riot Games, and it is played mostly on Windows and Mac computers. LoL is a strategy game where the player is seeking to destroy another team's base with their team. (League of Legends, 2022). The two teams of five need to choose their heroes for different roles from a pool of over 140 champions, all of which have unique abilities and playstyles of their own.

According to the website Webtribunal (2022), LoL has over 150 million registered users, of whom around 125 million are active monthly. LoL also has its own competitive tournaments, such as the annual League of Legends Worlds championships, and smaller more frequent regional competitions between teams in their respective server areas (Western Europe, North America, China, etcetera). In these tournaments, professional

teams within the game compete against each other to determine which of them reigns as the foremost team in the world. According to Round Hill Investments (2020), LoL Worlds had over 100 million viewers in 2019, most of whom watched the event through streaming services such as Twitch and YouTube. To put the event's popularity into perspective, Super Bowl, which is one of the most popular yearly sports events in the world, had 100.7 million viewers that same year.

Considering the number of players LoL has, and how many viewers their events attract, it could be argued that the game, its brand, and its community have considerable influence. Globally, hundreds of thousands play LoL daily and consume content either the game developers themselves or creators specialised in the game have created. Even though the game is popular it also has a somewhat negative reputation because of its player base, i.e., those who play the game. (Sengun, Salminen, Jung, Mawhorter, & Jansen, 2019) (Kou & Gui, 2021).

Non-professional casual LoL players are especially notorious for showing offensive and toxic manners whilst playing, and the comments made during games often go beyond competitive trash talk, pinnacling on harsh and toxic online bullying. Toxicity is an umbrella term that describes certain negative behaviours, such as flaming (negatively commenting on someone's character/performance), trolling (someone not taking the game seriously, and making it tough for others only to ruin their game experience), racism, and harassment (Kordyaka, Jahn, & Niehaves, 2020). Trash talking in online gaming can be defined as common aggressive behaviours (Kniffin & Palacio, 2018). These include, e.g., antagonistic exchanges between players, such as taunting and name calling or making continuous noises in a voice chat to annoy another player (Ballard & Welch, 2017). Because of the mentioned toxic behaviour, the purpose of this master's thesis is to determine how the toxicity of a player base, the community of LoL, affects the brand image of LoL and its sponsors. Brand image is how a customer perceives a brand or how someone associates the symbolic meaning of a brand with the characteristics of a service or a product, (Alwi, Ngyen, Melewar, Loh, & Liu, 2016). Additionally, the aim is to determine, whether this negative reputation even has an impact on the brand images of the companies and brands that support and sponsor LoL's events, content (e.g.,

videos/music), professional LoL teams, and the game itself. For example, will a consumer refuse to use Alienware's computers because the company sponsors LoL Worlds? Do individuals actively choose Monster energy drinks instead of Red Bull, just because they sponsor LoL? Or has toxicity simply become an unfortunate part of LoL's brand that does not significantly impact consumer behaviour? It is also of interest to try to discover if someone has started playing just for the joy of being able to be toxic. To understand the possible impact toxicity has on brand image, toxicity must also be studied more deeply.

By utilising collected data and previous research, this thesis attempts to evaluate the claim that the toxicity of a player base affects the brand images of the game in question and its sponsors. If it is proven that the toxicity of the player base has a negative impact on either LoL's or their sponsors' brand images, this thesis will also try to devise solutions and/or guidelines as for how the game and its sponsors could try to affect the player base, so that the community would be less toxic. However, psychological research or the fundamental causes of toxic human behaviour are considered to be outside of the scope of this thesis.

The rationale behind the author's selection of LoL as the primary focus of this research stems from their personal experience of playing the game almost daily and encountering the toxic behaviour of its community. The toxicity and the amount of trash talk in the player base are on a level the author has never met in any other games. The author is also acquainted with many players of the game, and the common opinion amongst them is "this game is toxic". Nonetheless, with few exceptions they all return to play the game. The author and their acquaintances could be called loyal followers of the brand League of Legends. Thus, with that as the origin, the author of this thesis wanted to study the subject. Furthermore, the author strives this study to serve as a catalyst for future research exploring comparable dynamics among other gaming communities and player bases, as well as brands operating in entirely distinct fields.

1.1 A deep dive into the problem area

The gaming world is a place where many people spend a part of their time nowadays (Kordyaka, Jahn, & Niehaves, 2020), be it playing casually with friends on a console, such as PS4 or Nintendo Switch, or competing in amateur tournaments on a heavily equipped PC. The number of different games and different game types to choose from is as vast as ever, and new games are released constantly. Games include single-player platformers without contact to other players or big MOBAs where they interact with several other people during a match. Some take games just as casual fun, whereas others take them very seriously, either as a hobby or with dreams of becoming a professional player. In solo play, an individual may exhibit frustration by throwing their controller across the room when taking the game seriously. However, during real-time multiplayer games, this frustration may manifest in more aggressive verbal and non-verbal behaviour that can potentially spill over into the game environment.

Toxicity in games is a problem, and even though some game developers have tried to apply flagging (reporting toxic behaviour) into their game mechanics, toxicity still exists (Kou & Gui, 2021). It can take many forms such as chauvinism (Hayday & Collision, 2020), racism (Sengun, Salminen, Jung, Mawhorter, & Jansen, 2019), or sometimes straight-out death threats. When hiding behind an anonymous avatar, being cruel is much easier than saying obnoxious words to someone face-to-face. Some people do not care what is said to them in a gaming situation, but for some, cruel words might lead to negative feelings and quitting an otherwise enjoyable game. Therefore, to what extent does the presence of a toxic player base, i.e., a community characterized by aggressive and negative behaviour, affect the brand image of a game, and to what extent do these effects spill over to the game's sponsors? Brands rely on their communities and followers to keep on existing, so research, such as in this thesis, can be argued to be of importance for the field of branding games. As Keller & Swaminathan (2020) explained, brand image is how consumers perceive a brand by the reflections of brand associations in their memories, and if a consumer associates a brand with toxic behaviour, it might be harmful for the brand image. Since the connection between toxic behaviour and its effects on the image of gaming brands is not well-known, it can be argued researching the problem is of importance.

To achieve the aims for this thesis firstly, a pre-study is conducted to try to validate the research question considering that the gaming community of LoL is toxic. If the player base is perceived as toxic, the next step is to investigate has the toxicity affected the players' perceived image of the brand and its sponsors. This thesis will also endeavour to uncover if some someone who knows the game but has not ever played it has chosen not to try the game because of its toxic reputation. Regarding the sponsors, this thesis will try to discover if someone has gone so far as to boycott some brands because they sponsor a game that is seen as toxic.

By researching the impact toxicity of a gaming community has on a game and its sponsors' brand images, this thesis endeavours to discover what could be done to the phenomenon. Moreover, this thesis aims to serve as a stepping stone towards conducting similar and more broad research on other games, as well as brands outside of the gaming world. By shedding light on the relationship between the reputation of a gaming community and the brand image of the game and its sponsors, this study may inform future inquiries that examine the impact of other communities on brand images.

1.2 Aim of the study and research questions

This study aims to find out how the perceived toxicity of a gaming community affects the brand image of League of Legends and its sponsors. This is done through qualitative methods and by studying former research and theory of toxicity in games as well as data on what RIOT Games has already done to try to address the problem. This thesis is also conducted to test the relevance of the presented research questions to acquire a result which could prove the need for a larger quantitative study on the subject. The research questions in this thesis are:

RQ1: What does toxicity mean in gaming?

RQ2: Do players of LoL perceive the player base as toxic and if so, how does this toxicity affect their image of LoL's and its sponsors' brands?

RQ3: Do players who do not play LoL, but know what LoL is, perceive the player base as toxic, and if so, how does this toxicity affect their image of LoL's and its sponsors' brands?

RQ4: How to study the impact a toxic gaming community has on a game's and its sponsors' brand images?

1.3 Method and limitations

The theoretical material needed for this thesis was collected from academic journals, former studies, other academic literature, and some miscellaneous sources, such as websites showing statistics which are relevant to the research. This is to explain the theory encircling branding, sponsoring and toxicity, as well as to clarify the reasoning behind the chosen research methods, and the study itself. The main research methods used in this thesis are focus group interviews conducted at Åbo Akademi University and an in-depth interview conducted face-to-face with an employee of a game developer. A quantitative pre-study was also performed at Dreamhack 2022, to test out the research questions before the focus group interviews, as well as to test out the data collection method. The focus group interviews, and the in-depth interview were recorded (only sound), and the recordings from the focus groups were transcribed non-verbatim, and the in-depth interview verbatim. The data gathered from the two qualitative studies will be presented and analysed to validate the research questions and to formulate hypotheses for further research.

To investigate the impact of LoL's negative reputation on the brand and its sponsors, a primarily qualitative approach was utilised to collect data. The aim of this approach was to establish the validity of the research questions and to facilitate the development of hypotheses for potential future quantitative studies. Future quantitative study is discussed more in the chapter *7.5 Suggestions: Future quantitative study*. Qualitative data was

collected using focus group interviews. The respondents consisted of *gamers*, i.e., active players of LoL, non-active players of LoL, and gamers who know LoL but have not played it. An in-depth interview was also conducted with a person who works in the gaming industry to acquire additional qualitative data from a different point of view, i.e., data from someone who is in the position of the "seller" instead of "customer". Some material was also gathered with the help of focus group interviews from impartial individuals who have not played any games at all. This was to get correlations between gaming-related brands and other brands and to acquire information if these opinions of a toxic community varied between different fields. In these focus group interviews, the so-called *non-gamers* were presented with real-life scenarios from the game, and they expressed their opinions on how they would react in such scenarios, as well as how it affects their opinions of a game or sponsors. Both gamers and non-gamers were also asked to reflect on toxicity with the help of other brands and if toxic behaviour in a brand community would affect their image of those brands. This study does not go into the field of psychology, such as how toxicity might affect an individual's mental health or a young player's mental growth, etcetera.

Focus groups and an in-depth interview were chosen as the main research methods for this study, because the research around toxicity and brand image is largely about perception, and perception is more difficult to measure with quantitative research methods. The perception of what toxicity or toxic behaviour is varies from person to person, even though toxicity has been defined in different fields of academic research. Some persons might have a higher tolerance to negative behaviour than others, and thus, they might perceive toxicity differently (Adinolf & Türkay, 2018). Brand image is also about perception. It is how someone perceives a brand (Alwi, Ngyen, Melewar, Loh, & Liu, 2016), and thus, if wanting to understand the deeper meaning of why a brand has the image it has, it cannot be measured purely with quantitative methods. Because of the need for a deeper understanding of what is perceived as toxic and the effect toxicity has on a brand's image, the results of the focus groups and the in-depth interview were analysed using narrative analysis. Narrative analysis analyses how a respondent interprets different things, and it gives room for a respondent's imagination and agency (Kohler Riessman, 1993), which are factors needed to understand the problem area in this thesis.

1.4 Core concepts

League of Legends (LoL): One of the world's most popular MOBA games.

Gaming community/Player base: The group of people who play the same game.

Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA): A strategy-based video game, where two teams face off against each other on a predefined battlefield.

Brand image: How consumers perceive a brand by the reflections of brand associations in their memories. (Keller & Swaminathan, 2020)

Sponsor/Sponsoring: 'To sponsor' means when a business or other organisation pays for instance the costs of a sports event or the costs of a sportsperson in return for advertising. (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022).

Toxicity: Toxicity is an umbrella term that describes certain negative behaviours, such as flaming, trolling, racism, and harassment. (Kordyaka, Jahn, & Niehaves, 2020).

1.5 Disposition

Figure 1: The disposition of this thesis.

The disposition of this thesis can be seen in *Figure 1*. The first chapter serves as an introduction to this thesis and outlines the rationale for the research conducted within it. Chapter one begins with an introduction and continues with a deep dive into the problem area. Thereafter the aim of the study and the research questions are presented. The first chapter ends with a presentation of method and limitations and the core concepts. The rationale for the first chapter is to introduce the thesis and its subject to the reader.

The second chapter introduces the empirical context of this thesis. This is expedient since the theory reviewed in this thesis is drawn from research conducted about gaming and toxicity. The third chapter of this thesis presents the theoretical framework used to analyse the collected data. The first part of this chapter leads the reader through branding, brand identity and image, risks with branding and how to measure brand image. The next part of chapter three addresses first sponsoring on a general level. Thereafter sponsoring is presented in gaming, esports, and lastly in League of Legends. The last part of chapter three addresses toxicity on a general level and thereafter in gaming. The chapter ends with a summary of its contents.

The research methods for this thesis are presented in chapter four. This chapter explains and justifies the chosen research methods to the reader. Chapter four also presents how the different studies in this thesis were conducted. Chapter five has a focus on presenting the data and material acquired from the research, whereafter in chapter six the data and material is analysed. The last chapter concludes this thesis. The chapter presents the results and answers to the research questions. In chapter seven the thesis also undergoes critical analysis and offers recommendations for future research endeavours.

2 Description of the research context: Gaming and League of Legends

Gaming has evolved substantially since its dawn. Games have gone from pixelated text and pictures to massive adventures which can all be accessed by just sitting home in one's chair. Beeping sounds have changed to orchestral compositions and communication between players of games has changed from couch co-op to playing together online without having to even be in the same country. Players can hear each other or write to each other in real time irrespective of their global location. Gaming has also evolved into a profession, giving gifted and determined gamers the possibility to make a career out of their passion for a certain game. Electronic sports, or esports in short, are according to Harvard International Review (Leroux-Parra, 2020) "...*video games that are played in a highly organized competitive environment.*". Esports has evolved into a growing business with lucrative possibilities for sponsoring, and some esports competitions have even more viewers than some traditional sports tournaments. For instance, in 2019, the channel ESPN, peaked with approximately 3.3 million viewers for the Tennis Championship Weekend (Michelis, 2019), whereas LoL Worlds peak viewership was 3.9 million viewers (Esports Charts, 2019). Especially the young adult demographic creates new cultural trends, which can be observed in the declining viewership of traditional sports and increasing viewership in esports. This helps the popularisation of gaming and shows the possibilities it has as a past-time or even as a profession. (Leroux-Parra, 2020).

The possibility to play with random people from all around the world has its pros since one does not ever need to play alone anymore. However, the anonymity one acquires when sitting behind a gaming avatar and a fake name enables disturbing and hurtful behaviour. Toxicity has been a problem of online multiplayer games for a while now. With the protection of anonymity players of different games forget their language filter and express the most hateful comments they can think of to their teammates or other players. MOBAs are not anymore just a battleground for who wins the match, but they are also a battleground of words: hate comments, racism, ignorance of others' feelings, and chauvinism. Some games have tried to battle the toxicity occurring in their player base but to no avail. Being able to report another player for toxic or unsportsmanlike

behaviour was a step in the right direction, but even this feature, which was supposed to help fight toxicity, has been weaponised by toxicity. If someone performs poorly, they are reported. If they steal too many minions from their ADC, they are reported. The tool is of course also used for real reports, but it seems it is very seldom that toxic players get serious enough punishment for their behaviour.

To get a better picture of the research context, next it is presented what League of Legends is, and how the game works. League of Legends is one of the world's most popular multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) games. It has an estimated 125 million active users per month, and 150 million registered players. The game was released in 2009 by RIOT Games, and it is mostly played on Windows and MAC. (Webtribunal, 2022). LoL is a strategy game, wherein in the base game mode called Summoners Rift two teams of five players (called summoners) face off against each other in pursuit to destroy the other teams base called The Nexus. The summoners can choose from over 140 different champions, who all have different unique abilities and weaknesses. The game is played on a predefined map with three different lanes and a jungle. The three distinct lanes on the map are commonly referred to as top, mid, and bottom (also known as bot), respectively, based on their relative positioning on the map. The jungle spans between these lanes through the whole map (see *Figure 2*). Top, mid and jungle are played solo in each team, which means that those lanes only have two opposing summoners facing off against each other. The bottom lane is played in pairs. The pairs consist of a support and an attack damage carry (ADC). The junglers mission is to try to aid the other lanes by doing surprise attacks (i.e., ganks). All the lanes have destroyable objectives in form of turrets, which must be destroyed to get to the inhibitors, which in their turn protect The Nexus and its turrets. After one or more of the inhibitors are destroyed, the team needs to destroy two more enemy turrets, before they can attack The Nexus and by destroying it win the game. (League of Legends, 2022).

Figure 2: The layout/map of Summoners Rift, with the lanes, objectives, Nexuses, Fountains, and jungle visible. In the beginning, each team controls their side of the map, either blue or red side. The game randomises which team gets which side in each game. 1. The Fountain, one on both sides of the map. 2. The Nexus, one on both sides of the map. 3. Nexus Turrets, two in front of both Nexuses. 4. Inhibitors, three on both sides of the map. 5. Top lane. 6. Mid lane. 7. Bottom lane. 8. The Jungle. 9. Examples of jungle monsters. Depending on the monster their spawning is either based on time or randomised. 10. Lane turrets. Each lane has three lane turrets per side (red and blue). These turrets are called the outer turrets (farthest away from the Nexus), the inner turrets and the inhibitor turrets (protecting the inhibitors). *Source:* (League of Legends, 2022).

The jungle and the different lanes also have different non-player characters (NPCs) which all serve their own purpose. The jungle has monsters, which are meant for the jungler to farm and get money from. The jungle also has other types of monsters which, if killed, give different buffs to either the killer or the whole team. The lanes have NPCs called minions or creeps, which help the laners to push towards the enemy and get money. With money players get from killing enemy players and NPCs they can buy different kinds of

items, which grow their powers and give them buffs. The items are bought from a shop located behind The Nexus. This place is called The Fountain, and it is a place where the players also respawn after they have been killed by the enemy team, a turret, or an NPC. By killing the enemy champions, objectives, and NPCs the summoners also gain experience, which increases their level. By increasing their level, the champions get to power up and unlock their unique abilities. Every champion has four of these upgradable abilities which all have different moves, buffs, shields and so on.

By winning games in the ranked mode of the game, players can increase their ranking in the game (see *Figure 3*). By playing whichever game mode LoL has, players can also increase their summoner level (account level), and by doing so, the players get rewarded with different rewards, such as in-game currency (blue and orange essence), skins, new champions, etcetera. Other game modes in LoL are for instance a single lane fight called Aram, an auto chess game mode called Teamfight Tactics, and different kinds of changing featured game modes. (League of Legends, 2022).

TIERS

Iron	Bronze	Silver	Gold	Platinum

Diamond	Master	Grandmaster	Challenger

Figure 3: The ranking system in LoL, the lowest rank being Iron and the highest being Challenger. The ranking system tells how skilled the player is in the game. Rank is increased or decreased by playing Ranked mode in the game. The map is always

Summoners Rift, and a player can either play Flex queue alone, as a duo, trio or full team, to try to increase their Flex rank. Players can also play in the Solo/Duo queue, either alone or with a duo partner, to try to increase their Solo/Duo rank. Flex and Solo/Duo queue ranks are two different ranks. *Source:* (Laserface, 2023)

Because of the toxicity of LoL players, the game and its community are somewhat hated, even by its own players. Some people do not even want to try the game because the reputation of the community is so toxic, and some players who have played LoL have quit altogether (Adinolf & Türkay, 2018). As a more personal example, the author of this thesis has friends who have said they refuse to try the game because of the toxicity, and friends who have played it at some point, but quit since they did not see the stress the game is causing worth the effort. Still, the game has around 125 million active players monthly and a huge yearly tournament watched by millions every year.

A game as big as LoL and the professional players of the game also have their sponsors. The sponsors are visible on e.g., team names, merchandise, and commercial breaks. But one must wonder: are these sponsors not at all worried about their reputation? Are they not worried that supporting a game with a reputation of toxic players could hurt them, or is it a calculated risk? This is what has piqued the interest of the author of this thesis, especially because they have not found too much research conducted on this specific subject.

3 Theoretical background: Branding, sponsoring and toxicity

This chapter brings forth the theoretical aspects required to study the subject in this thesis. The aspects addressed are branding and brand image, as well as sponsoring and sponsorship as marketing strategies in the gaming context and the game League of Legends. The chapter also covers some of the risks in branding and how to measure brand image. These two theoretical aspects are important to the thesis, since it is necessary to understand what risks comes with branding and if the brand becomes popular. This is especially crucial for sponsors to understand since their reputation can partly depend on the party their sponsor. To get to the aim of this thesis it is also needed to know how to measure brand image. By measuring brand image, the possible effects perceived toxicity has can be studied. In addition, the chapter covers toxicity in gaming and how it manifests itself in the gaming context.

3.1 Branding

As regards brands and branding, it is important to understand the difference between marketing and branding. Both are needed in the process of branding, but in different stages since one cannot market a brand if the brand has not yet been established. Whereas branding answers the question *why*, marketing answers the question *how*. Branding also strives to establish long-term customer relationships whereas marketing is often short-term. Marketing campaigns come and go, whereas successful brands stay around for decades. Therefore, it can be said that branding is on a macro level, since it strives for a bigger picture, whereas marketing is on a micro level, because it focuses on smaller things, such as marketing one product or service at a time. Marketing helps a person consume a product or a service for the first time, whereas branding gives the person a reason to become a reoccurring customer. Marketing is doing, but a brand is being. (Wheeler, 2018).

The word branding stems from the English word 'brand', which has meant and still means today when someone brands their kettle with a tag or "logo". Before the advent of modern methods, such as microchipping or ear tags, this was done by burning a picture or letters on the animal's hides with a hot iron. This way it could be identified who the owner of an animal was. All these "logos" were then collected in a brand manual, so the ownership of for instance stray kettle could be identified. During these times the word brand was quite simple to explain, but nowadays the term is much more complicated. (Uusitalo, 2014) (Wheeler, 2018). The meaning behind a modern brand is much broader than the explanation behind the word's predecessor, and that is why modern branding is hard to specify. There have been several attempts to explain what a brand and its different elements are, but even after those, the term can be somewhat diffusing. (Ruokolainen, 2020). The American Marketing Association has tried to give the word 'brand' a clear definition, and they define it as "*...a name, term, design, symbol or any other feature that identifies one seller's goods or service as distinct from those of other sellers.*" (American Marketing Association, 2023). According to Alina Wheeler (2018), one part of a brand is its visuality. The visual appeal of a brand consists of different brand elements such as the brand's logo, slogan and how to position these two. In all its simplicity, the visual part of a brand is all that can be seen of a brand. Relying on this argument, the common misconception that a brand is synonymous with its logo can be debunked, since a logo is merely a part of the brand's visual elements, which aids consumers in recognising a brand. (Ruokolainen, 2020).

A brand is neither just a product nor a service because a brand is supposed to be an experience. According to Ruokolainen (2020), humans make decisions with their gut and justify them through reasoning, and the beauty in brands and branding is that they are supposed to appeal to a human's feelings. For this particular reason, efficiently executed branding is important to a company or a person. The establishment of a favourable brand can enhance a company's perceived value in the eyes of consumers and promote the existence of their products or services. The process of branding also facilitates the establishment of an emotional bond between a customer and the company. If the brand is executed efficiently, this bond can last for a lifetime, leading to a loyal and returning customer, who returns to the company's products and services repeatedly. (Amodeo, 2018). According to Keller & Swaminathan (2020), branding is of value both to

customers and manufacturers. With the help of branding, customers can e.g., identify easier the source of a product and it provides means of simplification as regards purchase decisions. For manufacturers branding provides valuable functions such as legal protection for unique features and identification purposes which simplify product tracing and handling.

Wheeler (2018) argues, that in today's increasingly competitive market, characterised by globalisation, having a strong and distinctive brand is crucial for companies to differentiate themselves and succeed. Consumers have loads of options to choose from when e.g., buying a product, so a strong and distinctive brand might help them make a choice which is beneficial for the branded company. When a consumer decides to become loyal to a brand, they trust it and are certain that it is superior compared to other brands.

According to Malmelin & Hakala (2011), radical brands are successful brands which have the potential to change the world and whole industries. Radical brands create phenomena, which in their turn create trends, followers, and communities around these trends. For instance, LoL has done this in form of their annual League of Legends Worlds, which makes hundreds of thousands of fans tune in to their streaming services during every match of the event.

Wheeler (2018) writes that a brand has a strong foundation if it answers the questions of *who you are, who should know about you, how they get to know about you,* and *why should they be interested in you*. According to Wheeler (2018), the three main functions of a brand are *navigation*, *reassurance,* and *engagement*. Navigation aids the consumer towards easier decision making, and after the consumer has decided, the brand reassures the consumer they have made a correct choice. Lastly, by engagement the consumer can encouraged to stay as a reoccurring customer. Engagement is easier if the consumer feels the brand is relatable to them. When the consumer can relate to a brand, engagement occurs.

Something that is also important to know about branding is the difference between endemic and non-endemic brands. When a brand is endemic e.g., for esports, then it is native for that sort of activity. It can be for instance a company that sells computers, and when they sponsor an esports event, it is an endemic brand since computers are necessary for certain gaming. On the contrary, non-endemic brands are not necessary for sponsored events/activities. (Gawrysiak, Burton, Jenny, & Williams, 2020).

3.1.1   Brand identity and image

According to Wheeler (2018), a brand's identity must feel "like an old friend". It needs to be something one can touch or almost touch. It must awaken feelings in a person. A brand's identity must also be seen and heard, but it does not mean the brand's identity is only as much as its visuality. A brand identity is forever evolving. Malmelin & Hakala (2011) wrote that a brand's identity summarises a company's operations, mission, and vision. Something that also affects a company's brand identity, is how the consumers perceive the company and what the company's position is on the market.

According to Alwi et al. (2016), there are different ways to define brand image. It can be defined as how the customer perceives the brand or how someone associates the symbolic meaning with the characteristics of a service or a product. Alwi et al. (2016) also wrote, that memories triggered by a company's stimulants, such as the logo or the company's name represent the brand for the customer, and this is called brand image. Keller & Swaminathan (2020) offer a traditional definition of brand image. According to them, brand image is how consumers perceive a brand by the reflections of brand associations in their memories. Even though scholars such as Lee, James & Kim (2014) criticise Kellers & Swaminathans definition, the definition by Keller & Swaninathan (2020) is the definition for brand image used in this thesis, as it has been a widely accepted definition for many years. According to Keller & Swaminathan (2020), brand image consists of four elements, *performance, imagery, judgement,* and *feelings*. Performance is all about the product or service a brand offers. This element has to do with e.g., the durability,

serviceability, efficiency, style and price of the service or the product. Imagery is the more intangible aspects of a brand. Brand imagery consists of e.g., what type of people use the brand (e.g., gender, age) or what the brands history is. Judgements are the personal opinions and evaluations a customer has of a brand. The judgements considering a brand are about e.g., quality, credibility, and superiority. The last element is brand feelings. This element alludes the customers' emotional reactions and responses to a brand. These reactions and responses can be such as warmth (feelings of calmness and peacefulness), excitement (feelings of getting energised) or social approval (being accepted or respected by others). (2020)

To create a positive brand image, Keller & Swaminathan (2020) emphasize the importance of marketing programs which link unique, favourable, and strong associations to a brand in the consumer's memory. These associations can either be brand benefits (personal value and meaning attached by the customer to product or service attributes) or brand attributes (identifying elements which characterize a service or a product). However, a consumer can create brand associations in other ways than only from marketing activities. The associations can form from e.g., direct experiences, social media, word of mouth, or from personal interactions with a person. (Keller & Swaminathan, 2020). According to Dam (2020) there are three factors which improve brand image, and which aid with the stimuli a customer gains from the link between them and the product. These factors are the business and the marketing mix, the characteristics of the products, as well as and the personality of the brand user and their values. Environmental variables and the experience of the brand also have a key role in brand image. Dam (2020) also writes that brand image has a crucial role in a customer's decision-making process during a possible purchase. If a product or a service enjoys a higher brand image, it will more commonly elevate the customer's expectation of quality, whereas a low brand image leads to customers having no trust in the products. According to some examinations, a respectable brand image had a positive impact on a brand, and a positive brand image is a precursor to brand commitment. (Dam, 2020).

The key difference between brand identity and brand image is that brand identity is a precursor to brand image. Brand identity is how a company wants customers to perceive

a brand, whereas brand image is what forms afterwards in the customer's minds, and it is the way customers actually perceive a brand. (Mindrut;Manolica;& Roman, 2013).

3.1.2 Risks with branding

Branding might seem as something that can boost a company and give it a good image, but as with everything else, also branding comes with its risks. To avoid mistakes and risks with branding, it is essential to have a comprehensive understanding of the potential risks and how to mitigate them effectively. One potential risk associated with branding is that it may become too superficial, whereby the emphasis is placed more on creating a visually appealing brand identity than on developing a deeper understanding of the brand's core values. If someone tries to base a brand only on glamorous adjectives, the brand is probably not going to succeed. (Uusitalo, 2014).

According to Uusitalo (2014), it is crucial not to make a brand too vague, because otherwise customers might become confused. If a brand promises something for everyone, then it does not really promise anything for anyone. A vague brand could be perceived as unclear and as of that unreliable. A brand cannot promise everything to everyone, because then it is not a brand. A brand must be clear and somewhat specific, so that people who share the brand's values can find it, thus, too many compromises do not belong in branding. (Uusitalo, 2014). A brand also needs to be authentic because if someone discovers a brand has been inauthentic and is not what they promised, the brand's value might decrease, and the image becomes tainted. If inauthenticity is discovered the customers will stop trusting the brand and simply leave, as they feel they have been lied to and deceived. (Beverland & et al., 2014).

Publicity can be a double-edged sword for brands since it is crucial to have publicity to raise brand awareness, but the publicity needs to be managed. According to Malmelin & Hakala (2011), one negative article has the potential to destroy a brand, despite all the publicity the brand has enjoyed before would have been positive. For this reason,

companies need to know how manage and use the media. This does not only include what the company publishes themselves, but also how the company should react if something negative gets published by someone else. To avert a catastrophic loss of face and trustworthiness, the reaction needs to be quick yet subtle. Hakala (2011) wrote that publicity is a possibility to grow a brand's equity, but if a company does not know how to handle publicity, it can also be a threat to its brand's value. This means that publicity is the dynamics between possibilities and risks.

3.1.3   Measuring brand image

To identify desirable and undesirable brand associations managers can try to measure brand image. By doing this, managers can address the associations in their branding efforts. According to Plumeyer, Kotteman, Böger & Decker (2019), it is essential for managers to understand how consumers perceive brands, and by measuring brand image this can be made possible. According to Keller (1993), brand image is the consumers' perception of a brand, which reflects the meaning of the brand. The meaning is in the consumers' memory and forms a network of associations, which may take the form of benefits, attributes, or attitudes.

There has been a large amount of research on how to measure brand image and on the different techniques for how to do it. Plumeyer et al. (2019) follow the three stages mentioned by Tranfield, Denyer & Smart (2003) to identify the different kinds of measurement techniques for brand image. The stages are firstly planning, secondly conducting, and lastly reporting and disseminating the review. Plumeyer et al. (2019) chose 12 different techniques from their literature review which they argue are the most used in measuring brand image, and of those 12, five which might be of use are presented.

The first technique Plumeyer et al. (2019) focus on is the *Likert's method*. The method measures respondents' opinions, attitudes, or perceptions about a stimulus object, by either agreeing or disagreeing with statements of it. There are usually five to seven

statements, and the respondents are forced to choose an answer from a scale of "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". Thereafter each statement receives a numerical score, which then is turned into a mean score or summated score for each respondent. This way an indication of the respondent's attitude towards a brand can be acquired. (Hair, Bush, & Ortinau, 2009). Even though Plumeyer et al. (2019) discovered that Likert's scales are widely used as a technique to measure brand image, they argue that there is a lack of consensus in applicating the scale to brand image measuring. Another Likert's scale by Martínez & Pina Pérez (2009) considers three dimensions when measuring brand image. The dimensions try to assess tangible and intangible image attributes and benefits, and an overall attitude of a brand, i.e., its reputation. Utilising these three dimensions Martínes & de Chernatony (2004) succeeded in measuring general brand image instead of only product brand image.

Another technique mentioned by Plumeyer et al. (2019) is the *free-association technique*, which investigates the associations consumers have of a brand. In this technique, the respondents will get a stimulus which is for instance the researched brand's name, and then the consumer is asked to spontaneously say what comes to mind of the stimulus. This way it is easy to get verbal associations a consumer has of a brand. (Koll, von Wallpach, & Kreuzer, 2010).

The method called *focus group interviews* is also something examined by Plumeyer et al. (2019). This technique includes open-ended discussions about a specific target in a group of about eight to ten people. The respondents should be carefully screened in advance so that the group is as homogenous as possible regarding demographic and socioeconomic characteristics. The focus group method also requires a moderator who is skilled in guiding a conversation and who ensures the focus of the discussion stays on the chosen topic. The discussion should last a predetermined time, and after the time has passed the moderator ends the discussion. After the discussion the moderator summarises the findings. (Calder, 1977).

In-depth interviews are a way to get qualitative information of brand associations. In these types of interviews, an experienced interviewer will interview a respondent preferably face-to-face. The questions asked by the interviewer are meant to be semi-structured probing questions. (Hair, Bush, & Ortinau, 2009). The interviewer and the respondent need to interact with each other during the interview so that associations of the target brand can be uncovered. It is of importance to make sure the respondent feels comfortable and is encouraged to answer freely. (Legard, Keegan, & Ward, 2003).

A technique also reviewed by Plumeyer et al. (2019) is *dichotomous scaling*. In this technique, respondents are presented with only two response categories, in the style of "yes" or "no" responses. There might also be a third "neutral" (e.g., "I do not know") response category. By utilising dichotomous scaling, it can be determined whether certain predetermined associations and attributes hold true during a brand investigation.

3.2 Sponsorship and sponsoring

According to Cambridge Dictionary (2022) 'to sponsor' means when a business or some other organisation pays someone to do something or pays for something to happen. Cambridge Dictionary (2022) specifies that 'to sponsor' can also mean when a business or other organisation pays for instance the costs of a sports event or the costs for a sportsperson in return for advertising.

Sponsoring is a process for both the sponsor and the sponsored unit. According to the process model created by Cronwell & Kwon (2020) the aspects of the process, which take into consideration both the sponsor and the sponsored unit, are:

1. *Ecosystems thinking* – Principles include dynamism, boundedness, and interconnectedness. Whether the ecosystem is local, regional, national, or international.

2. *Initial decision* – Decisions related to partnership, such as exclusivity, asset pricing and price setting.

3. *Target audiences* – Does the sponsoring target organisations e.g., other businesses, shareholders and financial institutions, or individuals e.g., a general public, employees, fans, or club members?

4. *Objectives* – The objectives can be cognitive (e.g., awareness or image), affective (e.g., attitude/loyalty, identification, or reputation), behavioural (e.g., purchase behaviour or intention), financial, or other strategic objectives (e.g., sales, or market-shares).

5. *Engagement* – This aspect includes the nature of the sponsorship contract (e.g., event exposure, naming rights or endorsement), how to leverage the marketing (e.g., promotion, advertising, or online content), and what is the method of activation (e.g., on-site activities, hospitality, or demonstration).

6. *Measurement and evaluation* – This step of the process measures individual-level outcomes as well as brand, organisational and market outcomes. Measurable individual-level outcomes are e.g., brand image, loyalty, and equity, as well as purchase intention and behaviour. Measurable variables in brand, organisational and market outcomes are e.g., media exposure, goodwill, and sales. Something that should also be measured by both parties is the return on investment, objectives, and purpose.

7. *Subsequent decisions* – The last part of the process emphasizes decisions about the future of the relationship between the sponsor and the sponsored unit. This implies decisions such as if the partnership will be renewed, terminated, or should the two parties search for new partnerships.

The process model also considers so-called *external or unpredictable events*. These events refer to possible external factors such as rivalry, winning (e.g., a sponsored sport team winnings), or scandals. The process model also mentions *context moderators*, which regard authenticity, commercialisation, and congruence. (Cornwell & Kwon, 2020).

The link between a sponsor and a sponsored unit is called congruence (Toukabri, Najjar, & Yaîch, 2022). Toukbari, Najjar & Yaîch (2022) argue that the goal for sponsoring is to

raise brand awareness as much as possible. Sponsoring is also used to develop notoriety as well as to improve the image of a brand. According to Toukbari, Najjar & Yaîch (2022), there are three determinants of strong congruence. These determinants are knowledge of the sponsor's brand and the sponsored unit as well as the involvement with the sponsor's product. Toukbari, Najjar & Yaîch (2022) argue that the sponsor's brand image and attitude are directly affected by brand awareness, whereas the attitude towards a sponsor's brand is the only thing affected when the product is involved. In their model knowledge of a sponsored unit does not affect a sponsor's branding.

Wang (2017) has also investigated the effects of congruence in sports. According to Wang (2017), sponsorship is a widely used tool in marketing communication, and its popularity around the world is on the rise. Wang (2017) argues that compared to traditional advertising sponsoring in sports is a brand alteration investment and that sponsoring is a valuable tool when building a company's brand equity. Wang (2017) discovered that two different congruences – self-congruity (the match between a consumer's image or personality of something and the consumer's self-concept) and perceived congruence (the perception a consumer has of the similarity between the sponsor and sponsored unit) – have a positive effect on identifying a brand and in raising a sponsor's credibility. These two were also seen as factors which have a positive effect on a sponsor's brand equity. (Wang, 2017).

Regarding the possible negative sides of sponsoring, Olson (2017) argues that in sports sponsoring there might be a negative effect on a company if they sponsor a sports team which has a strong rivalry with another team. In a case such as this the fans of the rival might become hostile against a sponsor who sponsors the opposing team. This is a risk especially if their team is sponsored by a different company in the same field and if the company sponsoring is endemic (a company whose products or services correlate to the sport) for the sport. Olson (2017) suggests that for this reason it is important for sponsors to calculate the risk for possible loss of customers before they make decisions on sponsoring a certain team.

Chang, King & Shu (2020) discovered the importance of considering the influence of tourist patriotism on their enjoyment of mega-events and the perception of their sponsors, as it is strongly linked to the preference for domestic sponsors. If foreign companies aspire to sponsor events in a country foreign to them, they should according to Chang, King & Shu (2020) try to get a higher understanding of their target country. By implementing elements of local culture and history, as well as by adding other local elements to their brand, such as changing the name to a name that suits the target country and opening local stores or production facilities, companies can improve the local tourists' attitudes towards them. Also, the message in advertisements must reflect the self-concept of the population in the target country. Chang, King & Shu (2020) suggest the use of local celebrities to boost the brand might be beneficial when trying to penetrate a foreign market during a mega-event.

When a sponsored unit, be it for instance an individual or a sports team, falls into a crisis, the situation will need a reaction not only from the sponsored unit and their organisation but also from the sponsor. If the sponsor does not react at all or reacts the wrong way, the result might be losing face and the credibility of the sponsor's brand. As Schafraad & Verhoeven (2019) wrote in their paper on crises in sports sponsoring, e.g., doping, supporter violence and financial misconduct can cause problems not only for the sponsored unit but also for the sponsor. Therefore, it is important to find the correct way to react in such a situation to prevent the plummeting of the sponsor's credibility. According to Schafraad & Verhoeven (2019), the way a sponsor reacts can have either a positive or negative effect on the sponsored unit's credibility. Since consumers use information from different sources when judging the credibility of sponsors and sponsored units, the restoration project for credibility and handling of the crisis must be a joint effort from both parties. The worst possible course of action would be to attempt to deny that any incident has occurred. Taking distance from the situation might be one tactic but results on credibility might vary. Schafraad & Verhoeven (2019) argue that the best way to handle a crisis is to focus on a future rebuild strategy. If a sponsor takes action to prevent such cases in the future, it might have a positive impact on the sponsor's credibility since they are trying to influence the field with positive changes. Schafraad & Verhoeven (2019) call this phenomenon a *failure paradox*. How the public reacts to a crisis depends also on what kind of crisis it is. Schafraad & Verhoeven (2019) use doping

as an example: the public has a lower chance of judging a sponsor in a case of doping since it is not the sponsor's responsibility to solve problems with doping. However, if a sponsor still acts also in cases which are not a direct threat against their reputation, they accumulate positive credibility and publicity.

3.2.1 Sponsoring in gaming and esports

Electronic sports (hereafter esports) is a fast-growing industry (Shabir, 2017). In at least South Korea competitive gaming is already recognised as an official sport and other countries have also started following their example. (Scholz & Hiltcher, 2017). Esports tournaments can vary vastly in difficulty and size. There are amateur tournaments in which players can participate from the comfort of their own homes (Stein & Scholz, 2016), and on the other end of the spectrum, there are huge tournaments where professional teams face off in front of big live and streamed audiences. (Freitas, Contreras-Espinosa, & Correia, 2020). Because of the pace at which the industry is growing, both in popularity and economically, many companies are striving to enter and establish a foothold within it, and therefore many companies have started sponsoring esports events, teams, and players. (CGC Europe, 2015). As Funk, Pizzo & Baker (2017) wrote, big companies such as Microsoft, Samsung and Red Bull are already among the brands who have jumped on the opportunity to sponsor esports.

According to Freitas, Contreras-Espinosa & Correia (2020) sponsoring esports is an excellent way for brands to get more awareness and more customers. Freitas et al. (2020) present interesting numbers which show that 46 million people tuned in to watch an esports event, whereas only 1.7 million people viewed the 2014 Football World Championship match between Germany and USA. Esports fans have also been found to accept sponsoring more easily as a compulsory part of the sport, than fans of traditional sports, such as football, since esports fans acknowledge the importance of sponsoring to keep the esports scene alive. (Shabir, 2017). However, Rogers, Farquhar & Mummert (2020) argue that there are differences between sponsor acceptance. Endemic brands for

esports, such as Microsoft and Mountain Dew, tend to get more positive reactions and more credibility increase from fans whereas non-endemic brands, such as Delta Airlines and TD Ameritrade, were misidentified because they did not feel as natural to the esports audiences as the endemic brands. (Rogers, Farquhar, & Mummert, 2020). According to Allenstein, Gediehn, Lehmann & Singer (2020), not all who consume esports are the same, but they have concluded that the average esports consumer is a 26-year-old highly educated male who is tech-savvy. Because the audience still varies depending on the game and event, brands need to assess which segment they want to reach.

3.2.2   Sponsoring in League of Legends

As many esports events, teams, and players, also LoL related events and professionals have their fair share of sponsors. Mastercard, LG UltraGear, KitKat, OnePlus, and many other brands sponsor either one or multiple of the different LoL leagues and regions. (Seck, 2022). The logos of these brands can be seen flashing on screens and teams' clothing when watching LoL esports events through Twitch or YouTube, and sponsors can sponsor whole sections of a tournament where their brand names are said aloud and shown repeatedly. As Allenstein et al. (2020) wrote, there is a persona or stereotype of the average esports consumer, but they also studied with the help of artificial intelligence and social media what types of products and services certain fanbases are interested in. In the category of fans of mature esports such as LoL and CS:GO it was established that the fanbase is drawn to products and services related to self-help, e-commerce, business, and fast cars. Other sponsors of LoL across LCS (League of Legends North America) and LEC (League of Legends Europe) are Bud Light, Red Bull, Secretlab, Samsung SSD, State Farm and Kia (Seck, 2022).

3.3 What is toxicity?

According to WebMD Editorial Contributors (2022), a toxic person is someone who causes conflict in another person's life. By being difficult a toxic person creates stress and negative situations for others. The distress can even cause physical and emotional pain. According to Kordyaka, Jahn & Niehaves (2020), toxicity is an umbrella term that describes certain negative behaviours, such as flaming, trolling, racism, and harassment.

Toxicity in different circumstances has been studied broadly. Among many others, Wijesiriwardene et al. (2020) have studied toxic behaviour amongst the young demographic on Twitter. They report that almost 66% of people who use the internet have observed online harassment and 41% of the users say they have personal experience of the phenomenon. Up to 18% of internet users report having faced severe forms of online harassment. Monge & O'Brien (2022) on their part have made a study on what effects individual toxic behaviour has on team performance in LoL. Pelletier (2010) studied the toxicity of leaders in her article *Leader toxicity: An empirical investigation of toxic behaviour and rhetoric*, which resulted in a typology of toxic leader behaviours and rhetoric.

Harrington (2021) studied another type of toxicity which is called *toxic masculinity*. According to Harrington (2021), toxic masculinity is something that has been studied since the year of 1990, though the subject exploded in popularity only after the year of 2016. Harrington (2021) elaborates that since 2013 feminists started using toxic masculinity as an umbrella term for misogyny, homophobia, and men's violence. However, Harrington (2021) argues that toxic masculinity should not be used as an analytical concept, since it has historically targeted marginalized men, and the accusations of toxic masculinity often works to "...*maintain gender hierarchies and individualize responsibility for gender inequalities to certain bad men*." (Harrington, 2021, p. 345).

Toxicity in gaming

Toxicity and toxic behaviour in video games have been studied broadly. Suler (2004) describes the toxic disinhibition concept as when someone acts antisocially or aggressively in an online environment, thus breaking the commonly accepted rules of co-existence. Toxic behaviour in gaming or toxicity is an umbrella term that describes certain negative behaviours, such as flaming, trolling, racism, and harassment (Kordyaka, Jahn, & Niehaves, 2020). According to Neto, Yokoyama & Becker (2017), the definition of toxic behaviour is when a player has a negative event in-game and it generates frustration and anger, which leads to toxic behaviour. This toxic behaviour is harmful, disseminated, and contaminated. This kind of toxic behaviour in games targets other players and tries to discourage them (Blackburn & Kwak, 2014) and it can also affect the stream of new players for a game (Grandprey-Shores, He, Swanenburg, Kraut, & Riedl, 2014). According to Ewoldsen, Eno, Okdie, Velez, Guadagno & DeCoster (2012) and Kordyaka & Hribesek (2019), players might experience negative psychological and emotional effects because of toxicity in games. These effects can for instance be anxiety and lowered self-esteem. Trash talking is defined somewhat similarly as toxicity, and thus there is a delicate boundary when trash talking becomes toxicity. Trash talking in online gaming can be defined as common aggressive behaviours (Kniffin & Palacio, 2018). These include, e.g., antagonistic exchanges between players, such as taunting and name calling or making continuous noises in a voice chat to annoy another player (Ballard & Welch, 2017). These are usually used as intimidation tactics between opponents. Ballard & Welch (2017) also identified the main motive behind such behaviours as attempts to increase one's rank in a game. Even though scholars such as Ortiz (2018) and Breuer et al. (2013) define trash talking very similarly to toxicity, the definition used in this thesis is closer to the one given by Kniffin & Palacio (2018). This is to differentiate toxicity from less aggressive behaviours, which can be defined as competitive trash talk.

Some game developers have tried introducing player-driven flagging and reporting to games, where the players themselves are responsible for reporting other players' toxic behaviour, either before or after the game. (Kou & Gui, 2021). Although this mechanic may seem effective on the surface, and some game developers have reported that after

introducing reporting systems, toxic behaviour has decreased, the player bases of these games present a conflicting narrative. According to players, toxic behaviour has not decreased, and the reporting mechanic is abused to frame innocent players. (Blackburn & Kwak, 2014). Because of the partial failure in such attempts to reduce toxicity, players of certain games feel the game developers are helpless in trying to curb toxicity. (Sparrow, Gibbs, & Arnold, 2021).

3.4 Summary: Branding, sponsoring, and toxicity

According to American Marketing Association (2023), a brand is defined as "*...a name, term, design, symbol or any other feature that identifies one seller's goods or service as distinct from those of other sellers.*" Brands and branding offer many positive features to both customers and the companies or organisations behind the brands. Customers have it easier making purchasing decisions when they have identified a brand they associate with e.g., quality, and other positive traits or memories, whereas companies and organisations can legally protect these traits valued by customers. The associations a customer links to a brand through their memories is called brand image. (Keller & Swaminathan, 2020). According to Keller & Swaminathan (2020), brand image consists of four elements: *performance, imagery, judgement,* and *feelings.* Brand image has a crucial role in a customer's decision-making process during a possible purchase and thus, it is important to pursue a positive brand image (Dam, 2020). According to Keller & Swaminathan (2020), factors which can affect a company's brand image are e.g., word of mouth, social media, and direct experiences. These factors define the associations a consumer forms in their mind of a brand. Since these factors cannot always be controlled, branding comes with its risks. If something negative happens and it can be linked to the brand, the brand's image might become tainted with negative associations. To identify desirable and undesirable brand associations brand image can be measured. By measuring brand image, the associations can be addressed to understand how consumers perceive a brand. (Plumeyer, Kotteman, Böger, & Decker, 2019).

According to Cambridge Dictionary (2022), the definition of 'to sponsor' is when a business or other organisation pays for instance the costs of a sports event or the costs of a sportsperson in return for advertising. Freitas et al. (2020) wrote, that sponsoring esports is an excellent way for brands to get more awareness and more customers, i.e., sponsoring esports can elevate the sponsor's brand image. However, like traditional branding, sponsoring is not free of risk. As mentioned previously branding has its risks, and the same risks apply when a company or an organisation tries to elevate their brand image through the means of sponsoring. Among others, doping, supporter violence and financial misconduct can affect the sponsor through the unit they sponsor. Therefore, it is essential for the sponsor to have a suitable reaction to crisis situations, so that the sponsor's credibility does not plummet with the unit they are sponsoring. (Schafraad & Verhoeven, 2019).

Something that can taint something's, or someone's reputation is toxic behaviour. According to WebMD Editorial Contributors (2022), a toxic person is someone who causes conflict in another person's life. Toxicity in games can be defined as an umbrella term that describes certain negative behaviours, such as flaming, trolling, racism, and harassment (Kordyaka, Jahn, & Niehaves, 2020). In games this kind of toxic behaviour targets other players and tries to discourage them (Blackburn & Kwak, 2014) and it can also affect the stream of new players for a game (Grandprey-Shores, He, Swanenburg, Kraut, & Riedl, 2014). If a game cannot get new players to join their game because consumers associate the game with toxicity, they should take measures to try to curb the unwanted behaviour, and thus, remove the unwanted association linked to their brand. In the light of the reviewed studies and theory, toxicity does not necessarily only affect a game's brand image but might also simultaneously affect the brand image of those who sponsor the game. The effects can be similar to those mentioned by Schafraad & Verhoeven (2019), i.e., the sponsor can lose their credibility and suffer from a negative brand image e.g., because of the sponsored unit's supporters' violent behaviour. As a summary, it can be argued based on the reviewed material, that a sponsor's brand image can be negatively affected as a consequence of the negative behaviour of the sponsored unit's supporters.
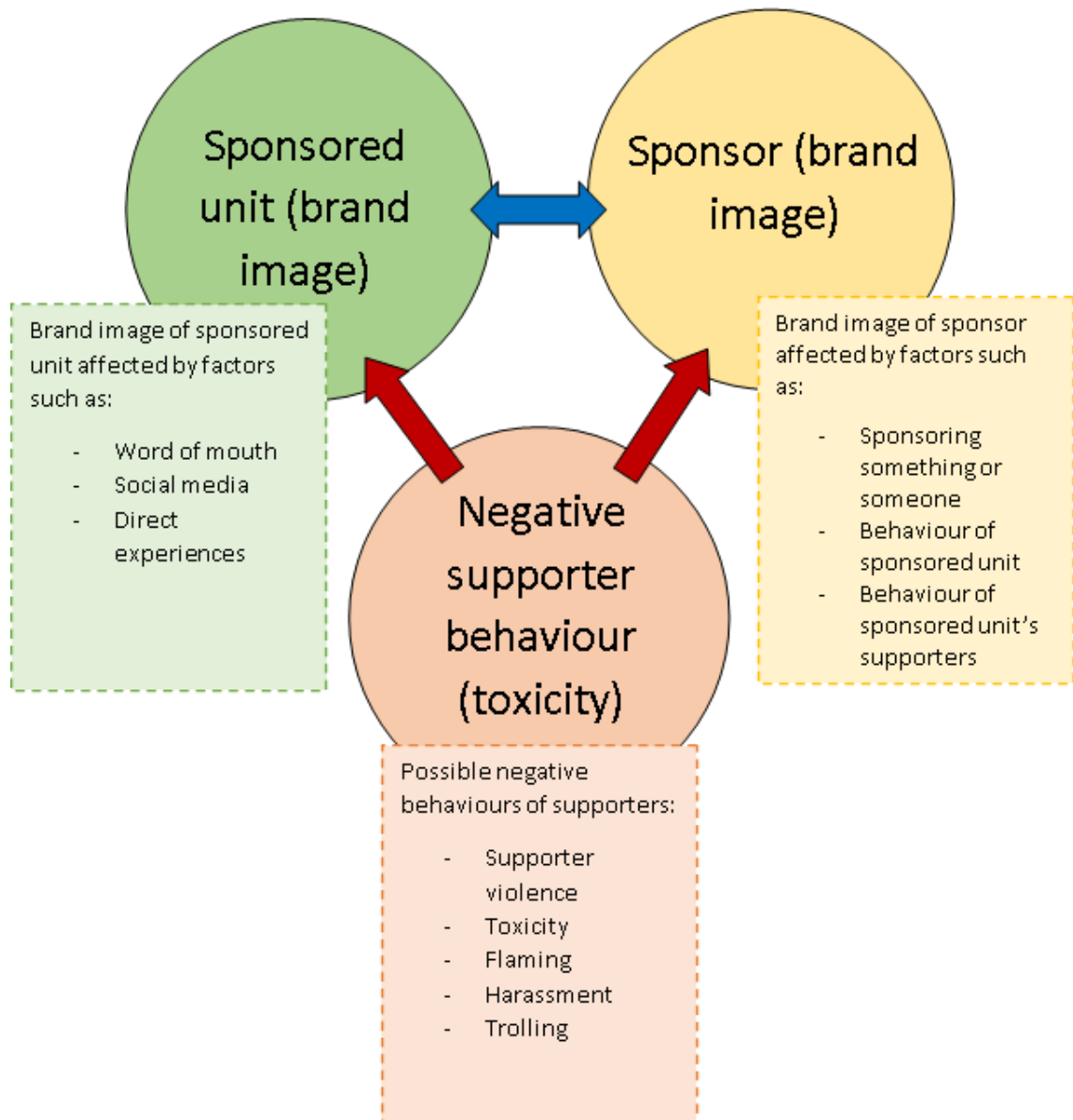
Figure 4: Summary of how brand image, sponsoring, and toxicity are linked.

4 Research methods

In this chapter, the research methods used in this thesis will be presented. The chapter will present both theories behind the chosen methods and how the different studies will be conducted to collect data.

The research in this thesis is based on a method for planning research proposed by Krishnaswami & Satyaprasad (2010) which includes the following steps:

1. Identification and selection of the research problem.
2. Choice of a theoretical framework for the research problem
3. Formulation of the research problem
4. Design of the experiment or inquiry
5. Definition and measurement of variables
6. Sampling procedures
7. Tools and techniques for gathering data
8. Coding, editing, and processing of data
9. Analysis of the data
10. Reporting research

4.1 Choosing the methods: Qualitative and quantitative studies

Bryman & Bell (2013) argue that qualitative and quantitative research can both be distinguished as two separate research strategies. They define quantitative research as a research method which has a deductive (i.e., logical) point of view regarding the interconnection of theory and practical research. The focus in quantitative research is on testing theories, and it has connected the norms and practices in natural science, especially regarding positivism, i.e., an epistemological position which advocates the usage of natural scientific methods to research the social reality and all its aspects.

Bryman & Bell (2013) define qualitative research as a research strategy which empathises words instead of quantification of data during the process of data collection and analysis. It also highlights an inductive point of view of the interconnection between theory and research. The focus point in qualitative research lies in the generation of theories, and it distances itself from the norms and ways used in the natural sciences. It also emphasises how an individual perceives their social reality, and it realises a view of the social reality as something forever changing, that belongs to an individual's creative and constructive ability.

According to Krishnaswami & Satyaprasad (2010), in quantitative research data is collected from the mass. In quantitative research data can be collected with the help of e.g., observations or surveys. By measuring for instance, the numerical data from a set of a targeted group, drawing conclusions is more straightforward. The suitability of different variables in a quantitative study, which are used for analysis, can be tested by their relationship to each other. Quantitative research also uses different statistical tools, which include for instance standard deviation, median and mode. By using these tools conclusions can be drawn both individually and collectively, and if the variables behave consistently over a period of time, the results can be used to create a generalisation of trends. In qualitative research data collection is based on assessing for instance behaviours, attitudes, and opinions. These can be collected in mostly non-quantitative methods, such as group discussions, focus group interviews and in-depth interviews. (Krishnaswami & Satyaprasad, 2010).

According to Plante, Kiernan & Betts (1994), both qualitative and quantitative methods can provide relevant and valid data and information, and together they can be mixed to get more detailed information. When executed adequately a qualitative study can give systematic, context-based, and descriptive observations about a subject. Quantitative research in its turn emphasises the possibility to measure variables of clinical or theoretical interest. In quantitative studies, the researcher needs to collect large amounts of measurable data to prove a point, whereas in qualitative studies the researcher needs to have the ability to support and motivate the conclusions drawn. (Plante, Kiernan, & Betts, 1994).

Bryman & Bell (2013) argue for the positive effects of a mixed method (i.e., combining qualitative and quantitative methods) in research, even though some arguments exist against it. For instance, one of these arguments has to do with the paradigm of both schools. This means that both qualitative and quantitative methods have their own concepts and patterns which do not align with each other. However, Bryman & Bell (2013) emphasise that the argument cannot be proven, since it relies on the perception of solid interconnections between methods and epistemology. Relying on this argument, a mixed method is chosen for this thesis. However, the quantitative research is more of a pre-survey for testing the grounds for the arguments in this thesis before the focus group interviews, which will be the main source of data combined with the in-depth interview. The pre-survey is also a test for finding choke points and for refining the method for a possible future bigger quantitative study, which can be conducted to complement this thesis.

The research conducted in this thesis is a combination of *exploratory or formulative research* and *descriptive research*. Descriptive research means the thesis is focusing on trying to study a problem through particular aspects and dimensions. With descriptive research descriptive information can be collected and this information can be used in further studies. (Krishnaswami & Satyaprasad, 2010). Exploratory or formulative research means this study is somewhat of a pilot research, since toxicity in gaming has been studied as a subject of its own, but its impact on brand image has not been studied much or at all.

The two chosen methods for qualitative research are focus group interviews and an in-depth interview. Focus group interviews are based on open-ended and interactive discussions of a specific topic in a group of about 8-10 people. Before the interview the respondents need to be screened in advance, so that the group is as homogenous as possible (Plumeyer, Kotteman, Böger, & Decker, 2019). It is also required to choose a moderator for the focus groups who guide the conversations with the help of a manuscript so that the focus of the discussion stays on the chosen topic. (Calder, 1977). Focus group interviews are chosen as a method to acquire more detailed and qualitative data from respondents who are both gamers and non-gamers. With the help of focus group

interviews the research will acquire not only opinions but also why the opinions are what they are. This is important because how people perceive toxicity and brand image is somewhat individual. Some may think an action is extremely toxic, whereas another person does not mind the action at all. The non-gamer data is also important because their opinions about LoL are objective. The non-gamers can also reflect toxic behaviour through other brands. Conducting such a comparative analysis enables the assessment of whether attitudes toward toxicity differ between game brands and other brands, and whether toxic behaviour is viewed more critically within one of these domains.

In-depth interviews are a way to get qualitative information on a chosen topic. The interview is conducted with an interviewer who asks the questions and a respondent who is meant to answer these questions. The questions are meant to be semi-structured probing questions. (Hair, Bush, & Ortinau, 2009). Interaction between the interviewer and the respondent is needed during in-depth interviews to uncover different associations of the topic discussed. To achieve this, the respondent needs to be made as comfortable as possible to encourage the mentality to answer freely. (Legard, Keegan, & Ward, 2003). It was chosen to complete an in-depth interview with a person who works for a gaming company because it gives insights from the sellers' point of view, which can be compared to the consumers' point of view (obtained from focus group interviews). Every coin has two sides, and this way both sides can be looked at simultaneously.

The three mentioned methods (quantitative pre-study, focus group interviews and in-depth interview) are chosen to complement and support each other as a mixed method research (Bryman & Bell, 2013). By having these methods data can be gathered from different points of view to support each other and put together to a more in-depth conclusion. These methods were also chosen to prepare the method for a possible future quantitative study, which can be made to complement this thesis. According to a model of mixed research made by Steckler et al. (1992), qualitative research can be used to help develop measures for quantitative research. According to Steckler et al. (1992), it is common to use focus group interviews before the development of a structured survey. Qualitative and quantitative studies and research methods can also be used in parallel with each other to cross-validate findings in a study by looking if both methods came to the

same conclusion. Despite potential criticisms of qualitative research methods by scholars advocating positivist approaches and those who insist on strict separation between qualitative and quantitative paradigms, the authors referred to in this chapter endorse the positive impact that mixed methods can have on the results, validity, and reliability of a study. Thus, the author of this thesis has concluded to use a mixed methods approach.

4.2 Quantitative study: Dreamhack 2022

A quantitative pre-study was conducted at Dreamhack 2022, to test out the research questions presented in this thesis. The study was conducted using the method called dichotomous scaling. In this method, respondents are presented with two response categories, in the style of *yes* or *no* responses. This way it can be determined whether some predefined associations and characteristics are true when investigating LoL's and their sponsors' brand images. (Plumeyer, Kotteman, Böger, & Decker, 2019). The survey at Dreamhack 2022 was a pre-study before the focus group interviews. It was also a pre-study meant to test the study method for a possible future larger-scale quantitative study. The author of this thesis participated in Dreamhack 2022 and collected "yes" and "no" replies from respondents on a digital survey. The goal was to find out whether predefined associations presented in this thesis are true or false. The predefined associations are:

- The players of LoL (do not) perceive the player base as toxic. This toxicity (does not) affects their image of LoL's and their sponsors' brands negatively.
- Players who do not play LoL, but know what LoL is, (do not) perceive the player base as toxic. This toxicity (does not) affects their image of LoL's and their sponsors' brands negatively.

The survey questions were structured, i.e., the respondents were asked to answer according to pre-determined attributes (Sun, Ryan, & Pan, 2015). The survey was anonymous and in a digital form. Even though the "interviewer" was close to the

respondents at Dreamhack 2022 while they answered the survey, the interviewer did not interfere with the process nor see what the respondent answered. This was to prevent interviewer effects which could affect the results/answers. When the survey was passed to Dreamhack 2022 attendees through a digital platform, the risk of the interviewer effect was minimal. (Duffy, Smith, Terhanian, & Bremer, 2005).

Firstly, the respondents were asked do they know LoL, and if yes, if they approve that their anonymous answers will be used in this thesis and for other research purposes. If they approved the use of their replies, they were asked whether they are LoL players or just know the game but have never played it. As background information, the respondents were asked about their age and gender identity. The survey was executed through the web survey -platform Webropol. To examine the survey manuscript, see *Appendix A.*

The respondents could only answer "yes" or "no" to the questions in the survey, i.e., it was a forced-choice full binary format, as demonstrated by Dolnicar & Grün (2013). The acquired data is binary, and by ticking in "yes" or "no" the respondents told whether they associated a given attribute (Dolnicar & Grün, 2013) to LoL and its sponsors. The style of Dolnicar & Grün (2013) was also followed in such way that the attributes described were not described with additional adjectives such as "very" or "somewhat". This way there was no need for a broader scale with many different options, and the survey could be binary. The binary pre-study at Dreamhack 2022 gave hard extreme data from two ends of the spectrum.

4.3 Qualitative study: Focus group interviews

One of the data collection methods in this thesis is *focus group interviews*. According to Kitzinger (1995), focus groups are "*a form of group interview that capitalises on communication between research participants in order to generate data*." (Kitzinger, 1995, p. 1). In focus group interviews the moderator does not ask respondents individual

questions but gives the group a subject to discuss about. The method relies heavily on human interaction, where the respondents get to discuss freely with each other instead of just answering questions presented by the moderator. With the help of this method, it is easier to explore respondents' experiences and knowledge around the given subject, and thus, with the help of free discussion it is easier to not only understand how the respondents think but also why they think in a particular way. (Kitzinger, 1995). The use of focus group interviews as a research method simplifies the process of clarifying and exploring thoughts for respondents compared to a one-on-one interview. To make the group dynamic more open and livelier, it is suggested to present the respondents with open-ended questions which can generate new questions and directions within the group discussion. (Kitzinger, 1995).

The focus group interviews were conducted in collaboration with a course for qualitative research methods at Åbo Akademi University. In this course, university students are meant to familiarise themselves with different methods of qualitative research, before they start the process of writing their bachelor's thesis. As a part of the course, the students are obliged to take part in focus group interviews. The focus group interviews encircled the theme of this thesis, i.e., how does the toxicity of a gaming community affect the brand image of games and their sponsors. Almost all the respondents were business administration students with different major subjects, such as international marketing, accounting, and human resource management. The respondents were roughly divided into groups based on their gaming habits. To ensure the groups were divided accordingly, a pre-survey of their gaming habits was conducted. The pre-survey also collected information on gender/gender identity and age. The groups were divided into *gamers* and *non-gamers*. All the respondents in the gamers category had experience or some experience of gaming, especially online gaming, and they all were at least somewhat familiar with the game League of Legends. Those who had minimal to no experience in gaming were divided into groups of non-gamers.

The groups with gamers discussed the theme mostly through their gaming experiences in different games and through their perception of League of Legends. The non-gamers were

presented with three real-life scenarios from the game League of Legends, and they discussed the subject based on those scenarios and their perceptions of other brands.

Focus groups were either led by the author of this thesis or by a professor at the Åbo Akademi University. The focus group moderators had a manuscript tailored for gamers or non-gamers, depending on the group they were moderating. To see the manuscript in its whole, see *Appendix B*. The parts with no colour are something both manuscripts had. The parts with red are something only the gamer groups had, and the parts with blue are something only the non-gamer groups had. The focus group interviews were conducted in Swedish, so the manuscript in Appendix B has been translated from Swedish to English to match the language in this thesis. Generally, the manuscript had topics such as how does the toxicity of a gaming/brand community affect the respondents' perception of the brand image of a game or another brand, does the toxicity of a gaming/brand community affect the sponsors' brand images, and how the respondents define toxicity and have they had toxic traits or encounters themselves.

The data collected through the focus group interviews were analysed using a narrative analysis method. Narrative analysis is a method where it is analysed how a respondent interprets different things, and the researcher can then interpret the respondent's interpretations. Because narrative analysis gives room for a respondent's imagination and agency, this method is suitable for analysing things such as subjectivity. (Kohler Riessman, 1993). The reasoning behind the chosen method is that toxicity and brand image are based on an individual's own perceptions. Through narrative analysis this perception is discovered easier, since the analysis is based on the narrative, the story, and the reasoning behind the individuals' opinions.

The narrative analysis in this thesis was interpreted in a way where transcriptions were executed in a summarised non-verbatim format. The author of this thesis listened through the recordings and summarised the recordings concurrently while listening. The transcriptions of each individual focus group summarise the opinions and thoughts of the respondents in their own group. Opinions and thoughts were not utilitarianised but were

written in a simplified form with the main points of all relevant commentary presented. Some quotes which were excellently presented by respondents were transcribed verbatim, not to lose a well-expressed definition or thought. Since the focus groups were conducted in Swedish, the author of this thesis has translated the transcribed material into the written English form seen in this thesis concurrently while analysing. The analysis has focused on finding key factors across the focus groups. These key factors are similar stories and perceptions as well as stories and perceptions which differ from the most common ones. The analysis has also considered if something is said in a positive or negative context, and the personal and individual experiences a representant has had, either in a game or with another brand.

4.4 Qualitative study: In-depth interview

The author of this thesis got the opportunity to interview a person who works for a game developer. The interview was conducted in November of 2022. Present were only the author of this thesis and the person working for the game developer. The names of both the person interviewed and the company they work for have been redacted as per request to protect the identity of the person getting interviewed and the company they are working for.

The interview was recorded with only sound and the author of this thesis has transcribed the interview verbatim into a text document with the names and other critical information redacted or altered to protect the identity of the person interviewed, their company and their products. The manuscript for the interview can be found in *Appendix C*.

The theme of the interview was toxicity in gaming. The interview questions had topics such as how the company the person is working for defines toxicity and toxic behaviour in gaming, and does the person interviewed agree with this definition. The person was also asked to talk about the reporting mechanics in their game and do these mechanics work in their opinion. Another topic was about the ethical responsibility of game

developers as regards curbing toxicity, and can toxicity even be controlled or curbed. It was also discussed could toxicity be a part of a games brand image. The last topic was what the plans are for the company and its games in the future as regards toxicity.

The purpose of this interview was to acquire a "seller's" (i.e., the game developers') perspective on the impact toxicity might have on the brand image of a game and its sponsors, so it could be compared to the results of the "consumers'" (i.e., the players') perspective. A point of interest is if sellers and consumers define toxicity the same way, and how their opinions either differ or are similar regarding the impact on brand image. A brand's image is as stated before something that is formed in the minds of consumers, and the ones standing behind the brand might have a totally different perception of their own brand. Another point of interest was also the measures developers take to curb toxicity and does the perceived utility of these measures differ between the opposite entities.

4.5 Additional data: Chatlogs

As additional data the author of this thesis collected chatlogs from games they have played in LoL during 11.6.2022-16.2.2023. These chat logs are to function as evidence of the manifestation of toxicity, bad language and competitive trash talk in LoL. The toxic and malicious text chat comments have been transcribed verbatim into written form, and the situations surrounding them will be elaborated. Original pictures and screenshots can be found in *Appendix D*. As to protect the players' identities and accounts, their summoner names are redacted in both the transcriptions and original pictures. The players' summoner names have been replaced with codes meant to represent a certain player.

The chatlogs were analysed using a qualitative method called *instrumental case study*. The method studies a case to administer understanding into a certain problem, alter generalisations, or to formulate theory. The case studied can be e.g., a person,

organisation, or a specific group. The main point in instrumental case studies is that the case facilitates knowledge of a phenomenon, and it extends an experience. (Grandy, 2010). The group studied was players of LoL, and they represent a phenomenon, i.e., toxicity. The chatlogs are meant to provide general understanding of the phenomenon, i.e., toxicity in LoL.

4.6 Quality of research

To ensure the quality of conducted research, the research must be examined with the help of three prominent criteria: *reliability, replication,* and *validity*. The implementation of these criteria varies depending on whether research has been conducted with qualitative or quantitative methods. According to Bryman & Bell (2013) reliability, replication, and validity are more necessary in quantitative research, but the criteria can also be implemented for qualitative research. Reliability pertains to the degree of repeatability of research findings, i.e., it concerns if the results of a study can be repeated, and if measures devised for different concepts are consistent. Replication is closely related to reliability. Simply put, replication translates to if a study can be replicated. If a researcher's presentation of their methods and process is lacking in detail, the study is most likely impossible to replicate (by someone else). Bryman & Bell (2013) argue that the most important criterion of the three is validity. It concerns the integrity of conclusions drawn from research. However, there are different types of validity, and depending on the type of method used in a study, the study and the results must be examined with the help of the correct validity type. The different types of validity according to Bryman & Bell (2013) are:

- *Measurement validity* which applies primarily to quantitative research, and it has to do with whether the denoted concept of a study is reflected by the measures devised for a concept. If the measures do not represent the concept, the findings of a study can be deemed as questionable.

- *Internal validity* which mainly relates to causality, i.e., if it is suggested that *this* causes *that*, can we be sure of that connection, or could there be *something else* affecting *that* instead of *this*?

- *External validity* which is a type of validity that is hard to achieve with qualitative research, since it concerns whether a result from a study can be generalised beyond a certain research context.

- *Ecological validity* which is concerned with whether findings that are social scientific in nature apply to people's natural and everyday social settings, i.e., a finding can technically be seen as valid, but it does not necessarily consider what happens in the everyday lives of people.

Due to the better suitability for quantitative research of the mentioned validity types, Bryman & Bell (2013) present a modified set of validity criteria which should be more suitable for assessing the validity of qualitative research. These criteria, called aspects of trustworthiness, are *credibility, transferability, dependability,* and *confirmability*. Credibility is closely associated with internal validity, which assesses how believable the findings of a study are. Transferability parallels external validity, which in turn assesses if the findings of a study apply to other contexts. Dependability parallels to reliability, i.e., can the findings of a study apply at other times. Lastly, confirmability parallels to objectivity, which assesses if the researcher's own values have intruded the study at a higher degree.

4.7 Summary: Research methods

In this chapter an exposé of the methods for the research in this thesis has been given. The chapter started with an introduction of the method used for planning the thesis and its research. The chapter continued with a presentation of both qualitative and quantitative research methods, and motivations for using a mixed method. Thereafter the chosen quantitative and qualitative methods were presented and motivated. The chosen qualitative method was dichotomous scaling in the form of a survey with structured

questions. The chosen qualitative methods were focus group interviews, an in-depth interview, and an instrumental case study. The chapter has also presented how to assess the quality of research.

5   Empirical data

In this chapter the data and material collected from the pre-study at Dreamhack 2022, focus group interviews and the in-depth interview is presented. The presentation method varies from transcribed data to summarised data. As an introduction it is also presented how toxicity in LoL manifests itself and the measures and methods RIOT Games has taken in the past for trying to curb toxicity, and what methods and measures they have in use today.

5.1 The manifestation of toxicity in League of Legends

In the next two sub chapters *5.1.1* and *5.1.2* it is presented how toxicity manifests itself in LoL. Chapter 5.1.1 explains how and why different types of communication takes place in LoL and how the non-verbal toxicity manifests in LoL, i.e., how a non-verbal communication system *pinging* has been turned to a method for toxicity by toxic players. Chapter 5.1.1 also explains how toxicity is defined by LoL according to their web guide on reporting toxic behaviour. Chapter 5.1.2 consists of verbatim transcribed text chatlogs from LoL games. These were collected to show actual real-life scenarios of the verbal forms of harassment, trash talking and toxicity in the game.

5.1.1   Communication and non-verbal toxicity in League of Legends

In LoL players who are not "friends" in-game mostly communicate through chat. In premade teams, i.e., teams where the players are in the same team lobby before going into queue for a game, players can choose to communicate through a voice chat, but if a player gets paired up with random players, the communication before, in and after the game will only take place through the game text chat and while in-game by pinging. Pinging is a system that allows players to quickly ping certain things in game, through simple non-

verbal symbols as arrows, exclamation points and question marks (See example in *Figure 5*). The different symbols have different meanings, such as "I will come there", "warning", "target this objective", "what happened", "enemy missing" and so on. In-game the player can choose to either only write to their allies in the "ally chat" or in the "all chat" so that even the enemy team sees what they are writing.

Figure 5: Example of the smart ping system in League of Legends. *Source:* (Smart Ping, 2023).

Toxic behaviour in LoL is defined as *intentional feeding* (dying on purpose/letting the enemy kill you), *hate speech* (for instance racism, sexism), *verbal abuse* (for instance harassment, insulting), *negative attitude* (for instance griefing, giving up), *inappropriate name* (for instance a name with sexist or racist content), *leaving the game/AFK* (leaving in the middle of the game/going 'away from keyboard'), *hostage taking* (refusing to give another player their desired champion/extorting another player to do what they want) and *refusing to play role* (the player refuses to play the role they have been assigned) (Skittle Sniper, Player Reporting Guide and FAQ, 2022). These are all reasons to report a player in LoL.

Even though the pinging system is non-verbal, it can also be abused as a means for toxic behaviour. For instance, if a player makes a mistake and dies, and a toxic player thinks it was a "dumb death" or that the player died on purpose, they can start excessively pinging question marks on the dead player as to highlight their mistake. Sometimes this pinging occurs even if it was not a mistake, but just a situation where the other player could not have survived. Neto, Yokoyama & Becker (2017) discovered in their study of the influence of toxic behaviour in LoL, that a team's performance is lowered when toxic players are present. In their study one of the most straightforward types of toxic behaviour was insults and taunts, where the toxic player or players would throw around homophobic, sexist, and racial slurs. The study also argues that insulting and taunting is a method for a toxic player to release stress in a tense situation.

5.1.2   Chat logs from League of Legends

In this sub-chapter verbatim transcribed chat logs will be presented as evidence of the manifestation of toxic and malicious behaviour in low elo (i.e., games between player who have a lower skill rank, from iron 4 to platinum 1, for clarification, see *Figure 3* on page 14) games in LoL. The summoner names of players have been redacted as to protect the names and accounts of players. *In-game chat* means the comments have taken place during the game. *Post-game lobby* means the comments have come to a lobby which comes after a match. In these lobbies players can see the results of the game and chat with each other. Player's indicators are coloured either red or blue. Blue colour means the player played in the same team as the author of this thesis, and red colour means the player was in the opposing team. For original pictures and screenshots, see *Appendix D*.

Chat log 1, post-game lobby – 11.06.2022

Player 1: "*Nice tutorial.*"

In this case the player who wrote this comment meant the opposing team was so easy to beat and played so badly that it felt like a tutorial for the game. Depending on how someone perceives toxicity, this comment can either go into the category of *competitive trash talk* or *toxic behaviour*.

Chat log 2, post-game lobby – 17.11.2022

> Player 2: "*Fucking idiot*"
> Player 2: "*Play 10 min and then leave for no reason*"
> Player 2: "*Riot and this shit mindset of not banning people*"
> Player 2: "*So stupid*"

In this case the player was probably frustrated when a teammate quit the game and started lashing out in the comments because of the frustration.

Chat log 3, in-game chat – 4.12.2022

> Player 3: "*Surr.*"
> Player 3: "*What a fucking team.*"

In this case the player thought the enemy team was so bad, there was no other option for them but to *surr*, i.e., surrender. When said to the opposing team, this is also used as a tactic to try to *tilt*, i.e., enrage the opposing team, so that they lose their focus and so, lose the game.

Chat log 4, post-game lobby – 8.1.2023

> Player 4: "*Bad sera* (a playable character in the game called Seraphine)"
> Player 4: "*Bad cassio* (i.e., cassio, a playable character in LoL called Cassiopeia)"

Player 4: "*But hey*"

Player 4: "*Ey*"

Player 4: "*Y*"

Player 4: "*Its classic*"

Player 4: "*New players*"

In this case the player was openly saying two other players played badly, and thus mocking their performance in the game. The player indicated these two players must be new to the game, since according to the player they played badly.

Chat log 5, in-game chat – 9.1.2023

Player 5: "*FAIL ULTI VS PLAYERS AFK*"

Player 5: "*??????????????????????????? HELLO*"

Player 6: "*But you are the worlds best!*"

Player 7: "*Ur tries to tilt me tresh (i.e., Thresh, a playable character in LoL) r lacking.*"

In this case player 5 indicates that player 7 failed their *ulti*, i.e., and ultimate move, which is a powerful and possibly match changing high damage/high disruption causing move, against players of the enemy team who almost stood still. Player 7 failing this move caused player 5 to lash out to them.

Chat log 6, in-game chat – 10.1.2023

Player 8: "*was denn? Ne tüte deutsch?*"

Player 9: "*nazi*"

Player 9: "*N A Z I*"

Player 8: "*report*"

Player 10: "*noob as ass*"

Player 9: "*noo its empire ottoman*"

In this case player 8 said something in German, and player 9 indicated they are a nazi because of their language. Player 8 told others to report player 9 because of their hateful comments. Player 10 went on and called someone else a noob, i.e., a spiteful word meant to humiliate new players, which is also generally used to tell other players one thinks they play badly.

Chat log 7, in-game chat – 5.2.2023

Player 11: "*this miss fortune* (i.e., Miss Fortune, a playable character in LoL)"

Player 12: "*yeas, i am mf* (i.e., mf, short version for Miss Fortune)*, good use of your noticing skills^^*"

Player 11: "*good that u can land a single skill* (i.e., skill shots, an ability the player needs to aim for to hit an enemy player)"

Player 11: "*:D*"

Player 12: "*i like e liandry mf, i'll slow them, so u can finish them :p*"

Player 11: "*ye, ur slowing them by dropping skill on top of urself*"

Player 11: "*ur smar*"

Player 11: "*smart*"

Player 12: "*smarter than bantering with players in an online game, n getting upset about it^^*"

Player 11: "*im not uposet*"

Player 11: "*i don't care*"

Player 11: "*ur showing how stupid u are*"

Player 12: "*if ones intelligence is met in their lol performance, i am worried about the future of this world XD*"

In this case player 11 used the word *this* in front of the character name, which usually means they think the player playing the character mentioned is really bad, and their performance is lacking. Player 12 enjoys playing the specific character, Miss Fortune, in a way which is not the most popular (i.e., off meta), and is so played slightly differently from the most used way. Player 11 is mocking player 12 for not hitting their skill shots (i.e., not homing shots) every time, and also tries to mock their intelligence. Player 12 is trying to shut down the negative player with snarky comments.

Chat log 8, post-game lobby – 8.2.2023

> Player 13: "*you are mentally ill*"
>
> Player 14: "*report incredibly toxic draven* (i.e., Draven, playable character in LoL)"
>
> Player 13: "*you should kill yourself*"
>
> Player 15: "*lol, imagine flaming someone in blind, and then the person getting s+*"
>
> Player 13: "*you are an illiterate twat and should kill yourself*"
>
> Player 13: "*the only reason you inbreds had a game*"
>
> Player 13: "*is due to me and gp* (i.e., gp, Gangplank, a playable character in LoL)"

In this last chat log a player was frustrated in their teammates, probably because of their performance. Their claims were though proven wrong, since one of the flamed players (player 15) provably got the highest possible grade in the game from their performance (the game calculates the players performance and turns it into a grade between D and S+, where D is the worst possible performance and S+ is extremely good performance). Player 13 then proceeds to writing profanities to the other players and claims they only did well because of them and another player.

5.2 What has RIOT Games done in the past to try to manage toxicity in League of Legends?

From 2011 to 2014 RIOT Games tried a system called "The Tribunal" to tackle toxicity in their LoL player community (Fandom, u.d.). The system was a crowdsourced platform where players got to judge if someone's behaviour deserved punishment or not. It was a system with two stages, where the first stage was player(s) reporting toxic behaviour which they observed directly and afterwards human experts reviewed the reported behaviour to deem if it was toxic or not, and whether it deserved punishment or not. (Blackburn & Kwak, 2014). On a LoL Q&A platform (Ask Riot - Will Tribunal Return?, 2018) Draggles from RIOT Games writes the system was dissolved because it was slow and inefficient. It required manual pulling of chat logs to a website, where the next stage was to wait for enough players to give their opinion of the behaviour and decide on a

sufficient penalty, whereas RIOTs modern systems can distribute a penalty in less than 15 minutes. Draggles (2018) also mentions the system suffered from time to time of wild inaccuracy and bias, since successful penalties could give an IP reward. The Tribunal has despite its imperfections served as a foundation for the more modern systems of reporting in-game and Draggles (2018) wrote they are working on systems which can detect intentional feeding, trolling and inappropriate names even more efficiently. For this to evolve and work, RIOT still needs player contribution in form of in-game and post-game reports of toxic behaviour.

The system RIOT currently uses in LoL to prevent and report toxic behaviour is called the Instant Feedback System (later IFS). The IFS trusts players to report the toxic behaviour they see before or after a match. In the post-game lobby players can choose to report a toxic player. The different toxic categories one can be reported of are: *Negative attitude* (griefing, giving up), *Verbal abuse* (harassment, offensive language), *Leaving the game/AFK*, *Intentional feeding* (feeding is griefing, not just having a bad game), *Hate speech* (racism, sexism, homophobia, etcetera), *Cheating* (unapproved third-party programs) and *Offensive or inappropriate name*. The report window also has an open-ended question field where players are asked to describe the toxic behaviour and what happened.

After the report is sent it triggers a review in LoL's reporting system. To make a report a player must have played with the other player, either in the same or opposing team, and the game must have occurred a maximum of twenty games ago. It is also possible to report a player already before the game in champion select if they behave toxically (e.g., verbal abuse, hostage taking, refusing to play assigned role, etcetera). When the review system is triggered, and if the behaviour is deemed toxic by it, LoL's automatic disciplinary system will trigger and start analysing the behaviour to assess the appropriate punishment. LoL also defines what is not considered as reportable behaviour to minimise unnecessary reports. These includes playing poorly but still trying to win, choosing off meta champions and builds for certain roles and strong language which is not insulting. Possible punishments for toxic behaviour are chat restrictions, ending up in low priority queue (queue times for games is longer), temporary ban (i.e., being banned for playing

the game for a certain amount of time), permanent ban (i.e., being banned from the game permanently, and disabling the account), etcetera. (Player Reporting Guide and FAQ, 2022).

According to a LoL youtuber, Neace, LoL is also starting to experiment with manually reviewing high elo (players who are higher in the LoL skill bracket) games to prevent unsportsmanlike behaviour. (Neace, 2022). Patch 12.22 notes also reveal LoL is starting to experiment with anonymous mode in ranked solo/duo queue. This means that players will not see their ally team members summoner names in champion select or in game. This way LoL tries to prevent game dodging (i.e., quitting before the game starts). This is a phenomenon which has been occurring thanks to third party programs which give players information about their team members match history; how many games they have won/lost recently and with which champions, and if someone's match history has been undesirable, another player might have dodged the game before it has started to ensure the best possibility to win and climb in the skill bracket. Because of this change to anonymous mode, these third-party programs cannot anymore offer player information, and the number of dodged games should decrease. LoL is also renewing their system that recognizes disruptive chat. (Patch 12.22 Notes, 2022). These could be methods to tackle toxicity and unsportsmanlike behaviour in LoL, but how this affects the gaming community and the game itself remains to be seen.

To encourage players to a more positive attitude in the game, LoL also has an *honour system*. The honour system is meant to reward players who behave well and show sportsmanlike behaviour. After each game, before the post-game lobby, LoL gives the players a chance to honour one of their teammates. Honouring gives the honoured player points to their honour score, and by getting these points, players climb in their honour rank. A player can honour another player for being a good sport and positive in general, for being the shotcaller, i.e., a player who made important and positive decisions in the game that gained success to the team in battles, and lastly a player can be honoured for being tilt-proof. Being tilt-proof means, that a player, even though they for instance struggled, were being flamed or otherwise had a bad game, still "kept their cool" and did not give up, start flaming or griefing themself. If everyone in a team honour someone,

everybody gets some extra points to their honour score, even though they might have not been the player who was honoured. (TimTamMonster, 2022).

The more honourable a player is consistently, the faster their honour score and level grows. Depending on the honour level, a player also gets rewards accordingly. The highest honour reward a player can get at the end of a LoL season is nowadays a special skin to a champion, which cannot be obtained in any other way. Other rewards might include small amounts of in-game currency or an add-on to a characters' backing (i.e., teleporting back to their own base to shop, heal, etcetera) animation, which shows the other players the player has a high honour level. (TimTamMonster, 2022).

5.3 Quantitative study: Dreamhack 2022

The survey conducted at Dreamhack 2022 received far less replies than what was hoped for. Considering the lack of respondents, the data presented cannot be seen as valid, but more as vaguely indicative, i.e., the data gives a vague indication of the general opinion of LoL's and their sponsors' brand images. Even though the study at Dreamhack 2022 was unsuccessful at acquiring a satisfying number of replies, it can be used as a foundation for a possibly upcoming larger and deeper quantitative study. The foundation for the Dreamhack 2022 study also helps to understand what needs to be done differently in the possible larger quantitative study with players of League of Legends. With modifications the questions used in the survey are a good foundation for a larger study, though the larger study should not use binary questions, but more of a Likert's scale type of approach. Even though the study did not give a valid and reliable result it functioned as a test for a quantitative research approach to the subject.

Data from respondents who did not know what LoL is has been removed. Most of the respondents (86%) identified as male, and the respondents were between 16-30 years old. All the respondents had played LoL and experienced toxicity in it while playing. More

than half (57%) of the respondents answered they perceive the player base/gaming community of LoL as toxic. Approximately 70% of the respondents admitted they had taken either a conscious break or stopped playing LoL because of toxic behaviour. Approximately 70% of the respondents said they felt the toxic behaviour of the LoL player base has affected negatively on their opinion of the game's brand image. However, only 29% said the toxicity of the player base has affected negatively on their perception of LoL's sponsors brand images. When asked if the respondents' overall opinion on LoL's and their sponsors brand image was positive, for both alternatives 71% of the respondents chose *yes* as their answer.

Figure 6: Distribution of responses in Dreamhack 2022 survey

Gender	Man	Woman		Conscious breaks or quitting LoL?	Yes	No
	86 %	14 %			71 %	29 %
Age	16-20	21-25	26-30	Negative impact on LoLs brand image?	Yes	No
	28 %	43 %	29 %		71 %	29 %
Do you know what LoL is?	Yes	No		Negative impact on sponsors' brand image?	Yes	No
	100 %	0 %			29 %	71 %
Have you played LoL?	Yes	No		Overall opinion of LoLs brand image positive?	Yes	No
	100 %	0 %			71 %	29 %
Have you experienced tocixity in LoL?	Yes	No		Overall opinion of sponsors brand image positive?	Yes	No
	100 %	0 %			71 %	29 %
Do you perceive the player base as toxic?	Yes	No				
	57 %	43 %				

5.4 Qualitative studies

In the next two sections the data collected from two different qualitative studies will be presented. The first study was a face-to-face in-depth interview with a person who works for a company in the gaming field. The second set of data comes from focus group interviews conducted in collaboration with a course covering different kinds of qualitative research methods in Åbo Akademi University.

5.4.1   Data from the qualitative in-depth interview

For this thesis the author had the opportunity to interview a person who works for a game developer. As to protect the identity of both the interviewed person and the company, the names of the interviewed person and the company they work for have been redacted per request by the interviewed person. The person working for the company will be called Person X in the material, and the company will be called Organisation X. The games discussed will be called Game 1 and Game 2. The interview was conducted in November of 2022 with the company employee and the author of this thesis present.

Person X works with Game 1 related projects at Organisation X. One of their tasks is to organize and create strategies for special tournaments and to ensure the players and their coaches as well as the community of Game 1 gets what they need to find success in the space.

When asked, how does Organisation X define toxicity and does Person X personally agree with the definition, the following answer was acquired:

> "*I would say that I feel from my understanding Organisation X's definition for toxicity does encompass most negative behaviour in games, so definitively rhetoric that targets the person, their appearance, things that they can't control, like definitively nationality for example as well. All these things are covered, saying to addition to that, you have throwing games, griefing, just*

general negative attitude, stuff like that. The list of things you can report people for, I've never looked at that and not found what I was looking for, when something you know goes wrong in game I would say. So, I would say I do agree with its definition of what's toxic based on the list of things that are in the reporting menu[1]." (Person X, 2022).

When asked if Person X would like to elaborate about the reporting systems in use, and what has been tried to curb toxicity, they told the discussion around toxic behaviour and how they at Organisation X can move towards a better execution in the fight against toxicity is something that is constantly ongoing internally at Organisation X. They also told Game 2 has a reporting system that mostly does its job, since it has an integrated penalty system which works in every phase of the gaming experience. According to Person X, the discussion around improving reporting systems depends also on how the community is set up, so the conversation differs whether they are discussing systems in Game 1 or Game 2. Person X thinks most people would prefer to see outright bans for toxic players, but as a company they also need make sure that people will still play their games, and if too many players get banned, the games will not soon have any players left. Therefore, Person X tells they are trying to find different solutions and balance in reporting and what kind of behaviour leads to what kind of penalties. Organisation X is trying to explore how to be stricter with certain types of negativities, especially negative behaviour including racism, sexism, and character negativity. Person X elaborates that there is a delicate balance to find when trying to encourage people towards more positive behaviour instead of instantly kicking them out of the gaming experience for good. One example Person X gave was to restrict the toxic user's ability to communicate with other players, and thus creating a suboptimal experience as a punishment until the user learns how to behave.

In the interview it was also discussed whether Person X thinks the measures Organisation X has taken to curb toxicity in their gaming community have worked, and according to Person X there has been some improvement in the environment. According to Person X, at least Game 2 has become more playable. However, Person X does make a remark that the gaming culture is so embedded in the general online culture, so this is a hard equation to solve. According to Person X's perception, they have reached a benchmark in the war

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[1] *Reporting menu: The game discussed has a reporting mechanic built in it, which can be used to report toxic behaviour in game.*

against toxicity, but the work is not complete, and they already need to consider what their next steps should be. Person X also mentions how toxic behaviour takes new forms after an old form has been obliterated or made harder to practice.

The subsequent question in the interview pertained to the ethical dimension of game development, and more specifically, if Person X thinks game developers have an ethical responsibility in the matter of curbing the toxicity of gaming communities and enhancing the safety in them. Person X's personal opinion was "technically no", but it is worth considering for any game if a game developer makes a game that facilitates toxicity. According to Person X, there are dedicated teams working on these kinds of problems, and that Game 2 has been a good attempt at a game that encourages people towards more positive behaviour, but Person X also reminds that in formats such as Game 2, toxicity always finds a way into the community and the game, but it does not mean Organisation X would stop trying to find ways to improve it.

According to Person X the company as a collective should be committed to work together towards a better player experience and finding choke points and features which facilitate toxicity or can lead to toxic behaviour. "*It's meaningless if there isn't somebody aligned to put the money for fixing that, somebody to fix the solution and somebody aligned to implement it.*" Person X elaborates that everybody in the company must be onboard in fighting negativity and that it is a shared responsibility. Person X says that Organisation X is trying to find not only ways to penalize negative behaviour, but also ways to reward good behaviour in hopes of improving the general behaviour patterns in the community towards more encouraging and supportive behaviour.

In the penultimate question the interviewer asked whether Person X believed that Organisation X can control the toxicity within their gaming community. From a branding perspective, the question also explored whether they think toxicity might in some way be a part of Game 2's brand image, as it is something that forms in the consumers' minds. A follow-up question was if Organisation X had the intention to eradicate toxicity in their community altogether if it is indeed a part of their brand.

Person X said they want people to be able to communicate in a cheeky and competitive way through the communication channels their games have, but that the channels do not exist there for exaggerated positivity. With exaggerated positivity Person X meant situations where a team is clearly losing/performing poorly, and a player would tell everyone "It is going so great!". According to Person X nobody wants toxicity to be baked in the gaming culture, and that opinions vary on if toxicity is just a part of a game or not. Person X also argued that one would need to devise an argument for why toxicity would be brand specific for their games, since other games from different developers have the same kind of reputation. "*...so how much of a brand can toxicity be if every game is toxic.*" Person X referred to a previous comment, which is that toxicity is just a part of being online, but it does not need to be baked into a certain gaming culture. Person X also mentioned the fact that one of their games is somewhat old, which might allude to why people think toxicity is a part of its brand and an element that is expected in the game.

Person X clarifies, Organisation X does not want that toxic encounters are the baseline experience for new players who do not necessarily have a thick skin when encountering negativity, as this could result in the game becoming unenjoyable for them. Generally, players do not want to be flamed, and one way to "not get flamed" is muting the toxic player (i.e., filtering out the communication from a certain player). However, some people do not even bother muting the game and just quit playing it, and that is not an experience anyone wants to create for their players. Some also decide against muting toxic players, since without the ability to see other player's communication the player loses the ability to coordinate strategy. Therefore, these players decide to endure the toxicity for the sake of strategizing. Person X also wanted to contest the idea that toxicity is just a part of the culture in their games, because it is a part of the whole gaming culture, even though it should not necessary be a part of it. Thus, Person X thinks everybody should continue to contribute towards improving the gaming environment.

The final question in the interview aimed to explore the direction Game 2 is going in the future in terms of curbing toxicity and branding, as well as what plans Organisation X has for Game 2. Person X started with a comment they referred to as "cheesy". According to Person X, Organisation X aspires Game 2 would become a fun experience for

everyone. Regarding the tournaments organised around Game 2, Organisation X wants these events to be an environment where individuals who love the game can just come together and enjoy them. To elaborate, Person X mentioned one of their latest marketing and branding efforts which presented a satire of cheeky and goodwilled competitiveness occurring in Game 2. The setting for this marketing campaign was an everyday environment instead of a game, where cheekiness and competitiveness was embraced. The relaxed communication and environment presented in the marketing campaign is what Organisation X wishes their players could experience: goodwilled joking amongst friends and foes. To achieve this kind of cheeky but friendly environment Person X told they need to work on how to identify toxic behaviour more efficiently and how to differentiate toxic behaviour from friendly and healthy competitiveness. Organisation X utilises artificial intelligence to identify toxic behaviour in their games. However, artificial intelligence still lacks the ability to assess context. An example Person X presented for a situation where penalty systems that use artificial intelligence might make a wrong verdict was if a player says to another player "*I am going to take you out*". Depending on the context the player can either mean they are taking the other person out for a date or intend to kill them. Even if the player would have meant the first option, i.e., taking someone on a date, artificial intelligence might consider the statement as threatening and penalise the player. Therefore, utilising artificial intelligence might create problems, but it can be very efficient if it works the way it is intended to.

I think it is time for us to find out how we can strike a balance in toxicity identification because obviously there are only so many people you can assign to figure that out. You definitively can't put a human in every game, so we don't. We have ways that a player can report, but how can we take on that stuff that gets frequently reported, how we can target and solve that, because that is one less report we need to handle manually for example. So, I would say we are looking for ways to optimize that and learning from other games really to do that. We have to figure out how to make an automatic solution that can fix the problem without it ending with a bunch of people who get kicked out. But it is on the table. -Person X

5.4.2   Data from focus group interviews

In total 60 respondents took part in the focus groups. These 60 respondents were all divided into 10 different groups based on their gaming habits. All respondents are business administration students with varying major subjects at Åbo Akademi University. The respondents in focus groups called "*gamers*" all had experience in games and had played or at least knew the game League of Legends, whereas the focus groups called "*non-gamers*" had respondents with minimal to no personal experience in playing games. Half of the respondents were categorised as gamers and were divided into five focus groups, and the other half of the respondents were categorised as non-gamers and were divided into five focus groups. In total 80 respondents were invited to the focus groups, but 20 of them did not participate. As a result, the focus groups vary in size from four respondents per group to eight respondents per group.

Figure 7: Overview of the focus groups. Focus groups 1-5 were gamers, whereas focus groups 6-10 were non-gamers

Focus group	Date	Place	Length (hh.mm.ss	Respondents per group	Man	Woman
1	29.11.2023	Turku	42.36.00	7	7	0
2	29.11.2023	Turku	38.24.00	8	6	2
3	30.11.2023	Turku	37.43.00	5	5	0
4	30.11.2023	Turku	35.17.00	4	4	0
5	29.11.2023	Turku	43.16.00	6	6	0
6	29.11.2023	Turku	47.45.00	6	3	3
7	30.11.2023	Turku	46.54.00	8	0	8
8	30.11.2023	Turku	39.15.00	7	1	6
9	29.11.2023	Turku	33.16.00	4	0	4
10	29.11.2023	Turku	30.30.00	5	1	4

Only five of the respondents in the gamer focus groups told they play games actively. The rest of the respondents told they have played a great deal when they were younger, but now, especially because they have started attending university, they play far less. Six of the respondents told they play or have played LoL actively at some point in their life.

In screening 59% of the respondents identified as men and 41% as women. Chosen terms to represent respondents' gender identity are *man* and *woman*, because the traditional *male* and *female* terms refer to a person's biological sex, which is determined by chromosomes and genes, whereas the terms man and woman refer to gender, which is not synonymous with the term sex. Instead, gender refers "*...to the continuum of complex psychosocial self-perceptions, attitudes, and expectations people have about members of both sexes.*" and it also takes into consideration the broader cultural concepts of being a man or a woman or what is considered masculine or feminine. (Tseng, 2008).

Figure 8: The gender distribution of focus group participants
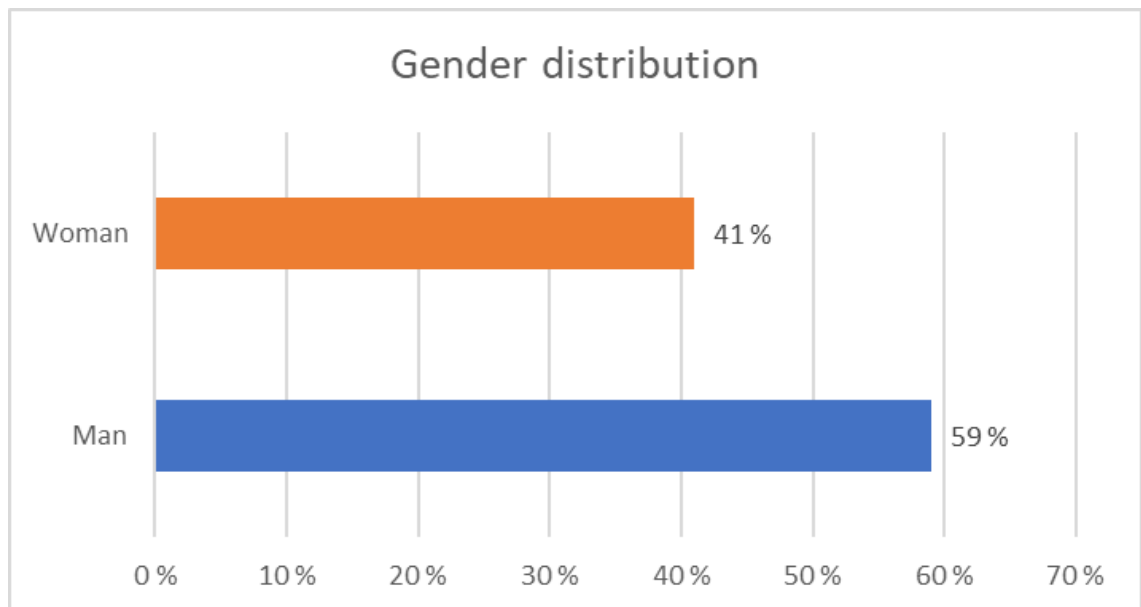
The average birthyear of the respondents is 1998, and the median birthyear is 2000. The youngest respondent/respondents is/are born in 2001 and the oldest respondent/respondents is/are born in 1973.

Figure 9: Birthyear distribution of focus group participants
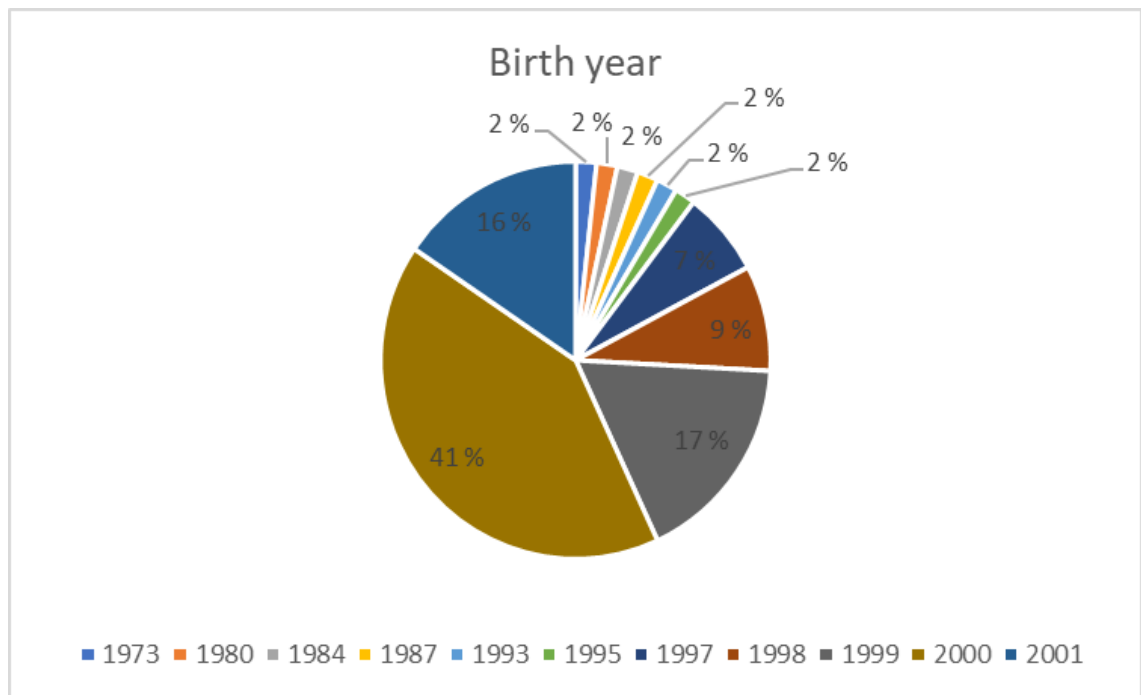
Data from gamers

One of the first themes discussed in the focus group interviews was what the respondents perceive as toxic behaviour in gaming and generally. Many of the respondents noted that in the context of gaming, it is considered toxic behaviour when someone begins to personally attack others. Some respondents elaborated that negative comments are especially toxic when a game is based on teamwork and the negativity is expressed by the player's own teammates. According to the respondents, the moral of the whole team decreases in a situation where someone starts flaming, thus leading to poorer performance and even to a loss of a match. According to the respondents, other toxic traits in the gaming context are e.g., homophobic and racial slurs, having toxic words in one's summoner name (i.e., the player's account name, which is visible to other players), non-verbal toxicity such as inting (i.e., intentional feeding, dying intentionally to the enemy team) and other forms of griefing (i.e., making the match unplayable for other players with your own actions), as well as ping flaming (i.e., spamming the non-verbal

communication symbols on another player after they e.g., died or did not help). Also, being a bad loser was seen as something that can trigger toxic behaviour and one of the focus groups even suggested toxicity can just be a trait in someone's personality.

Some focus groups mentioned how in other games the reporting mechanic that is supposed to get rid of toxic players gets misused. The mechanic based on players voting if a player should be kicked from a lobby or not by either giving them a thumbs up or down during the game. Instead of kicking out toxic players, a group of toxic players could vote someone out simply because they underperformed or played poorly for other reasons. The game Call of Duty (hereafter COD) was also mentioned as an example of a game with toxic players. The game differs in both style and mechanics from LoL, but it also relies on teamwork in some game modes. The focus groups with gamers mentioned "*COD squeakers*" as something they thought made the game not enjoyable. COD squeakers was explained as players who are excessively screeching and yelling profanities through voice chat in the lobby and in game. This behaviour was perceived as very disturbing and disrupting. Some respondents said they have also got hateful chat and voice messages after matches to their account inboxes. According to one respondent, messages sent after games, telling you e.g., "You were bad" are just straight up bullying.

A running theme amongst the focus groups with gamers was also that toxicity and toxic behaviour is associated with young/younger players, especially those in their early teens and teens. Some respondents even admitted they themselves have exhibited toxic behaviour in games in their younger years, but that these tendencies have dissipated after they have matured. Nevertheless, the respondents argued that toxicity is something that is part of all PvP games, and especially those which are competitive in nature, and that toxic behaviour is almost expected in competitive games. Relying on these interviews it can be argued that toxicity is already a part of the image of PvP games.

Despite the fact that most of the respondents in the focus groups with gamers perceived the type of behaviour mentioned previously as toxic, there were a few who said even the harsher behaviour (excluding racism, homophobia, etcetera) was not toxic. They

perceived it more as psychological warfare to try to make the other team tilt (i.e., lose their cool and because of that their focus), so it would be easier to win. One respondent even argued it is worse playing with their friends than with a group of random players, because their friends seemed quicker to give negative feedback than random players. Nevertheless, most of the respondents felt that when playing with friends "being toxic" is considered acceptable, because even if you say harsh words and flame each other, it is not considered as toxic, but as cheeky joking and bantering among friends. However, it was mentioned that in friend groups some individuals might still step over an accepted threshold and their behaviour might become "too much". It was also mentioned that goodwilled criticism could be seen as toxic if the player delivering it cannot formulate the comment in a constructive way. If criticism is presented constructively, it can be beneficial, but if the comment which is meant to be helpful is expressed in a cumbersome way, the receiving player might misinterpret it as e.g., flaming. Misinterpretations and miscommunications like this might lead to a harmful cycle of toxic arguments within a match.

When the respondents were asked how they would define the difference between competitive trash talk and toxicity, varying definitions were provided. For instance, comments such as "*GG EZ*" (i.e., *good game, easy*, which means you were an easy opponent to beat/bad player) or minor negative commenting such as "*uninstall your game*" was seen as competitive trash talk and something that belongs to the psychological warfare in games. It was also generally perceived that external negative behaviour, i.e., shaming and trying to tilt the opponent was competitive trash talking, whereas if derogatory comments were directed at a teammate by a teammate, it was more easily considered as toxic behaviour. The reasoning was that games like LoL are based on teamwork, and if the team is not working together and trying to aid their struggling teammates, and instead start flaming each other, then there is no teamwork. It was argued that in situations where negativity is internal, i.e., within a team, morale and with it also the chance of winning decreases. Many of the gamers in the focus groups also said players must have a thick skin when playing, and not take everything too seriously.

General "*bullshitting*" was seen as something that is a part of competitive games, and players should not get *triggered* (i.e., getting angry, irritated) by it, but nonetheless it was argued that some players are not as thick skinned, and the perception of toxicity varies from person to person, and even from culture to culture. Something that was also mentioned was that toxicity is not creative, whereas someone who does competitive trash talking needs to be creative. On the contrary, some respondents said the opposite, and thought toxicity has also become more creative lately than the traditional "*I screwed your mother*" comments. One respondent had ended up in a toxic banter with a random opponent, and the opponent had successfully dug up their home address and sent it to the respondent. Despite this breach of privacy, the respondent told they remained calm, and apologised to the opponent, even though the opponent started the bantering. Despite this respondent's calm reaction, for someone else this type of situation might have caused some severe anxiety.

The next topic discussed was if the reputation of a gaming community has had a negative impact on a games brand image. Respondents in gamer focus groups said that they have avoided some games because of their reputation. One of the first things mentioned was that a respondent had avoided a game because its player base is associated with immaturity. Another said they would never recommend another game to their friends because the game's community has such a toxic reputation. It was also mentioned that a respondent knows people who do not want to try LoL because of its toxic reputation, and another respondent added, that LoL feels like one of the most toxic environments in the gaming world. It was suggested that toxicity is a part of LoL's brand image, and some respondents avoid the game because of it. A respondent also noted that LoL is almost always referred to as a toxic game and is rarely discussed in any other context. On the contrary, some respondents said the toxicity of the gaming community does not affect their image of LoL's brand, because they differentiate between the brand itself and the fanbase of the game. Instead, it was suggested that the way LoL reacts to toxic behaviour is something that affects its brand image. If LoL would not take any actions against the toxicity in its community, it would be seen as something that impacts the brand image negatively. Even though respondents said they can differentiate the community from the brand, there were still respondents who said they would not recommend LoL to their friends because of the toxicity of the fanbase. This rhetoric can be interpreted as

somewhat contradicting. Nevertheless, most of the respondents said they would not recommend the game to a friend, since according to the respondents it is hard to learn. The respondents also elaborated that they themselves are not interested in LoL. However, a couple of respondents said they could recommend LoL to a friend if they knew the friend was interested in MOBAS, but they would make a remark that the community is toxic and unfriendly.

No one in the focus groups said that their image of a sponsor has been affected negatively because of a gaming community's negative reputation. They all agreed that sponsors are a separate entity from the fanbase in this case. The sponsors are most often seen in professional tournaments, and in these tournaments the professional sponsored teams and players are mostly well behaved. However, it was suggested that if some kind of outrageous behaviour would occur, either from a sponsored team or a player, the sponsors should react to it in some way to show they oppose toxic behaviour.

To map the gamers own behaviour, they were also asked how they react to toxicity in the games they play and do they themselves behave toxically. With this approach it was possible to gain some deeper insight into why they might think in a particular way regarding toxic behaviour in games. Most of the respondents in gamer groups said they would try to ignore the behaviour, since arguing with a toxic player is "*like talking to a wall*" or "*like throwing more petrol into the flames*", i.e., the toxic player will not listen and would probably escalate their behaviour. On the contrary, some respondents said they would try to counter the toxic players, and some even considered tilting the toxic player more as entertainment. Trying to tilt a toxic enemy player was also considered as psychological warfare, since if the enemy player tilts and spends more time typing or raging instead of focusing on the game, the enemy team is more likely to lose the match. A suggested course of action to retaliate against a toxic player on the opposing team was targeting them in the game, i.e., putting more effort into killing them in-game. Also, if an enemy was being toxic by griefing, some said they would try to grief them back.

The respondents were asked to compare the toxicity in competitive gaming with that of traditional sports, as well as with other brands outside the gaming context. Such brands included those in the clothing industry, and sports such as football and ice hockey, and the results were interesting. One respondent said psychological warfare is normal in traditional sports, but most respondents who made the comparison said the types of things said in games or things done in games (such as griefing) would never be accepted in traditional sports. One group agreed traditional sports have a code of conduct, the gentleman rules, which prevent toxic behaviour in them. Some respondents said that if a non-gaming related brand's (e.g., an energy drink company, cars, clothes) fanbase or brand community would be associated with weird or negative behaviour, they would probably avoid it, since they would not want to be associated with a negative stereotype. One respondent even told they know people who have returned products they have bought from a brand, because they heard the products were associated with certain types of behaviour or people. Another respondent mentioned that they think some people might avoid everything FIFA related, because their actions in Qatar during the latest football championships are seen as controversial. However, this does not concern the football fanbase, but more the actions of the organisation itself. One of the most interesting comments in these comparisons was, when a respondent blatantly said they did not see toxicity in gaming as real bullying, and this same attitude was also discovered in the nuances of other respondents' answers.

The next theme discussed was what concrete actions the game developers should take to curb toxicity, and do the respondents think the methods already in use are working. The respondents found this question bit puzzling, since according to them toxicity is already so rooted in gaming culture and especially in competitive games. Reporting was seen as both a pro and a con, since at its best reporting works as it should, but it can also be misused to target innocent players just to bully them. Keyword banning, i.e., banning certain negative words was seen as problematic, because the meaning of a word depends on culture and context. If an automated moderating system only deems a word as either accepted or not accepted, the context gets lost in the translation and leads to unjustified punishments. Banning an account was also seen as useless, since the toxic player can just create a new one. The solution for this according to one respondent would be to make IP-bans, but they also mentioned it would be much harder to execute. A few respondents

also suggested that using voice chat instead for text chat could be helpful. One respondent said, "*toxicity is born out of frustration for the lack of efficient communication*" and voice chats would make communicating quicker and easier. Voice chat could also help players to hear the tone of another player's voice, which could decrease the possibility to misinterpret what someone means. Using voice chat could also make the players think twice what they say, since they can actually hear what they are saying, and they also hear there is another human on the other end. However, respondents admitted voice chat has also its problems, since if someone would not want to use voice chat, they could be pressed to do it by the other players. One suggestion that could work in competitive games which are based on a ranking system, was that the ranking mechanic should be more connected to individual performance, and not in the performance of the whole team. This way one individual's poor performance would not affect the rank of the other players, and thus, the individual would not perhaps be as targeted if they underperform. Discovering new methods for curbing toxicity was deemed as challenging or nearly impossible, since a new mechanic might work for a few days, but after a while the community would discover a way to circumvent it resulting in the emergence of new forms of toxic behaviour.

The last question for the focus groups was how they would describe PvP gaming, either with a word or a sentence. The majority used the word *competitive*. PvP was also seen as *addictive*, *frustrating*, *chaotic*, and *provocative*.

Data from non-gamers

The focus groups with non-gamers said toxicity is hate and hate speech against minorities, attacking someone on a personal or on an individual level (e.g., YOU are bad), bullying, insulting and threats. One focus group with non-gamers also defined toxicity on the internet as saying something you would not say face-to-face to another person. The non-gamers also linked toxic behaviour to people who are uneducated (poor mannered) and use curse words excessively.

When asked how the non-gamers would think they would react to toxicity in gaming, most said they would try to ignore it or hope someone else would defend them. However, a few respondents said toxic behaviour would probably affect them in a negative way, despite someone defending them. The respondents added their reaction to toxicity might also depend on the state of mind they themselves are in. One respondent suggested that countering toxicity might be easier if someone else was the target, but as in the gamer groups, some of the non-gamers also concluded that reacting to negativity might lead to the toxic player escalating their behaviour.

The non-gamers were also asked if the scenarios presented to them affected their image of LoL's brand. Two respondents said the scenarios did not affect their image of LoL, but more the image of the whole gaming world. However, many respondents agreed that their image of LoL is not positive after the presented scenarios. One respondent commented that it is unfortunate that there are sponsors who are willing to sponsor concepts where individuals might feel they are being oppressed. Another respondent mentioned that the game is not the problem, but rather the players. However, when the non-gamers were asked whether they would recommend the game to their friends based on the scenarios or be willing to try it themselves, some of the replies were once again somewhat contradictory. The non-gamers shared similar views as the gamers on specific actions that could be taken to reduce toxicity in gaming. Reporting and account bans were suggested, but toxicity was seen as something that has always been and will always be, because no matter the measures toxicity will just change its form. Many non-gamers also pondered if toxicity could be curbed more efficiently, not by only punishing toxic players, but with increasing the rewards for positive behaviour.

When asked if the non-gamers thought the toxic gaming community would affect their image of LoL's sponsors brands, the opinions were unified: The scenarios did not develop negative feelings or a desire to boycott a sponsor. The respondents said there are brands who sponsor much more controversial companies or organisations. One example was FIFA and their sponsors, since allowing Qatar to be the host for the football championships has been a controversial decision, based on the evidence of crimes against humanity in the country. The non-gamers suggested that sponsors could try to have more

impact in the fight against toxicity. Suggested measures were campaigns against toxicity and that the sponsors could have behavioural requirements for their sponsored units. If the behavioural requirements would not be met and a unit would still exhibit toxic behaviour, the sponsor should withdraw their support.

When asked if a brand community of a brand the non-gamers followed would start exhibiting toxic behaviour, the replies contradicted again with what was said about the impact of the community to LoL's brand. All the respondents said it would affect their image of the brand negatively, and some even said they would stop following the brand.

The last question was how the non-gamers perceived the PvP gaming world after the discussion. *Trash talking*, *aggressive*, *boring*, and *extreme* were the more negatively charged words, but one respondent even described their perception as *interesting*. One focus group also described the PvP gaming world as *intensive*.

5.5 Summary: Empirical data

In this chapter the empirical data acquired via the conducted research has been presented. The chapter begun with a presentation of how toxicity manifests in LoL and with a summary of RIOT Games' measures against it. Next, data acquired from the quantitative study at Dreamhack 2022, and the material acquired from the qualitative in-depth interview and qualitative focus group interviews were presented in their own chapters.

6 Analysis of the research material and data

In this chapter the findings of the conducted research are analysed. The analysis is based on the empirical study, theory, and former research. Firstly, the chapter analyses findings considering brand image. The second analysis considers toxicity. Penultimately, findings on perceived toxicity and its perceived impact on brand image are analysed. The chapter ends with a summary of its contents.

6.1 Brand image

According to Keller & Swaminathan (2020) brand image is how consumers perceive a brand by the reflections of brand associations in their memories. LoL's brand image is shaped in the minds of its players and in the minds of those who do not play LoL but know at least something of the game. This was apparent in the focus groups where perceptions of LoL's reputation and brand image was discussed. Respondents had different associations with the game, either shaped by their own experiences or from what they have heard others say about LoL. Since not too many respondents were LoL players themselves, the associations acquired in this thesis focus more on the latter, i.e., associations shaped by word-of-mouth and other non-direct experiences. Other non-direct experiences can be e.g., discussions about LoL on social medias or content made by creators on YouTube. Nevertheless, all the mentioned factors are something which help players and non-players shape a brand image of LoL. As Keller & Swaminathan (2020) wrote, brand image consists of four elements: *performance, imagery, judgement,* and *feelings*. Since the focus groups did not have too many respondents who could be considered active players of LoL, the element of performance was not discussed. However, the other three elements can be addressed. Brand imagery emerged clearly in one of the replies, since a respondents associated LoL players with nerds, which can be perceived as a somewhat negative stereotype of a certain type of gamer. However, since this was only an association presented by one respondent it cannot be generalised as a general association with LoL's brand image. What can instead be considered as a more general association was the age of players who behave toxically and that the players of

LoL are perceived as toxic. Many respondents associated toxic behaviour as a trait of young, mostly teenaged, players. The respondents also had their judgments of LoL in the form of their personal opinions and evaluations of LoL. A general opinion among focus groups with gamers was that the player base is toxic and LoL is a hard game to learn, and thus, it is not as beginner friendly as other games (e.g., CS:GO). The feelings LoL awoke in the respondents were e.g., intensity, competitiveness, and toxicity.

According to Malmelin & Hakala (2011), radical brands are successful brands which have the potential to change the world and whole industries. Radical brands create phenomena, which in their turn create trends, followers, and communities around these trends. LoL has succeeded in this in the form of their annual League of Legends Worlds competition, which makes hundreds of thousands of fans tune into their streaming services during every match of the event. Referring to this, it can be argued that LoL has created a radical brand, which has had a part in kickstarting the explosion of esports' popularity and changes in the whole competitive esports scene. This is also supported by the fact that even though many of the gamers in the focus groups were not active LoL players, they still had heard of LoL. Respondents knew enough about LoL to discuss it, and they had a perception of LoL's brand image.

The associations of LoL's sponsors brand images were very neutral. One respondent from a focus group with non-gamers thought it is unfortunate that companies sponsor a game where toxicity is rampant. However, respondents thought sponsors such as Red Bull is such a big player in the sponsoring world that the negative reputation an amateur gaming scene has does not affect their perception of Red Bull's brand image in any way. Respondents' thoughts surrounding other sponsors were also similar. The toxicity in the amateur player base of LoL was not seen as something so grave that it could affect a third party's reputation negatively.

6.2 Toxicity

According to the former theory reviewed in this thesis, toxicity in gaming is an umbrella term for certain types of antisocial behaviours. It includes griefing, flaming, homophobia, racism, bullying, and other types of behaviour which is meant to make another player's gaming experience unpleasant. (Kordyaka, Jahn, & Niehaves, 2020). The data acquired from the empirical research also supports the former theory. The interviewed person, Person X, who works for a game developer defined toxicity as most negative behaviours in games. These are for instance rhetoric that targets a person's appearance and/or nationality. They also defined toxicity as throwing games, griefing and having negative attitude in general. The focus groups with gamers and non-gamers also came to very similar conclusions, where personal attacks, racial slurs and slurs meant to insult someone's sexuality, as well as griefing was seen as toxic behaviour. LoL describe these types of behaviours as toxic and reportable in their Player Reporting Guide (Skittle Sniper, 2022), and this type of behaviour was seen in the chatlogs collected for this thesis. Based on the focus groups it is also possible to make a distinction between competitive trash talk and toxicity. In former theory and research scholars (e.g., Ortiz, 2018 & Breuer et al., 2013) seem to define these two terms similarly with no clear distinction, hence, toxicity and trash talk should be defined more clearly as their own phenomena. Comments such as *GG EZ* and *uninstall your game* were according to the focus groups something that was in the spectrum of trash talk. When negative behaviour was exhibited by a player in the enemy team, it was also seen as psychological warfare and competitive trash talk instead of toxicity. If negative behaviour was exhibited by someone in the players own team, then the behaviour was easier categorised as toxic, since it does not help anyone to perform better in the game. Instead, the focus groups argued that toxic behaviour inside a players own team leads to poorer performance and even loss, as negative behaviour does not belong in a game that relies on teamwork. These effects were also found in the study by Adinolf & Türkay (2018). Similar to Adinolfs & Türkays (2018) findings, the focus groups also concluded that people perceive toxicity differently. This might take place for instance because the players might be from different cultures, so a comment that was meant to be helpful might be misinterpreted in the heat of the moment. This is a problem especially in text chat since it lacks proper context and intonation (Karjala, 2021, p. 1), and another player might perceive the comment as criticism of their performance.

This in its turn might lead to a misunderstanding that result in toxic behaviour. Since the respondents in the gamer groups perceived negativity differently depending on whether it was exhibited by the enemy team or a player's own team, negativity in team games could be separated into two different categories: *internal* and *external negativity*. Internal negativity, which is negativity exhibited within the team was easier categorised as toxicity, whereas external negativity, which was negativity exhibited by the opposing team, was categorised more often as competitive trash talk.

An interesting contradiction found in the acquired empirical data had to do with communication. Person X told in their interview that one way to punish toxic or disruptive players was to narrow down or take away their possibility to communicate in-game with other players. However, in one of the focus groups the respondents agreed that toxicity and negative behaviour in games is born easier because of the frustration caused by lack of the possibility to communicate properly. Thus, it could be argued that taking away someone's possibility to communicate properly might be counterproductive when considering the goal. There could be a possibility that the person who has been punished by taking away the means of communication becomes even more disruptive when they get the ability to communicate again. The focus groups with gamers suggested that toxic behaviour which is caused by the lack of proper ways to communicate could be fought instead with giving the players of competitive games better ways to communicate. It was argued that including a possibility to voice chat, also with random players, could decrease disruptive behaviours, since players could communicate quicker and hear the intonation (compare Karjala 2021, p. 1) and understand the context better in speech than in text. This could decrease the amount of miscommunication and misunderstandings during a match. The focus groups also argued that by hearing someone's voice on the other end of the line could also help humanise players. When seeing only an avatar and a name on the screen, the toxically behaving person might not think there is another human being behind the character. By hearing there is another person on the other end of the line, players might think more what they say and how they deliver it, because the experience is more intimate and human than when only communicating through text chat. When asked about the possible negative sides a voice chat can bring, as e.g., the mentioned *COD squeakers* the focus groups said there should always be the possibility to mute and report a player.

To summarize, the gamers emphasise the importance of proper and quicker ways to communicate, because it decreases misunderstandings, and when hearing another voice, it might have the effect of players thinking more about what they say. A voice chat could bring the game closer to the real world, where toxic behaviour is judged more gravely than in the gaming world, and this way those who still would behave toxically would also be judged more seriously. This feels as something that would also help people to see that toxic behaviour in games is also something that needs to be taken seriously, since opinions provided by the focus groups could be interpreted as that at least these respondents did not see toxicity in games as a real problem or real bullying.

Interestingly, just recently a professional LoL player Darshan Tweeted about LoL needing a voice chat at least in Solo/Duo queue, after playing another Riot Games game Valorant. Darshan (2023) tweeted that having a voice chat would humanise the Solo/Duo queue experience, and they had felt that when playing Valorant thanks to the possibility to voice chat. Darshan said in their tweet that with the help of voice chat in Valorant, they actually felt as the team of five random strangers were working, indeed, as a team, and that toxicity has been a problem in LoL for so long, that now is the time to try to take new steps forward. (DarshanU, 2023). This supports the ideas the respondents had about voice chat being a helpful tool to fight toxicity.

However, a Riot Games employee, Joe White (Twitter username @HonestPillow) replied to Darshans tweet (DarshanU, 2023) with their concerns about how voice chat would affect women and persons of colour, since they are, according to Joe White, unfairly targeted in voice chats. Other discussions that the tweet has risen for instance on the social media platform Reddit have also had their users voice their concerns for how players could get pushed to use a voice chat even though they do not want to, and then be targeted if they have e.g., a feminine voice or an accent. (u/Orizirguy, 2023).

Other measures LoL has taken to curb toxicity in the past was also discussed in the focus groups. When the respondents were asked, have these measures worked, they were not so sure. The respondents thought banning certain words is a problem, because there is a lack

of context when an artificial intelligence reviews a report. This is also something Person X mentioned in their interview. However, respondents thought one of the most important mechanics is the ability to report, and that is something LoL has offered for a long time. Respondents also thought it is important to know if the report led to a punishment, and LoL also does this by sending *report feedbacks* every time a report has led to a punishment. However, the player does not get to know, which report it was, and what the punishment was.

Even though the respondents thought player-based reporting is a good thing, they still thought the measures taken so far are not enough and not efficient enough, but that games such as LoL are on the right track. The biggest problem according to the respondents and something that Person X also mentioned, is that every time a new mechanic to fight toxicity is implemented, the players find a way around it in a couple of days. However, trying to take actions against toxicity was still seen as something that affects the brand image positively, because if LoL would not do anything to try to curb toxicity, it would be seen as something that is very negative.

6.3 Perceived toxicity and its perceived impact on brand image

When it was discussed is the player base of LoL toxic, the conclusions in the focus groups were mostly uniform. The player base of LoL was perceived as toxic, even by non-gamers. However, some of the respondents in the focus groups with gamers argued that almost all games with competitive elements have a toxic player community, but other respondents said the reputation of the community around LoL is especially known for its toxicity. One respondent even mentioned that every time they have heard something about LoL it has had to do with the toxic player base and the game being toxic. Because of these opinions and comments, it can be argued that the toxicity of the community is a part of LoL's brand image, and thus the toxicity has had an impact on LoL's brand image.

When the discussion moved to if toxicity affects LoL's brand image, the acquired replies were somewhat contradicting. Based on the discoveries we can argue that the players of LoL are perceived as toxic both by players and non-players of the game. Several participants of the focus groups with gamers said that they have either met toxicity while playing or trying LoL, or that they have heard from their friends who play the game that the player community behaves toxically during matches in the game. The non-gamer focus groups also mostly concluded that their image of the game is negatively affected after the scenarios or because of what they have heard about the game through their friends or family members. However, most of the respondents argued that the toxic community does not affect their perception of the brand, but still when asked would they recommend LoL to their friends or would they themselves want to try it, the replies became interesting.

Most often the answer was that they would not recommend LoL to a friend, if the friend was not already interested in MOBAs, because MOBA games such as LoL need a great amount of time to learn the mechanics. However, some replies where in the style of *if I would recommend the game, I would warn them it is toxic* or *I would not recommend it, because it is toxic*. Thus, even though the respondents said they can differentiate a brand community from the brand the behaviour of the community still seems to leak into their perception of the brand. Many of the respondents played other games which can also be considered having toxic fanbases, but the games had easier mechanics. Thus, this leads to two questions: do players look past the toxicity because a game is easier to learn and play or does the behaviour of LoL's player base actually have more impact on their perception of LoL's brand than the respondents think? It could be argued that both questions have truth in them. If a game is easier to learn, it is easier to get better at it, and thus, a player gains confidence in their abilities quicker. If a player is confident, toxicity could have less of an effect on their performance. The discussions in the focus groups also indicate that the brand image respondents have about LoL is affected by the toxicity of the player base. Interestingly, in some groups with gamers opinions rouse that toxicity might be a part of LoL's brand image, and that new players who want to try the game might want to try it because of the toxic reputation of the player base, because they want to experience it for themselves. It was said that in LoL and other PvP games toxicity is something that might even be expected when a player starts playing the game.

Across both the gamer and non-gamer focus groups no one said the image of a sponsor's brand would be affected because of LoL's toxic player base. The respondents thought much worse things in the world are being sponsored, and the sponsors would need to support something far worse to get their image tainted. One example that was taken up in a couple of focus groups was the Football World Cup, which was held in Qatar. The respondents thought it was questionable to sponsor this event, since the preparations for the world cup in Qatar has been accused of violations against human rights. Based on this the respondents thought the sponsors of LoL's events and professional esports teams do not need to worry about their reputation, but if something drastic would be to happen, then they would expect a reaction also from the sponsors. This is supported by Uusitalo (2014). According to him, publicity is a double-edged sword for brands, and it is crucial for brands to know how to navigate publicity and the media. If something drastic related to a sponsored unit would occur, the sponsor should react quickly because otherwise it could result in the sponsor losing face and their brand losing credibility (Schafraad & Verhoeven, 2019). Even though LoL's sponsors seem to be mostly unaffected by the toxicity of LoL's community, they could try to take advantage of the "failure paradox" mentioned by Schrafaad & Verhoeven (2019). If LoL's sponsors start campaigning more loudly against toxicity, they could become more immune to possible future crisis a toxic gaming community might cause. Even if the public has a lower chance of judging a sponsor in these types of cases, since it is not the sponsors' problem to solve toxicity, taking preventive action against it can accumulate positive credibility and publicity. This would be the "failure paradox" in the case for LoL's sponsors.

6.4 Summary: Analysis

The LoL ecosystem can be seen in *Figure 10*. Inside the ecosystem is LoL, LoL's brand image, the community of LoL and LoL's sponsors' brand image. Outside the ecosystem are the non-gamers who look the whole ecosystem from the outside. The non-gamers only have an image of the different parts of the ecosystem, i.e., a perception they have formulated from secondary sources without any first-hand experience. All the parts inside the ecosystem affect each other. LoL tries to formulate a certain brand identity to

themselves to affect their brand image, and the brand image affects how other see LoL. The community of LoL affects both the game itself and its brand image with their own behaviour. According to the findings in the research conducted in this thesis, the community of LoL has some effect on the sponsors' brand images, but the effect is very minimal. However, if the community would become responsible for something "more dire" the effect could become stronger. LoL and its brand image are connected to the sponsors' brand image and vice versa. If LoL would stop acting against toxicity, it could negatively affect the sponsors. Also, if a sponsor would do something questionable, their image could affect LoL and LoL's brand image. The non-gamers perception of LoL's brand image is dependent on how the community presents itself. If the community behaves toxically and non-gamers hear of this toxicity from secondary sources (e.g., social media, their friends) it affects their perception of LoL's brand image. This can affect e.g., someone's willingness to try LoL.
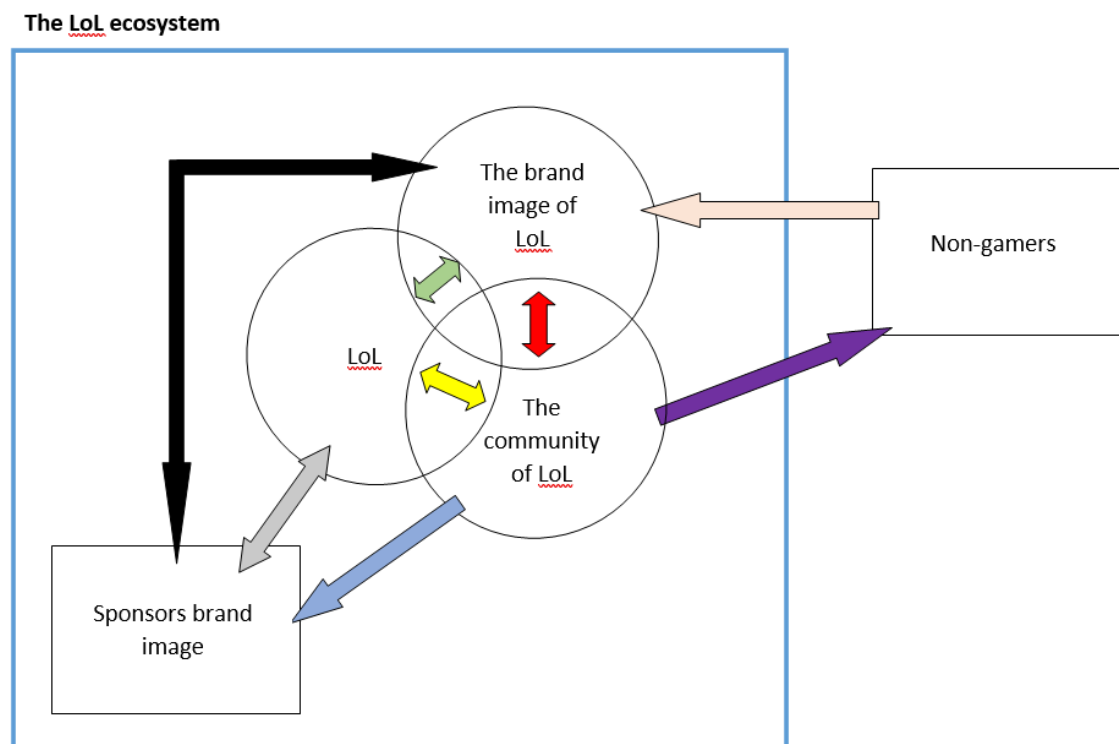

Figure 10: The LoL ecosystem.

Despite toxicity being associated with LoL it can be argued they have succeeded with creating their brand. LoL has been able to navigate their community's wishes and the

media, hence avoiding the risks with branding, which were mentioned by Malmelin & Hakala (2011). According to Kicurovski (2023), LoL has a steady stream of new players, and that the game is even growing in popularity thanks to the esports scene. Kicurovski (2023) also reports that the number of sponsors LoL has and gets is growing. Based on this it can be argued that the state of LoL's brand image is good, but what awaits in the future remains to be seen.

7 Concluding discussion

In this concluding chapter the results of this thesis are discussed. The presented research questions are answered, and the thesis is critically reviewed. Lastly, contributions for this field of research and suggestions for further research are presented.

7.1 The results

The review of former studies and acquired results of empirical research in this thesis have provided a satisfying answer to what toxicity means in gaming. The former studies argue that toxicity is an umbrella term that describes certain negative behaviours, such as flaming, trolling, racism, and harassment (Kordyaka, Jahn, & Niehaves, 2020). This definition is being supported by the results of the focus group studies and the interview with Person X. Respondents in focus groups agreed that e.g., personal attacks on an individual level, racism, homophobia, and griefing can be perceived as toxic behaviour. Person X said in their interview that they and the company they are working for also describe toxicity with the terms mentioned above.

The results acquired from the gathered data from focus group interviews were somewhat surprising as regarding the toxic behaviour of a fanbase and its effects on a brands image. The author of this thesis had prejudices of LoL's reputation in the beginning of this study, since they are someone who plays LoL themselves almost daily. The results indicated that at least the respondents chosen to the focus groups had a somewhat more rational approach to the game than someone who is emotionally invested in the game. One plausible explanation for this is that many of the respondents told they do not play very often nowadays, and almost none of them were active LoL players. Some said they were active players when they were younger. Nonetheless, given the small proportion of active players among the respondents, their level of emotional investment and concern about events in the game may be relatively lower compared to that of active LoL players. This argument can be partially substantiated by the comparisons of the brand image of LoL

with that of other brands, particularly in the context of their respective communities and their potential for toxicity. The respondents did not perceive the toxicity of LoL's fanbase as something that would directly affect their image of the game's brand, however, the more subtle nuances in their replies can be interpreted as some subconscious effects being present. However, when asked if a community of a brand that the respondents followed acquired a toxic reputation because of their followers, the respondents said they would consider stopping following that brand. The reasoning behind this was that they would not want to be associated with the toxic behaviour or stereotype of the users of that brand. One of the respondents also stated that they do not want to play LoL since they associate LoL with nerds, which might be a somewhat negative stereotype of a gamer. This indicates that the respondent associates a negative stereotype with LoL's brand, i.e., the respondent associates LoL's brand with certain type of people they do not want to be associated with.

Considering how the brand images of LoL's sponsors are affected by the toxic behaviour of LoL's community, the respondents were unified on that they perceive the sponsors as a separate entity from the game and the community. However, once again in the comparisons with other brands, the respondents said their image of a sponsor's brand might be tainted if they would sponsor an event or another brand that has done something which can be considered as questionable.

7.2 Answering the research questions

In this chapter the research questions presented in this thesis are answered. The answers are provided in the same order as the questions have been presented in chapter *1.2 Aim of the study and research questions*.

7.2.1   RQ1

- *What does toxicity mean in gaming?*

Toxicity in gaming can be defined as different types of negative and antisocial behaviours. These behaviours include flaming, griefing, harassment, personal attacks, racism, homophobia, sexism, hate speech, and attacks on an individual's character. These behaviours manifest in different ways depending on the game and its communication mechanics. Non-verbal toxicity includes e.g., excessive pinging/misuse of pinging, misuse of reporting mechanics, and griefing. Non-verbal toxicity does not require any verbal communication (text or voice) to be abled, but it can still make a game unplayable for a player or players who are targeted by these types of non-verbal toxic behaviours. Verbal toxicity can either occur through voice or text chats, i.e., it is either said aloud or written to other players. Screeching, yelling, and otherwise producing constant disturbing noise can be performed only through voice chats. Verbal toxicity can be especially hurtful, since it takes forms of racism, harassment, and can attack someone on a personal level.

7.2.2   RQ2

- *Do players of LoL perceive the player base as toxic and if so, how does this toxicity affect their image of LoL's and its sponsors' brands?*

Given the lack of respondents for the pre-survey at Dreamhack 2022 and the lack of respondents who actively play or had played LoL in the focus groups, this question lacks a complete answer. Based on the few replies from active or former active players the answer to this research question leaves much room for speculation. The acquired replies vaguely indicate that the players of LoL perceive the player base as toxic, and that it affects the brand image of the game. The sponsors' brand images do not seem to be

affected by the toxicity. To either confirm or disprove these speculations a larger study is needed. This larger study also needs respondents who are more familiar and active within LoL than the respondents in the focus groups.

7.2.3 RQ3

- *Do players who do not play LoL, but know what LoL is, perceive the player base as toxic, and if so, how does this toxicity affect their image of LoL's and its sponsors' brands?*

Players who do not play LoL but know what LoL is perceive the player base as toxic. This toxicity does not seem to influence LoL's sponsors' brand images. However, it can be argued the toxicity of the player base affects LoL's own brand image. This is supported by the analysis of the material from the focus groups.

7.2.4 RQ4

- *How to study the impact a toxic gaming community has on a game's and its sponsors' brand images?*

Since the research conducted in this thesis can be seen as a pilot study for this type of research subject, the answer to this question can be seen as a work in progress. This thesis has provided a foundation to studying the impact a toxic gaming community has on the brand images of a game and its sponsors. It can be argued that the methods chosen to conduct research around the phenomenon of toxicity in gaming communities and their impact on brand image are effective, but the methods still need refinement. The impact a toxic gaming community has on brand image can be studied both with qualitative and

quantitative methods. Focus groups and in-depth interviews have been proven to be effective data collection methods for this type of study, but the quantitative research method still needs refinement.

7.3 Critique

Because of the lack of respondents that actually were very familiar with LoL, the results can be criticised. It can be argued that the results acquired are one-sided, since the actual consumers of the game have not been heard. The research still provides evidence to prove that the player base of LoL is perceived toxic, but without a larger quantitative study, the effects on brand image can neither be proved or disapproved. The results of the quantitative pre-study were unreliable and invalid due to the lack of replies. However, the study can be used as a base for a larger quantitative study. The pre-study also showed that the way answers were collected was not the most effective, and because of that, the way to distribute a possible larger quantitative survey needs to be closely examined to get the largest possible number of answers.

The chosen qualitative methods of focus group interviews and a face-to-face in-depth interview can also both be criticised because of the possible interviewer effect. The interviewer in the one-on-one interview and the moderators of focus groups can subconsciously affect the interviewed person and the respondents. Because the interviews occurred face to face, it might have affected on how honest the respondents, or the interviewed person were able to be. In focus groups the respondents might also be affected by the way the other respondents think.

This thesis has provided partial answers to how does the toxicity of a gaming community impact LoL's and its sponsors' brand images and to, how to study the impact a toxic gaming community has on a games and sponsors brand image. The answers are partial, since the validity of the research is somewhat vague due to the possible different

interpretations of collected data, and the lack of respondents who would be very familiar with the studied game. As of this, in the chapter *7.5 Suggestions* a method for a further quantitative study will be suggested. By doing a continued quantitative study the results of this thesis can be either validated or disproven.

7.4 Contribution to theory

Toxicity and competitive trash talk were defined somewhat similarly by many previous researchers. However, based on the focus groups these two are their own concepts, and so, need their own definitions. The definition of toxicity by Kordyaka, Jahn, & Niehaves (2020) is well up to date and supported by how the respondents as well as Person X defined the term. Competitive trash talk on the other hand needs a definition of its own. Based on the interview with Person X and the respondents in the focus groups competitive trash talk is milder than toxicity. Competitive trash talk is a part of the competitive banter which was argued to be a part of almost all sports, be it traditional sports or esports. Competitive trash talk was said to be a part of the psychological warfare happening in sports and esports, and its objective is to sway the opponents psyche so they lose their focus. For instance, comments such as *GG EZ* and *Uninstall* were defined as competitive trash talk and not toxicity. Therefore, it is suggested that trash talk is to be defined as "*competitive non-toxic bantering meant to sway the opponents focus to gain an upper hand or other psychological advantage in a sport or esports match*".

A suggested addition to the theory of toxicity in gaming and esports is the distinction between *non-verbal* and *verbal toxicity*. In games and esports toxicity comes in different forms, of which some are verbal harassment and some non-verbal harassment. Verbal toxicity is toxicity happening in text and voice chats, in which e.g., insults, racist slurs, and harassment are either talked directly to another player or written in a chat. Non-verbal toxicity includes the other types of non-verbal toxic behaviours such as griefing and excessive and harassing pinging. It can be argued that these two need to be defined as two separate concepts, since depending on what type of communication mechanics a game

has, toxicity can take either both non-verbal and verbal forms, or just one of them. When studying toxicity in games with different communication mechanics, it is easier to define and understand the toxicity as well as plan the research methods when the type of toxicity is known. For instance, text chat based verbal toxicity can be analysed by searching toxic keywords, whereas non-verbal ping harassment needs to be analysed through recorded in-game video material. Therefore, it is suggested that toxicity in gaming and esports should be divided into two sub-categories: *verbal* and *non-verbal*. Verbal toxicity could be defined as "*written or spoken toxicity*". Non-verbal toxicity could be defined as "*non-verbal action-based toxicity, such as griefing, inting, or excessive harassing pinging*".

It is also suggested that since the respondents in the gamer groups perceived negativity differently depending on whether it was exhibited by the enemy team or a player's own team, negativity in team games could be separated into two different categories: *internal* and *external negativity*. Internal negativity could be defined as "*negativity exhibited within a team*", whereas external negativity could be defined as "*negativity exhibited by the opposing team*". A separate categorisation for these two can be argued to be of use since internal negativity was easier categorised as toxicity, whereas external negativity was categorised more often as competitive trash talk.

7.5 Suggestions: Further quantitative study

As stated in the beginning of this chapter, to give the results of this thesis more validity or to get them disproven, it is suggested that further research needs to be done. It can be argued that players who play LoL daily have a more emotional connection to the game, and that their perceptions are influenced by these emotions, whereas players who do not invest as much time to competitive games such as LoL, might have a more rational way of thinking. This might be why the author of this thesis had a more negative opinion of LoL in the beginnings of the thesis, and why the friends of the author also seem to react more emotionally to toxicity and competitive trash talk in the game. Very few of the respondents in the focus groups were active players of LoL, so this might be why they do

not have an emotional connection to the game, and they tend to think, at least in their own opinion, more rationally to the toxicity allegations, and the impact it has on the way they perceive LoL's brand image.

Since the material acquired from the focus groups give room to interpretation, the suggested method for further studies is a quantitative research study in the form of an electronically distributed survey. The survey should utilise the Likert's method combined with open-ended free-association questions to test the validity of respondents' answers. (Plumeyer, Kotteman, Böger, & Decker, 2019).

As stated in the chapter *3.1.3 Measuring brand image,* Likert's method measures respondents' opinions, attitudes, or perceptions about a stimulus object, by either agreeing or disagreeing with statements of it. There are usually five to seven statements, and the respondents need to choose if they strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree on what the statement states. There can also be a neutral option on the scale. After answering, each statement gets a numerical score, which can then be turned into a mean or summated score for each respondent. The final score gives indication on what the respondents attitude is towards a brand. (Hair, Bush, & Ortinau, 2009). With the help of the free-association technique, the survey could also collect spontaneous reactions from respondents to LoL's brand. The verbal associations could be collected e.g., by putting in the beginning of the survey just a picture of LoL, and the respondents would be asked, what is the first thing that comes to mind of that picture. This way it is easy to get verbal associations a consumer has of a brand. (Koll, von Wallpach, & Kreuzer, 2010).

The survey should also have a stricter screening for respondents, so that it is possible to clearly differentiate data acquired from players who actively play LoL, players who have tried LoL and players who only know LoL but have not tried it. This is a problem the qualitative study in this research had, since most of the participants were not actually active players of LoL, but mostly only knew the game. With the help of stricter screening and differentiation of respondents it could be possible to discover if emotional and rational mindsets influence the players perception of LoL's brand image. The screening

could be done by placing in the very beginning of the survey a question, where the respondents need to identify with a player category. The categories could be e.g., active LoL player (plays 5-7 days a week), LoL player (plays less than 5 days a week, but more than once a week), casual LoL player (plays monthly), familiar with LoL (has tried LoL, but does not play it), non-player (knows LoL but has never played it) and lastly former LoL player (has played LoL actively, but not anymore). The last category could provide interesting data on why someone has stopped playing LoL, and if the reason has had something to do with the toxicity. The survey should also consider the players rank in the game, since the results of this thesis suggest that lower rank players tend to be more toxic than the higher rank players.

The quantitative study also needs hypotheses, which aid the formulation of questions for the survey. The following hypotheses have been formulated with the help of the research questions and results in thesis:

- Hypothesis 1 (H1): The players of LoL perceive the player community as toxic.
- Hypothesis 1.1 (H1.1): The perceived toxicity affects the brand image of LoL negatively among players.
- Hypothesis 1.2 (H1.2): The perceived toxicity affects the brand image of LoL's sponsors negatively among players.

- Hypothesis 2 (H2): Non-players who know what LoL is perceive the player community of LoL as toxic.
- Hypothesis 2.1 (H2.1): The perceived toxicity affects the brand image of LoL negatively among non-players.
- Hypothesis 2.2 (H2.2): The perceived toxicity affects the brand image of LoL's sponsors negatively among non-players.

The survey could be distributed through electronic channels, such as social medias and Discord channels which are LoL related. The author of this thesis can also use their own

personal contacts and friend groups of players to distribute the survey to the correct audience. By having an electronic survey which can be completed privately online by the respondents, it is also possible to minimise the risk of the interviewer effect, i.e., the interviewer's presence or behaviour affecting the respondents' answers, thus increasing the chance of acquiring honest replies to the survey. When the survey is passed to players through digital platforms, the risk of the interviewer effect is minimal. (Duffy, Smith, Terhanian, & Bremer, 2005).

8 Svensk sammanfattning

Toxiska spelsamhällen och deras påverkan på varumärkesimage – En studie om hur toxiciteten av ett spelsamhälle påverkar varumärkesimagen av spelet League of Legends och deras sponsorer, samt hur detta fenomen kan undersökas

Härnäst ges en kort sammanfattning av magisteravhandlingen på svenska. Sammanfattningen består av en kort inledning, en genomgång av undersökningens syfte, teorins huvudpunkter, en presentation av forskningsmetoder och insamlade data samt en redogörelse för magisteravhandlingens resultat.

8.1 Inledning

Varumärken och deras kunder har existerat för årtal. Ifall någon hittar ett varumärke de tycker om, blir de också med stor sannolikhet varumärkets kunder och på så vis lojala följare av varumärket och en del av deras varumärkessamhälle med andra människor som tycker lika om varumärket. Olika varumärken har alla sina egna rykten, en image som har formulerats i konsumenternas sinnen. Fastän någon inte skulle höra till ett varumärkes samhälle, kan de ändå ha någon slags bild av det, antingen en positiv, en neutral eller till och med en negativ bild.

League of Legends (senare LoL) är ett av världens mest populära *multiplayer online battle arena*-spel (senare MOBA-spel). MOBA-spel är spel där man spelar mot andra riktiga spelare i realtid. LoL skapades av spelföretaget RIOT Games år 2009, och det spelas mestadels på dator. LoL är ett strategispel där två lag av fem spelare spelar mot varandra och tävlar om vilket lag som kan förstöra motståndarens bas först. (League of Legends, 2022). De två lagen måste först välja sina hjältar, *champions*, från över 140 olika karaktärer, som alla har sina olika roller och spelstilar.

Enligt nätsidan Webtribunal (2022) har LoL över 150 miljoner registrerade användare varav 125 miljoner spelar aktivt varje månad. LoL har också sina egna tävlingar som till exempel världsmästerskapet League of Legends Worlds, som ordnas en gång om året. I tävlingen spelar olika professionella lag från olika delar av världen om vem är bäst i spelet. Enligt Round Hill Investments (2022) hade LoL Worlds 2019 över 100 miljoner åskådare som mestadels tittade på tävlingen genom någon streamingservice som Twitch och YouTube. Evenemanget är alltså relativt stort då man jämför med till exempel Super Bowl, som hade 100,7 miljoner åskådare samma år.

När man tänker på mängden LoL-spelare samt hur många åskådare deras tävlingar och evenemang har, kan man påstå att LoL och deras spelarsamhälle har ganska stor påverkan. Fastän spelet är populärt, har det ett ganska negativt rykte. Speciellt icke-professionella spelare av LoL är kända för att ha skarpa tungor, och kommentaren man skriver i den textbaserade chatten under spelmatcher överskrider ofta gränsen för *trash talk.* Trash talk är språk man använder i tävlingsinriktade spel för att försöka få motståndarens att tappa fokus. Kommentarerna under en match kan direkt definieras som toxiskt online mobbning. Toxicitet är ett paraplybegrepp som beskriver vissa negativa beteenden, som *flaming* (att kommentera negativt på någons karaktär/prestanda), *trolling* (på flit försöka göra spelet ospelbart för andra), rasism och trakassering (Kordyaka, Jahn, & Niehaves, 2020). På grund av detta har författaren av denna magisteravhandling bestämt sig för att undersöka toxicitetens påverkan på varumärkesimage.

8.2 Syfte och ämnesmotivering

Syftet med denna magisteravhandling är att undersöka hur den uppfattade toxiciteten av ett spelarsamhälle påverkar varumärkesimagen av League of Legends och dess sponsorer. För att uppnå detta används huvudsakligen kvalitativa forskningsmetoder, men också genom kvantitativa metoder. Först refereras till tidigare forskning inom ämnen varumärkesutveckling, sponsorering och toxicitet. Empirin som består av en kvantitativ förstudie, kvalitativa fokusgrupper och en intervju, baserar sig på forskningsfrågor som formulerats för denna magisteravhandling. Denna undersökning genomförs, eftersom

effekten ett toxiskt spelarsamhälle kan ha på ett spels och sponsorers varumärkesimage har inte studerats tillräckligt tidigare. Forskningsfrågorna är:

- Vad betyder toxicitet i spelvärlden?
- Uppfattar spelare som spelar LoL dess spelarsamhälle som toxiskt, och ifall de gör det, hur påverkar toxiciteten till LoLs och dess sponsorers varumärkesimage?
- Uppfattar spelare som inte spelar LoL, men som vet vad LoL är, dess spelarsamhälle som toxiskt, och ifall de gör det, hur påverkar toxiciteten LoLs och dess sponsorers varumärkesimage?
- Hur undersöker man effekten ett toxiskt spelarsamhälle har på spelets och dess sponsorers varumärkesimage?

8.3 Sammanfattning av teori

Det är svårt att definiera vad ett varumärke är. Varumärken missförstås ofta som bara en logo, men egentligen är ett varumärke en upplevelse. Logon är bara en del av de olika element ett varumärke byggs av. (Ruokolainen, 2020). Fastän varumärken är beroende av marknadsföring, är dessa två inte jämförbara. Där marknadsföring svarar till frågan *hur* svarar varumärkesutveckling till frågan *varför*. Med varumärkesutveckling försöker man nå långvariga kundrelationer, medan marknadsföringskampanjer är kortvariga processer. Dessa kortvariga processer är viktiga, eftersom marknadsföring får en konsument att köpa någonting för första gången, medan varumärkesutveckling ger konsumenten en orsak att bli en långvarig kund. (Wheeler, 2018). Enligt Alwi et al. (2016) kan varumärkesimage definieras på flera olika sätt. En definition är hur en kund uppfattar ett varumärke eller hur någon associerar den symboliska betydelsen med karaktäristikan av en service eller produkt. Alwi et al. (2016) skriver också att minnen som utlöses av ett företags stimuli, som logo eller företagets namn, representerar varumärket för en kund, och detta kallas för varumärkesimage.

Enligt Cambridge Dictionary (2022) betyder "att sponsorera" (*to sponsor*) att ett företag eller en organisation betalar någon för en handling eller betalar för att någonting ska hända. Cambridge Dictionary (2022) specificerar också betydelsen av 'att sponsorera' som när ett företag eller en organisation betalar till exempel kostnaderna för ett sportevenemang eller en professionell spelare i utbyte för marknadsföring.

En toxisk person är någon som orsakar konflikter i en annan persons liv. Genom att vara svår skapar den toxiska personen stress och negativa situationer för andra människor. (WebMD, 2022). Enligt Kordyaka, Jahn och Niehaves (2020) är toxicitet ett paraplybegrepp som beskriver vissa negativa beteendemönster som flaming, trolling, rasism och kränkning. Suler (2004) i sin tur beskriver begreppet toxisk disinhibition som en egenskap hos personer som agerar antisocialt eller aggressivt i olika onlineomgivningar, och på det viset bryter de allmänt accepterade reglerna för vår tillvaro.

8.4 Presentation av metod och material

Bryman och Bell (2013) hävdar att kvantitativa och kvalitativa studiemetoder är två separata undersökningsstrategier. De definierar kvantitativ undersökning som en deduktiv metod, medan kvalitativ undersökning anses vara induktiv. Fastän båda undersökningsstrategierna har sina egna paradigm enligt vad man anser att de inte kan blandas, anser såväl Bryman och Bell (2013) som Plante, Kiernan och Betts (1994) att det går att visa på positiva resultat i forskning där båda strategierna har blandats till en så kallad blandad metod (eng. mixed method). På grund av detta används i den här studien en blandad metod, med fokus på kvalitativa metoder.

Som kvantitativ metod används en enkätformad elektronisk undersökning. Denna undersökning är en preliminär studie som genomfördes på Dreamhack 2022 för att testa forskningsfrågorna i denna magisteruppsats. De valda kvalitativa

undersökningsmetoderna var fokusgruppintervjuer och en djupgående ansikte-mot-ansikte-intervju, som gav det huvudsakliga empiriska materialet i denna magisteruppsats.

Den kvantitativa undersökningen på Dreamhack 2022 ledde inte till ett pålitligt resultat. Enkäten fick ett litet antal svar. Enkäten fungerade ändå som en god preliminär prövning för en möjlig fortsatt studie om ämnet, eftersom den ger insikter om datainsamlingsmetoden samt strukturen på enkäten.

Den djupgående ansikte-mot-ansikte-intervjun utfördes med en person som arbetar för ett spelföretag. Detaljerad personlig information om personen samt företaget redigerades bort på begäran av personen, och därför kallas den intervjuade personen Person X, och organisationen hen arbetar för Organisation X. Intervjun gav en god inblick i hur spelföretag tänker kring toxicitet samt vad som görs för att motverka det.

Fokusgruppintervjuerna gjordes i samarbete med en universitetskurs i kvalitativ forskningsmetodik på Åbo Akademi. Respondenterna delades i fokusgrupper enligt deras spelerfarenhet och ifall de kände till LoL. Fastän alla så kallade "spelarna" kände till spelet LoL, var det ett fåtal av respondenterna som var eller har varit aktiva spelare av spelet, och på grund av det var materialet som samlades inte optimalt. Materialet från den djupgående intervjun och fokusgruppintervjuerna kunde ändå analyseras för att komma till ett resultat. Resultatets validitet kan dock anses vara svag.

8.5 Redogörelse för undersökningens resultat.

Enligt äldre studier som refererats till i denna undersökning är toxicitet i spelvärlden ett paraplybegrepp för vissa typer av negativt beteende. Dessa inkluderar *griefing* (man till exempel förlorar eller försöker få laget att förlora på flit), flaming, homofobi, rasism, mobbning och andra typer av antisociala beteendemönster som är menade att förstöra någon annans spelupplevelse. Materialet som samlats i de empiriska undersökningarna

stöder denna definition. Den intervjuade personen, Person X, som arbetar för ett spelföretag definierade toxicitet som största delen av negativa beteendemönster i spel, som till exempel negativ retorik som riktar sig mot en persons utseende och/eller nationalitet. Hen definierade också toxicitet som att förlora/ge upp på flit, griefing och om man bara överlag har en negativ attityd. Respondenterna i de båda fokusgrupperna kom också till väldigt lika slutsatser, där personliga attacker, rasistiska uttryck samt andra uttryck som är menade att kränka någons sexualitet ansågs som toxicitet som överskrider gränsen för trash talk. Som trash talk betraktades lindrigare uttryck som *GG EZ* (vilket betyder att motståndarlaget spelade så dåligt att de var lätta att vinna) eller *avinstallera ditt spel* (vilket betyder att någon spelade så dåligt att de bara borde sluta spela spelet).

Enligt respondenterna i fokusgrupperna som spelar olika spel, är det värre ifall negativa eller toxiska kommentarer framförs av det egna laget jämfört med om motståndarlaget använder uttryck som kan anses toxiska. När en motståndare är toxisk eller negativ, ansågs det nästan som någonting som hör till den psykologiska krigsföringen i spel. Om det egna teamet i sin tur börjar kränka någon, leder det enligt respondenterna till sämre prestanda och till och med till att man förlorar spelet. Respondenterna tog också upp att olika personer uppfattar toxicitet olika. Till exempel kommentarer som försöker vara hjälpsamma kan uppfattas fel, och det kan bero på att när man kommunicerar bara genom en textchat, förlorar man tonfallet av kommentaren. Med hjälp av tonfall kan en språkanvändare förmedla information mellan raderna, (jfr. Karjala 2021, 1) och då tonfallet fattas i en textbaserad plattform kan misstolkningar uppstå.

En intressant kontradiktion som hade att göra med kommunicering i spel hittades mellan intervjun med Person X och fokusgrupperna. Person X berättade att ett sätt att straffa toxiska spelare är att ta bort deras textchatträttigheter, medan fokusgrupperna påstod att bristen på ordentliga kommuniceringsmöjligheter är en faktor som kan leda till toxiskt beteende. Kan det då tyda på att ifall en spelare som beter sig toxiskt blir av med möjligheten att kommunicera, blir de ännu mera toxiska på andra sätt, eller då de får tillbaka sina chatträttigheter, tar de ut sin frustration med ännu värre språk. Fokusgrupperna föreslog att för att lösa problemet, borde LoL ta i bruk en röstchat också då man spelar med okända spelare. Då tappas inte kontexten eller tonfallet i

kommuniceringen och kommunikationen blir mycket smidigare och snabbare då det händer kontinuerligt i realtid. Respondenterna argumenterade också för röstchatt på grund av det att det kunde hjälpa humanisera de andra spelarna. Med detta menas att när man hör att det finns en människa i andra ändan av linjen, kan det toxiska beteendet minska. Då man ser bara en karaktär och ett namn som inte har någonting att göra med en riktig människa, kan man lätt distansera sig från verkligheten och börja skriva vad än man vill, utan att tänka på att det man säger kan såra någon.

Möjligheten till röstchatt också med okända spelare kommer dock inte utan problem. En professionell LoL-spelare gjorde nyligen en tweet på Twitter om hur han skulle tro en röstchatt kunde minska toxiciteten i LoL (DarshanU, 2023). En arbetstagare från Riot Games, Joe White, svarade snabbt på tweeten med sin oro över hur en röstchatt kan leda till kränkning av kvinnor och icke-vita personer eftersom de enligt White blir orättvist målsatta i röstchatt.

LoL har tidigare försökt hindra toxicitet till exempel med ett system som hette Tribunal, men det visade sig vara bristfälligt. Det mer moderna systemet som är i användning kallas för *Reporting* (att rapportera negativt beteende). Andra spelare kan rapportera spelare som beter sig negativt, och det finns olika kategorier man kan bli rapporterad i. Dessa kategorier är till exempel *flaming, griefing* eller att man vägrar spela den roll som man blivit tilldelad. När fokusgrupperna diskuterade ifall dessa metoder som finns för att hindra toxicitet fungerar, var åsikterna osäkra. Fokusgrupperna ansåg LoL är på rätt väg med de metoder de har i användning, men metoderna hävdades vara till viss grad dysfunktionella. Rapporteringsfunktionen fungerar till viss mån, men den används också fel, till exempel för att rapportera en spelare som inte gjort någonting fel utan bara för att mobba den spelaren. Både fokusgrupperna och Person X hävdade också att alltid det kommer ett nytt medel för att hindra toxicitet, tar det bara några dagar tills de toxiska spelarna lyckas kringgå det och börjar använda det nya medlet till toxiska ändamål.

När fokusgrupperna började diskutera ifall toxiciteten av LoLs spelarsamhälle påverkar LoLs varumärkesimage stred svaren mot varandra. Fastän respondenterna påstod att de

inte har märkt själv att deras åsikt om LoLs varumärkesimage påverkats av det negativa ryktet som spelarsamhället har, nämnde de ändå att de inte skulle rekommendera spelet eller vilja spela det själv. Den största orsaken enligt respondenterna för att de inte skulle vilja spela LoL var att spelet är för svårt och tidskrävande. Respondenterna pratade också om toxiciteten och att de skulle varna sina vänner av det, ifall de skulle rekommendera spelet. En respondent nämnde också att hen inte skulle vilja spela LoL på grund av det att hen associerar spelet med nördar och osociala personer. Så fastän respondenterna säger toxiciteten påverkar inte deras åsikt om LoLs varumärkesimage, nyanserna i deras svar och kommentarer tyder på någonting annat. Många av respondenterna i fokusgrupperna spelade eller hade aktivt spelat andra spel som också har blivit anklagade för toxicitet inom deras spelarsamhällen. Dessa spel var dock enklare när det gällde att lära sig spelet, så en fråga uppstår: är det lättare att ignorera toxicitet då ett spel är enklare, eller påverkar toxiciteten av LoLs spelarsamhälle respondenterna undermedvetet mera än de tror? Någonting som också var intressant var att vissa respondenter föreslog att toxicitet redan är en del av LoLs varumärkesimage och dessa personer till och med spekulerade att vissa spelare kan dras till LoL på grund av detta. De kanske vill uppleva toxiciteten själv eller vill till och med ha en kanal för att själv släppa lös sina toxiska tendenser.

Alla fokusgrupper höll dock med om att sponsorernas varumärkesimage inte blir negativt påverkad på grund av ett spelarsamhälles toxicitet. Respondenterna ansåg att någonting värre borde hända för att sponsorerna skulle bli negativt påverkade av det dåliga ryktet. Ett exempel på någonting respondenterna tog upp av någonting värre som kunde påverka sponsorernas varumärkesimage var det som hände i Qatar före, under och efter Fotbolls Världsmästerskaptävlingen. Qatar har blivit anklagad av brott mot mänskliga rättigheter under världsmästerskapet, och respondenterna i fokusgrupperna ansåg sponsorering av ett evenemang som begått dylika brott som ifrågasättbart.

Oberoende av det insamlade och analyserade materialet kan resultatet av denna studie inte anses totalt trovärdigt. Eftersom det inte fanns tillräckligt många respondenter som skulle vara aktiva spelare av LoL, samt på grund av metodikens kvalitativa natur, beror resultaten till en del av hur materialet tolkas. Tolkning av material kan vara partisk på grund av forskarens egna förhållanden till spelet och forskningsämnet. För att antingen

validera eller omkullkasta resultatet av denna magisteravhandling föreslås en ny studie som baserar sig på kvantitativ metodik och noggrannare gallring samt sortering av svar och respondenter. Den enkätformade kvantitativa studien borde distribueras genom elektroniska kanaler där spelare håller till. Sådana kanaler är till exempel olika Discord-servrar. Enkäten borde också ha frågor som kan sortera svaren enligt spelarnas aktivitet inom LoL, samt vad deras ranking är i spelet. Med hjälp av en sortering som baserar sig på ranking och aktivitet, kan det mätas ifall det finns en emotionell koppling mellan spelaren och LoL, samt påverkar det till hur rationellt en spelare tänker om spelet samt dess rykte.

Som metod för enkäten kan användas Likert's metod, som mäter respondenternas åsikter, attityder och uppfattning om ett stimulusobjekt. Respondenterna skall antingen hålla med om eller motsätta sig cirka 5–7 påståenden. Skalan för svar för påståenden kan vara till exempel *håller totalt med, håller delvis med, håller delvis inte med, motsätter mig totalt.* Svarskalan kan också ha en möjlighet att vara neutral för påståendet. Efter varje svar får varje påstående ett numeriskt värde, som i sin tur kan konverteras till ett medeltal eller ett summerat värde för varje respondent. Det slutliga resultatet ger en indikation för hurdan en respondents attityd är om ett varumärke. (Hair, Bush, & Ortinau, 2009).

Den fortsatta studien måste ha hypoteser som har anpassats till den kvantitativa naturen av studien. Till näst föreslås hypoteser som kunde användas som bas för studien.

- Hypotes 1 (H1): Spelare av LoL uppfattar LoLs spelarsamhälle som toxiskt.
- Hypotes 1.1 (H1.1): Den uppfattade toxiciteten påverkar LoLs varumärkesimage negativt bland spelarna.
- Hypotes 1.2 (H1.2): Den uppfattade toxiciteten påverkar negativt på varumärkesimagen av LoLs sponsorer bland spelarna.

- Hypotes 2 (H2): Spelare som inte spelar LoL, men som vet vad LoL är, uppfattar LoLs spelarsamhälle som toxiskt.
- Hypotes 2.1 (H2.1): Den uppfattade toxiciteten påverkar LoLs varumärkesimage negativt bland spelarna som inte spelar LoL, men vet vad LoL är.

- Hypotes 2.2 (H2.2): Den uppfattade toxiciteten påverkar negativt på LoLs sponsorers varumärkesimage bland spelarna som inte spelar LoL, men vet vad LoL är.

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Appendix

The appendices for this thesis.

Appendix A

Survey Dreamhack 2022

Welcome to a survey considering how does the perceived toxicity of a gaming community affect the games and its sponsors brand images. The survey takes approximately 3-5 minutes. All answers will be handled anonymously.

Thank you for your answers and time!

For more information, contact jenna.turpeinen@abo.fi

1. The survey owner will be the only person to access the data from this survey. All answers are anonymous. In the written form, the material from this survey will be used in a master's thesis and research publications authored by the survey owner.

    Do you give your concent to this? Yes/No

2. Are you:
   Man/Woman/Non-binary/genderfluid/Rather not disclose

3. Age?
   10-15/16-20/21-25/26-30/31-35/36-40/41-45/46-50/51+

4. Do you know what League of Legends is? Yes/No (If no, survey ends).

5. Have you played League of Legends? Yes/No

6. Have you experienced toxic behaviour while playing League of Legends? (Follow up question if respondent has played LoL). Yes/No

7. Do you perceive the player base/gaming community of League of Legends as toxic? Yes/No

8. Have you stopped or taken a conscious break playing League of Legends because of toxic behaviour? (A question only for those who have played LoL). Yes/No

9. Has the toxicity of the player base affected your choice to not try League of Legends? Yes/No

10. Do you feel like the toxic behaviour of the League of Legends player base has affected negatively on your opinion of the game's brand image? Yes/No

11. Do you feel like the toxic behaviour of the League of Legends player base has affected negatively on your opinion of the game's sponsors brand images? Yes/No

12. Please name a sponsor whose brand image has been negatively affected in your eyes because of toxicity in the League of Legends player community? (Only answered if the answer to question 11 was Yes).

13. Is your overall opinion on League of Legends brand image positive? Yes/No

14. Is your overall opinion on League of Legends sponsors brand image positive? Yes/No

Appendix B

Focus group interviews about toxicity in gaming 29.-30.11.2022

Before the interview starts, remind the respondents that the interview will be recorded (sound only) and that the results of the interviews can be used anonymously in a master's thesis and future academic research. If someone doesn't want to be recorded or doesn't want their answers to be used in a master's thesis or other academic research, that person's data will be redacted from eventual analysis. Ensure that everyone has filled in their background information. The link to the background survey is on the learning platform Moodle, and should be filled before the interviews. If someone has not filled in the survey, please ask them to do it immediately. Go also through the necessary terms and what they mean in case someone on the focus group isn't sure about terms used in games.

PvP *– Player versus player -games, you play against real people in the game.*

MOBA *– Multiplayer online battle arena, a competitive strategy game mode where you play against real people in real time. Two teams face off against each other on a virtual game field, and the one who destroys the opposing teams base first wins.*

Flaming *– When you talk maliciously of another player or their playing style and performance.*

Pinging *– A mechanic for non-verbal communication in the form of symbols you can place on the virtual game field. For instance, a question mark ("An opposing player is missing." Gets used in toxic and malicious behaviour as "What the heck happened? What in the world are you doing?"), a hook (Really means "try to lure the enemy to a trap" but gets used in toxic and malicious behaviour as "Hang yourself"), danger, etc.*

Creeps *– Computer controlled tiny characters both teams have. When you kill the opponents' creeps, you will get currency you need during the match.*

Turret *– An automatic tower that shoots at the opposing player. The turrets must be taken down to reach the base of the opponent.*

Remember to start the recording!

1. **Introduction (2 min)**

Hello and welcome to a focus group interview today. The theme we are going to discuss has to do with the world of gaming and games. We will have special focus on toxicity in gaming. Before we start, let's go through a few technicalities. Please put your mobile phones on silent, and as you know we have under an hour for these discussions. Has everyone filled the background survey? If so, good. This discussion will be recorded and the data from this discussion will be used for research purposes. Everyone who attends will be anonymous, i.e., you will not be identified at any point during the research process. If there is someone who doesn't want their data used in research purposes, please notify me, so I will separate your information from the data-analysis. The data will be stored on the servers of Åbo Akademi for approximately a year and everyone has the right to withdraw their consent for usage of their data at any point. In that case, contact me at a later point. Do you have any questions at this point of the data-analysis? The data will be mainly used in a master's thesis, but also in research and at least one academic article. But now, to the theme of this interview.

I look forward to discussing the theme *toxic behaviour in gaming, and how it affects the perceptions of a brand* with you today.

"Quick presentations of the moderator"

All opinions and thoughts are important so please say your honest opinion even though you aren't sure if it has to do with the theme. There aren't any right or wrong answers, and I am looking forward to hearing your thoughts around the questions and themes we are going to discuss. I hope we will have an active and relaxed discussion around the subject.

Does anyone have any questions, or shall we start?

2. **Presentation of the respondents (3 min)**

Ask all the respondents to briefly present themselves

- *Your name?*
- *Your major?*
- *Have you been in a focus group before?*
- *What is your experience/perception of gaming? (Do you play yourself? Do you consume e-sports content, e.g., via Twitch? Or have you never touched a game? Etc.)*

I will present you with a couple of real-life scenarios that have happened during matches in the game League of Legends, which is a MOBA type game. The comments are from players who play the game, and the comments are meant to give you an impression of the game.

Player 1: *Every now and then when I play League of Legends, I get matched up with teammates who flame if you can't read their thoughts, but then again matches like this can be saved if other teammates stand up for you against the toxic player. In those cases when someone stands up for me, I can still enjoy the game despite the toxic player in the team. Also, every time someone says GG EZ (Good Game, easy) after a match, I consider it mega toxic, because in most occasions the player who does this haven't been doing anything useful in the match. I also consider it as toxic if someone from my own team writes GG EZ after we win a match.*

Player 2: *I just played a game with a somewhat new character I haven't had time to practice with too much. My opponent went somewhere else on the game field, and I stayed in my lane trying to collect money by killing creeps, and trying to get to what my opponent protects, aka his turret, because the pros in this game do this strategy. My opponent succeeded in killing a few of my teammates during his roaming journey, and my team got angry with me because of this. They started spam pinging me with the question mark, and the new ping symbol, which in toxic cases means "hang yourself". In the chat another player was also being flamed, by just bluntly telling him he is shit. My teammates also told me I play so badly I belong to a lower league and that we will lose because of me, and we should give up. In the end we won the game thanks to actions I did.*

Player 3: *The language in the game is terrible. Racial and homophobic slurs are flying around, and people aren't afraid of telling you how shit you are. Often when you play against player like this, it feels like your day is ruined. On the other hand, when you play with your friends the game can be really fun and enjoyable. In those cases, you know they aren't going to flame you if you make a mistake, but instead they are trying to help you get better.*

Keep these scenarios in your mind while talking around the theme!

3. **How do you perceive toxicity in gaming and otherwise? (10 min)**

- What kind of behaviour do you perceive as toxic in gaming and otherwise? What kind of examples can you think of? You can write the down on post-its.
- Let's look at your examples. Here we have xxx, could you tell us a bit more? (Continue the discussion based on the examples of the respondents, as long as the conversation is meaningful/there is material to discuss).

4. **How does the presented toxic behaviour of other players affect your perception of the game League of Legends/some other game, and does the presented toxic behaviour among other players affect your perception of the brands that sponsor the game or its events? (20-30 min)**

- If you have had encounters of toxicity or would encounter toxic behaviour in a game, how would you react?
    - Do/would you try to make the toxic player to stop their behaviour?
    - Do/would you also start behaving toxically against that player?
- How does the toxic behaviour of the gaming community presented in the scenarios affect your perception of the games brand image?
    - Have you perhaps stopped playing the game because of it or decided not to even try the game because of the game's bad reputation? / Would you be willing to try the game after hearing the scenarios?
    - What could be some concrete measures to encourage the gaming community towards more positive behaviour?
- How does the toxic behaviour of a gaming community in the scenarios affect your perception of the game's sponsors brand image?
    - Would you for instance boycott products from a brand that supports the game and its events?
    - What kind of concrete measures should the sponsors take to encourage more positive behaviour in the gaming community?
- If you would describe your own behaviour in the PvP game world with one word, what would it be?/If you would describe your own perception of the PvP game world with one word, what would it be?
    - Why?

- If another brand's (some you follow/consume) community would start behaving toxically, how would it affect your opinion of the brand?

5. Wrap up (2 min)

It is time to start wrapping up and ending our discussion. Before we do this, does anyone have something you would like to point out, or has this woken any thoughts or questions around the subject you wish to tell us? We have some time left, so it is okay to ask questions. Okay, we are ready. Thank you for your contribution for today's discussion. I hope everyone got an impression of focus group interviews as a data collection method. I wish you luck with your course and thank you for today. If someone wants to stay and discuss about the theme, I am here for you. Otherwise, you can find me in my room xxx at a later point in time if you would like to discuss about the research or for instance e-sports.

Stop the recording!

Check if anyone has any other questions of the research project, method, or something else "off the record".

The data collected from the focus group interviews will be analysed and transcribed and the finds will be summarized.

Appendix C

Qualitative interview with [name redacted] – [Company name]

I am interviewer Jenna Turpeinen. [Information redacted]. I am writing my master's thesis in Åbo Akademi University about the subject "How does the perceived toxicity of a gaming community affect the brand image of League of Legends and its sponsors". My supervisor in this research is Anna-Greta Nyström, and she is the research leader in business economics at the faculty of social sciences, business, and economics at Åbo Akademi University.

In this interview I am interested in hearing your side of this research subject, i.e., how you at [Company name] describe toxicity and what you are doing to curb it.

The interview will be recorded, and the interviewer will transcribe (explain!) the interview. The interviewer and the supervisor of the interviewer will be the only persons to access the recorded interview audio. In the written form, the material from this interview will become available in a database for Finnish master's thesis, and the thesis will also be converted into an academic article. Because of this I will ask you do you want your name(s) redacted from the written material to remain anonymous?

The interview material will be used in research in the written form, in a way that the names of the interviewees or the organisations they represent will not be mentioned if you so wish.

After this thesis is done, you can get a copy of the research if you want to.

Do you [name redacted] consent to this?

1. Tell me about yourself, of your role at [Company name] and for how long you've worked for the company?
2. How does [Company name] define toxicity? -> Would you personally agree with this definition?
3. Could you describe for me the [reporting mechanic in game] and modern reporting systems in [Game made by the company]? Are there any other measures you have taken at [Company name], to try to curb toxicity in [Game made by the company]?

4. Have these measures worked? How can it be seen? What kind of challenges have you had after trying these different measures?

5. Do you think game developers generally have an ethic responsibility when it comes down to the toxicity of their gaming community? What does [Company name] think about the game developer's ethic responsibility in trying to stop toxicity and how does this show at [Company name]? -> Do you agree with this definition?

6. Do you feel like [Company name] can control the toxicity of the gaming community? And from a branding perspective, I just had a chat with a person, and they though toxicity might be a part of [Game made by the company]s brand, so if this is true does [Company name] even want to try to control it?

7. In which direction is [Game made by company] going in the future when it comes down to trying to curb toxicity and branding the game in the future, and what kind of plans do they have? Is the goal to try curb the toxicity totally, or is [Game made by company] without toxicity a utopia?
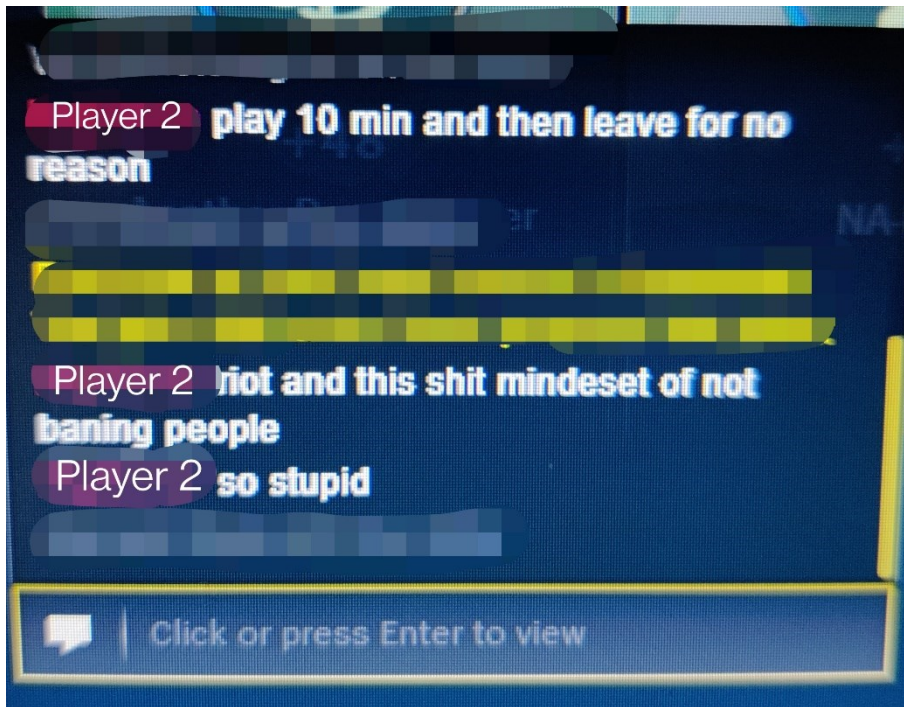
Appendix D

Chat log 1, post-game lobby – 11.06.2022
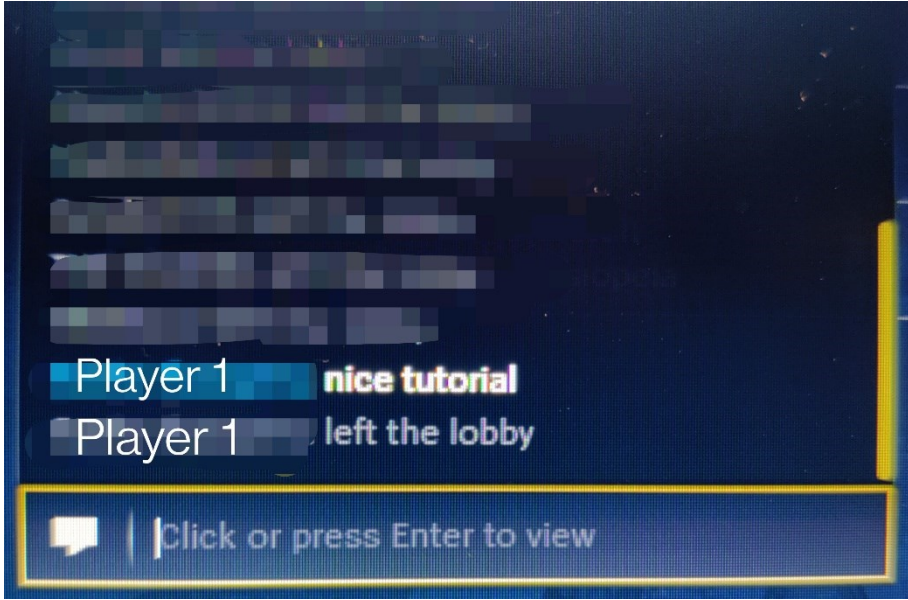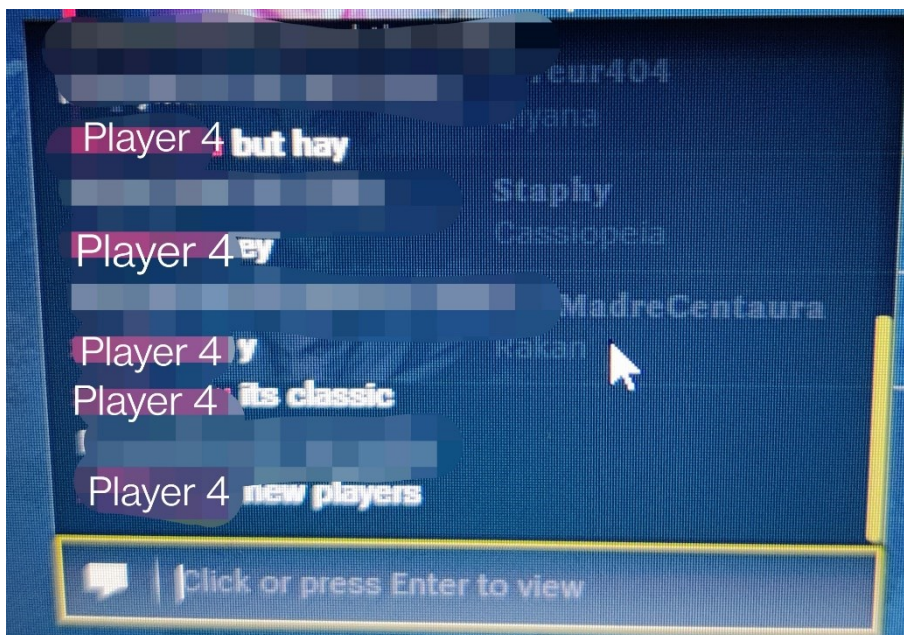

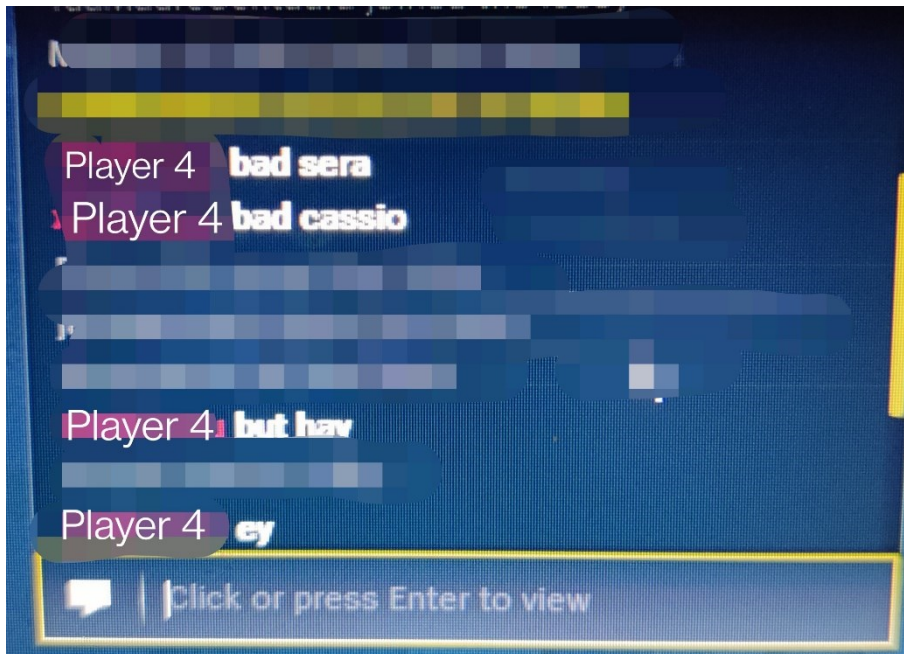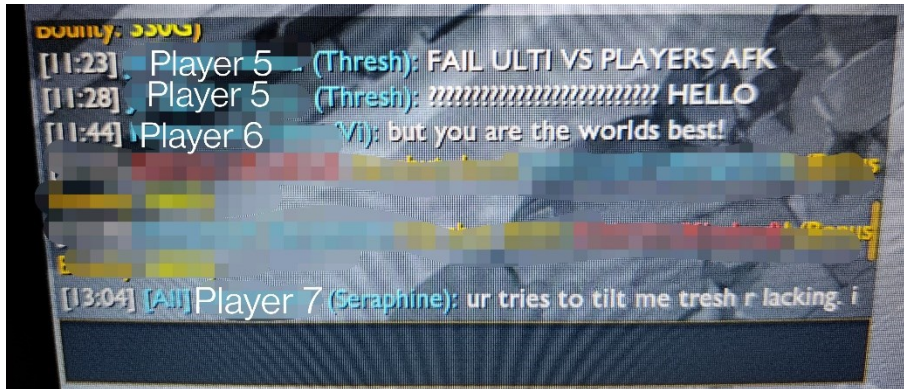Chat log 2, post-game lobby – 17.11.2022
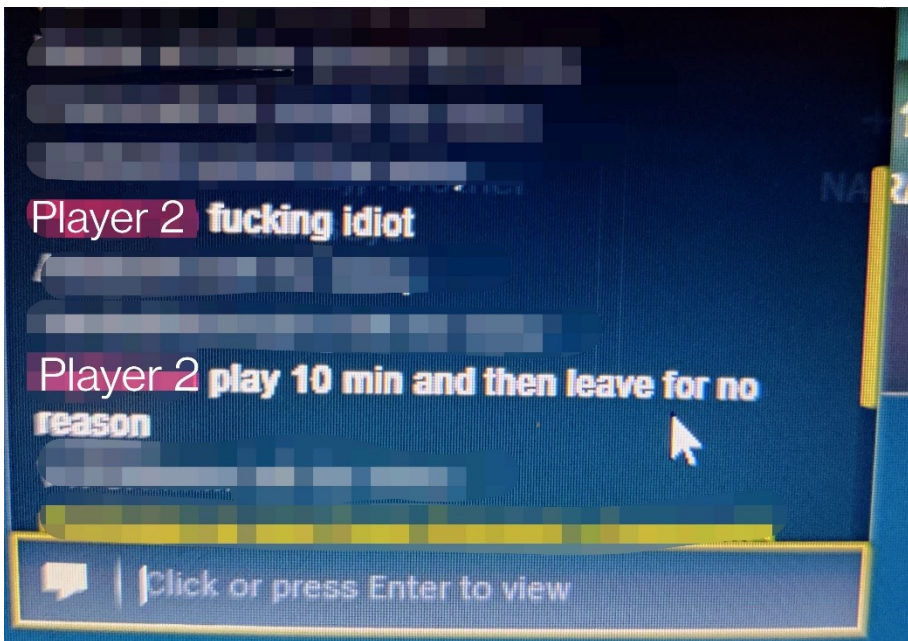
Chat log 3, in game chat – 4.12.2022

Chat log 4, post-game lobby – 8.1.2023

Chat log 5, in game chat – 9.1.2023

Chat log 6, in game chat – 10.1.2023

Chat log 7, in game chat – 5.2.2023

[08:45] Player 11 (Samira): this miss fortune

[09:38] Player 12 (Miss Fortune): yes, i am mf, good use of ur noticing skills^^

[09:38] Player 12 (Miss Fortune): yes, i am mf, good use of ur noticing skills^^
[09:39] Early surrender vote wasn't unanimous for your team 1 / 3.
[09:54] Player 11 (Samira): good that u can land a single skill
[09:54] Player 11 (Samira): :D
[09:55]
[09:55]
[09:55]

[10:40] Player 12 (Miss Fortune): i like e liandry mf. i'll slow them, so u can finish them:p

[11:23] Player 11 (Samira): ye ur slowing them by dropin skill on top of urself
[11:24] Player 11 (Samira): ur smar

[11:23] (Samira): ye ur slowing them by droping skill on top of urself
[11:24] Player 11 (Samira): ur smar
[11:26] Player 11 (Samira): smart
[11:58] Player 12 (Miss Fortune): smarter than bantering with players in an online game, n getting upset about it^^
[12:18] Player 11 (Samira): im not uposet
[12:21] Player 11 (Samira): i dont carte
[12:26] Player 11 (Samira): ur just showing how stupid u are

[13:38] Player 12 (Miss Fortune): if ones intelligence is met in their lol performance, i am worried about the future of this world XD
[14:06]

Chat log 8, post-game lobby – 8.2.2023

Player 13 you are all mentally ill

Player 14 report incredibly toxic draven

Click or press Enter to view

Player 13   you should kill yourself

Player 15   lol, imagine flaming someone in blind, and then the person getting s+

Player 13   you are an illitterate twat and should kill yourself

Player 13   the only reason you inbreds had a game

Player 13   is due to me and gp

Player 13   left the lobby

Player 14   left the lobby

💬 | Click or press Enter to view