

# Between Stigma and Support: How Esports Students and Teachers Experience and Negotiate Societal and Parental Attitudes Towards Esports

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## Abstract

*Although esports are gaining traction in formal education, their legitimacy remains contested. Previous research has explored institutional developments, but fewer studies have examined how legitimacy is experienced and negotiated by students and teachers. Through reflexive thematic analysis of interviews with twelve students and two teachers in a Norwegian upper secondary esports programme, we identified three key themes: ‘They care but don’t quite get it’ (parental attitudes), ‘If it were football, they’d clap’ (societal perceptions) and ‘We have to make it make sense’ (legitimation strategies). The study contributes to esports research by demonstrating how students and teachers strive to align esports with institutional and cultural norms and by identifying key equity concerns related to recognition, gendered access and the symbolic framing of esports as a meaningful activity.*

**Keywords:** esports education, legitimacy, youth culture, digital inequality, cultural translation

## 1. Introduction

Since the early 2000s, scholars have noted an ‘exodus to the virtual worlds’ (Castronova, 2007), where players sought immersive digital spaces for leisure, social interaction and identity formation. By the mid-2020s, this migration had taken the form of a massive influx into organised competitive gaming, commonly called esports (Formosa et al., 2022; Witkowski, 2012). What started as informal competitions among enthusiasts in arcades in the 1980s has evolved into a global cultural phenomenon shaped by professional structures, media attention and commercial interests (Hedlund et al., 2021; Seo, 2016; Taylor, 2012).

In recent years, esports have also been integrated into formal education (Jenny et al., 2025). In both Norway and internationally, esports are increasingly integrated into high schools to support student engagement, motivation and what in educational policy is often referred to as ‘21st-century skills’,

including competencies such as collaboration, communication, critical thinking and creativity, through immersive learning environments (Funk et al., 2018; Kane & Spradley, 2017; Radmann & Midthaugen, 2024; Scott et al., 2021).

However, the cultural legitimacy of gaming remains a contested issue. Over a decade ago, Chatfield (2010) described the divide between those who understand video games and those who do not as the defining cultural fault line of our time. This divide may be particularly salient for esports students, who do not merely enjoy games as entertainment but have also chosen esports as an educational pathway and a significant part of their identity (Cestino et al., 2023; McGrath, 2019).

Culturally, esports continue to struggle for full recognition, often dismissed as a ‘lesser’ pursuit than traditional sports despite requiring similar levels of discipline and teamwork (Jenny et al., 2017; Scholz et al., 2021). However, signs of changing perceptions are increasingly evident. Esports have gained symbolic recognition by being included in major multisport events – from demonstration and medal status at the Asian Games to the inaugural Olympic Esports Series in 2023 and the upcoming Olympic Esports Games in Riyadh in 2027 – while attracting large audiences on streaming platforms (Lefebvre et al., 2023; Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017). In Norway, cultural touchstones, such as the successful documentary ‘The Remarkable Life of Ibelin’ (Ree, 2024), have sparked national attention and helped reframe public discourse around gaming.

In families, parental attitudes play a pivotal role in legitimising or delegitimising youth engagement in esports. While many parents recognise gaming’s social and recreational value, concerns persist about screen time, physical inactivity and long-term prospects (Meriläinen & Ruotsalainen, 2023; Svensson et al., 2024; Wong et al., 2021), often shaped by generational perspectives and gendered expectations (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020). While recent research has suggested that esports participation may contribute to social capital and wellbeing (Yeomans et al., 2025), other studies indicate that young esports participants often face pressure related to time management and the perceived

legitimacy of their educational or career trajectories (Leis et al., 2024; Smithies et al., 2020).

In response, esports stakeholders often adopt strategies to legitimise their participation, drawing on athletic metaphors, emphasising skill development or aligning their practices with educational and moral values (Cestino et al., 2023; Lin et al., 2024; Taylor, 2012). These bottom-up strategies complement broader, top-down efforts to institutionalise esports' legitimacy through formal policies, league structures or national recognition (Heidenreich et al., 2022; Pizzo et al., 2021). However, the lived and relational dynamics through which esports' legitimacy is experienced and negotiated in educational settings remain insufficiently explored. As Funk et al. (2018) observed, there is a particular need for scholars and practitioners to examine the educational potential of esports more systematically (see also Jenny et al., 2025).

This study advances research by demonstrating how the legitimacy of esports is constructed not only by policies and institutions but also through everyday negotiations among students, teachers and parents in educational settings. Drawing on qualitative interviews at a Norwegian upper secondary school with esports as part of its elite sports track, this study explores how legitimacy is experienced, negotiated and translated through everyday practices

## 2. Background and research questions

In anthropological terms, esports occupies a 'betwixt and between' position (Turner, 1969), situated ambiguously between mainstream acceptance and lingering cultural stigma, as reflected in media portrayals. De Donder et al. (2022) showed how printed media in Belgium alternately frame esports players as 'virtual athletes' and 'ultimate nerds' (see also Siuda et al., 2024). Such portrayals often veer between admiration of skills (e.g. reaction time) and criticism of physical inactivity and social withdrawal, confirming esports' fragile cultural standing and exposing the symbolic battles over legitimacy (see also Cestino et al. 2023).

Despite ongoing tensions, the broader global trend indicates an increasing acceptance and official recognition of esports. Lefebvre et al. (2023) observed how esports' inclusion in multisport events, such as the Asian Games, has helped legitimise them within mainstream sporting discourse. This trend culminated in the International Olympic Committee's decision to create the Olympic Esports Games, with the first event scheduled for Riyadh in 2027. Industry media even described the decision as 'a green light for schools and

universities to invest in structured esports education, chatexport' (GamesHub, 2025).

Ambivalent cultural attitudes are often mirrored in families in which parents play a pivotal role in mediating access to gaming and esports. Many parents lack the conceptual tools, or what Liu et al. (2024) refer to as 'electronic health literacy', to assess digital activities, such as gaming (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020). Studies from Norway reveal a clear paradox: 7 in 10 parents express concerns about their children's gaming habits, but only 18% of young people report that their parents actively engage with their gaming, whereas 71% report that about traditional activities (Elvestad et al., 2021). However, research has suggested that understanding can develop over time. In Finland, Meriläinen and Ruotsalainen (2024) found that teenagers experienced an attitudinal shift over time, with parents becoming more supportive as their understanding of gaming increased. At the same time, a Chinese study showed that professional players are often perceived as engaging in unproductive or even deviant labour due to cultural ideals of seriousness, education and economic stability (Zhao & Zhu, 2020). In a cross-national study of adolescents in Australia and Germany, Leis et al. (2022) identified family-related stressors as a central challenge for young esports participants. Many reported having to repeatedly justify their commitment to sceptical parents who viewed esports as a distraction from school or as lacking long-term value. Some reported feeling pressured to limit their playtime, conceal their ambitions or negotiate 'deals' to continue competing, frequently characterised by adults as a conditional privilege rather than a legitimate pursuit.

Svensson et al. (2024) argued that weak parental support is linked to concerns about health and education, limited knowledge of esports and uncertain social norms. A large-scale U.S. survey found that over 40% of parents believed esports could lead to a more fulfilling future than traditional careers, and one in three considered them a viable route to scholarships (Prodigy Education, 2024). Williams et al. (2025) carried out a qualitative study in Singapore, developing a sociocultural model of esports expertise through interviews with 33 players. The study emphasises the vital role of family and school contexts, highlighting the wider importance of understanding how legitimacy is negotiated in everyday interactions.

Both institutional and everyday efforts shape the legitimacy of esports (Witkowski, 2023). At the organisational level, Heidenreich et al. (2022) described how German esports bodies emulate traditional sports structures (e.g. formal leagues, ethical codes and federation models) to signal

credibility. In Hong Kong, Cheng et al. (2022) found that even initially sceptical parents reconsidered their views when schools introduced structured esports programmes, showing the legitimising power of institutional endorsement. In the Nordic context, two studies highlight grassroots and school environments that enhance esports' legitimacy. Baumann et al. (2024) examined Norwegian sports clubs incorporating esports; they found that coaches emphasised values such as community, discipline and wellbeing to depict esports as meaningful. Cestino et al. (2023) analysed grassroots mobilisation in Sweden, revealing that experiences of exclusion and conflicting legitimacy judgements drive collective efforts to formalise and defend esports participation.

At the individual level, studies show that esports participants consciously employ discursive strategies to pursue legitimacy. For example, Taylor (2012) mentioned that players invoke athletic metaphors, emphasise self-discipline and stress educational or social benefits to counter stigma. Other studies describe how players construct narratives of professionalism and skill to reposition themselves as dedicated esports athletes rather than passive gamers (Zhao & Zhu, 2020). While perspectives on social identification (Tajfel, 1981) and boundary work (Gieryn, 1983) have been theorised in esports from various angles – for example, in studies of fan identification in sponsor–sponsee relationships (Calapez et al., 2023), viewers' behaviours (Navarro-Lucena et al., 2024), and sportsmanship (Naweed et al., 2023) – to the best of our knowledge, no research has explored how these processes develop within educational settings.

Taken together, existing research suggests that esports' legitimacy is constructed across cultural, familial and institutional domains. However, relatively little attention has been paid to the relational processes through which legitimacy is enacted in school settings, despite repeated calls to examine the educational potential of esports more systematically (Funk et al., 2018; Jenny et al., 2025). This study therefore asks: *How do students and teachers perceive and negotiate societal and parental attitudes towards esports?*

### 3. Method

Since the establishment of Norway's first upper secondary esports programme in 2016, the number of schools offering esports as a formal subject has steadily increased (Radmann & Midthaugen, 2024; Tjøndal & Skauge, 2021). Typically modelled on elite sports tracks, these programmes usually comprise around 5 hours of instruction weekly or approximately 140 hours per academic year. On their websites,

schools often emphasise structured training in specific games (e.g. League of Legends [LoL] and Counter-Strike: Global Offensive [CS:GO]), physical exercise and values such as teamwork, discipline, health awareness and fair play.

The present study was conducted at a Norwegian upper secondary school that, similar to the programme described above, offers esports in its elite sports curriculum alongside football, handball and cross-country skiing. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling in collaboration with the school. All students enrolled in esports and their two teachers were invited to participate; both teachers and 12 students (9 male and 3 female) consented. During the first interview round (spring 2023), all the students were in their first year of the esports programme. All spoke Norwegian as their first language, lived at home with one or both parents and specialised in a specific game. Teacher 1, a man in his early 30s, had a background as a professional esports player. Teacher 2, in his early 40s, combined personal gaming experience with formal qualifications in physical education and traditional sports coaching.

Pseudonym	Main Game(s)	Interview Rounds
Sara	CS:GO	1 + 2
Marie	LoL	1 + 2
Julie	CS:GO	1 + 2
Daniel	LoL	1 + 2
Julian	CS:GO/Apex	1 + 2
Even	Valorant	1 + 2
David	Valorant	1 + 2
Henrik	CS:GO	1 + 2
Max	Overwatch/LoL	1 + 2
Noah	LoL	1 + 2
Erik	CS:GO	1
Tom	FIFA	1

**Table 1. Student participants' demographic data**

Data were collected through semi-structured one-on-one interviews on the voice platform Discord, a familiar environment for the participants. The first round took place in April–May 2023 and covered six broad areas: pathways into gaming, daily routines, skill development, social dynamics, societal perceptions and aspirations. Topics of legitimacy and parental attitudes emerged unprompted in many of these conversations. A second interview round in April–May 2024 delved deeper into these issues, following up on the participants' evolving reflections and focusing more directly on how they and teachers understood and navigated societal expectations, familial concerns and the educational framing of

esports. Ten of the twelve students participated in both rounds; both teachers were interviewed once in 2023. The interviews, which lasted 35–65 minutes, were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were then translated into English for analysis and reporting.

The data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021). We adopted an inductive, semantic and realist orientation to capture both the descriptive content and deeper patterns of meaning. The first author did the initial manual coding after repeatedly reading the transcripts. The codes were then organised into preliminary themes reflecting how the participants interpreted societal and parental perceptions. Theme development progressed through iterative, collaborative discussions among the authors.

## 4. Findings

This section presents three central themes identified in the final analysis, each supported by illustrative quotes and analytical commentary.

### 4.1 Theme 1: ‘They care but don’t quite get it’

This theme reflects how parental attitudes towards gaming and esports evolved over time, generally proceeding from playful early engagement to increasing concern during adolescence and ultimately to conditional support as schools institutionalised esports. Most participants described this as a common pattern, although the timing and level of acceptance varied.

The first phase began in early childhood. Many students started gaming in family settings at the age of six or seven and fondly recalled playing with parents or siblings. Initially, the frequency and intensity of gaming increased, and nearly all the students reported that their parents expressed concern about their gaming habits at some point, particularly about time spent playing, some games’ violence and the potential for social isolation. Erik described negotiating screen time as a daily ritual: ‘An hour. It was always just one hour,’ he said with a smile.

As students entered adolescence and grew more serious about esports, most reported that their parents grew less concerned, particularly after the shift to structured esports programmes. Esports were perceived as less random and more purposeful than casual gaming, with some parents even seeing them as a way to keep students engaged with school while honing valuable skills. Tom noted that his parents

‘liked the structure’ of the programme and saw it as ‘better than just sitting in the basement alone’.

However, many noted a clear distinction between esports and casual gaming at home. Daniel explained, ‘He’s [father] fine with it as part of the school curriculum. But when I’m just playing freely in the evenings, he says it’s a waste of time.’ Some students described conditional support. Julian said, ‘My dad wasn’t a big fan, so he told me, “If you’re going to do this, you better damn well do it properly.” And that’s what I’m doing. They support me no matter what, and I’m grateful for that. They’re not necessarily thrilled, but they support me.’

Several students discussed navigating conflicting parental expectations in split households. Sara shared, ‘My mum lets me play, no problem, as long as I keep up with school. My dad thinks it’s toxic for the brain. He doesn’t want me playing at all.’

For Julie, gaming was long a shared and accepted aspect of family life. Her younger brother, who had multiple disabilities, enjoyed playing Fortnite, and their parents chose to engage with him on his terms by downloading the game and using it as a topic of conversation. ‘They even installed Fortnite themselves to understand what he likes and discuss it with him,’ she explained. ‘Ultimately, it became the topic of conversation during dinner, which we all shared.’ This inclusive environment likely shaped her parents’ view of Julie’s own engagement. Rather than questioning her participation in esports, they extended their empathy and recognition, seeing them as not only legitimate but perhaps also as a source of pride and a model for her brother.

Teachers often encountered concerned parents at the start of the school year when students entered the esports programme. Teacher 1 recalled, ‘Once they realised that we weren’t simply going to have them play all day and that we were focusing on teamwork, communication and even physical training, they typically changed their minds.’

In the current phase, most students described their parents as supportive yet emotionally disengaged – happy their children thrived but with limited interest in the specifics. Even remarked, ‘They support me, but they don’t really care. They never ask about what game I’m playing or how I’m doing in tournaments.’ Henrik noted, ‘They’ll drive my brother to football practice and cheer him on. But when I have training or a match, they don’t even ask.’

Support often took the practical form of better internet connections, buying gaming equipment or setting up dedicated spaces at home. Noah remarked, ‘They don’t really say much about it, but they got me the equipment, so I assume they’re okay with it.’ However, this support was not evenly distributed. Of

the 12 participants, 9 boys and 3 girls, only 2 lacked a gaming setup at home, and both were girls. Marie commented, 'Getting your parents to shell out 20 000 kroner [approximately €2,000] for a PC for a girl is not easy. It's just a fact of life.'

#### **4.2 Theme 2: 'If it were football, they'd clap'**

A parallel trajectory emerged in how the participants described society's perception of esports, tracing a broader movement from public scepticism and ridicule to partial recognition, shaped by institutional encounters, generational divides and symbolic turning points in media and culture. As with parental attitudes, this evolution was uneven and ongoing, characterised by negotiation rather than resolution.

The earliest accounts centred on the school's internal environment. Teacher 2 reported meeting resistance when the programme was introduced. Several colleagues, notably older teachers, strongly opposed using violent games in the classroom. One reportedly said in his retirement speech, 'Now that we are introducing shooter games in this school, I think I can retire.' While some raised moral concerns, questioning whether it was appropriate for a school to address the topic at all, both esports teachers noted that not all opposition was ideological. In some cases, they believed the resistance reflected professional rivalry or frustration, as the esports programme quickly became the school's most popular subject.

Over time, however, attitudes shifted. By consciously striving to help others understand the programme's aims and educational value, the esports teachers changed many minds. Gradually, colleagues approached them with inquiries about gaming computers for their children or to discuss the games their sons were playing. These private, understated moments of curiosity indicated that the stigma was easing. The change was not abrupt but steady, from mockery and opposition to tentative understanding and acknowledgement.

This shift within the school reflects wider societal patterns. Several students noted what they described as a double standard: traditional sports training is celebrated and promoted, whereas the same effort and dedication in esports may be ridiculed or dismissed. Daniel remarked, 'If I trained this hard in skiing, everyone would be clapping.' Despite regulated schedules, physical training and competitions, esports students felt they were still seen as 'lazy gamers, sitting in the basement'. Max added, 'I've trained more here than I did when I played handball. Yet I'm still told I'm just sitting still.' For many, this scepticism stemmed not from their actual routines but

from deep-seated cultural associations. Henrik noted, 'If we wear a football jersey, it's fine. But if we say we play Counter-Strike, people freak out.'

Students and teachers recognised that media representations played a crucial role in shaping public opinion. Both groups expressed fatigue over negative headlines, especially those linking gaming to addiction, isolation and academic failure. Teacher 1 called the headlines 'predictable and tired'. Erik echoed the sentiment, highlighting the inconsistency: 'If I say I have 7,000 hours in League of Legends, people say, "Wow!" But it's totally the same as if I said I've been playing football or handball for years. The only difference is that I can prove my hours in-game, while people on the football field don't.'

Still, some cultural moments were seen as turning points. Several students, including Tom and Even, cited the Norwegian esports professional Nyhrox's Fortnite World Cup victory in 2019 and accompanying prize money as a moment that sparked recognition. 'When the money comes, the understanding comes,' Even quipped. Several students also highlighted the inclusion of esports as a medal sport in the Asian Games and a demonstration sport at the Tokyo Olympics.

Another major shift was associated with the Ibelin case. Initially featured as a news story in 2019 and later adapted into a book and documentary, the story of a terminally ill boy who found meaning and connection through gaming resonated widely. Teacher 2 reflected, 'Suddenly, people stopped asking why we teach gaming and began saying, "I saw that documentary, I understand it now."'

These reflections illustrate a landscape of evolving perceptions. Both students and teachers characterised a gradual yet significant cultural reorientation, driven by symbolic victories, media narratives and generational change. Nevertheless, the journey from marginalisation to legitimacy remains halting, and the responsibility of explanation largely falls to those within the esports ecosystem, as shown in the final main theme.

#### **4.3 Theme 3: 'We have to make it make sense'**

Students and teachers were acutely aware that esports were not yet self-evidently legitimate in the eyes of others. In response, they developed a repertoire of strategies to reframe esports as meaningful, serious and future-oriented. These were not mere one-off justifications but ongoing efforts to make esports 'make sense' to sceptical audiences.

One consistent strategy was linguistic and symbolic adjustment. Many students described

deliberately tailoring their language to their audience when discussing esports. Rather than saying they were ‘gaming’, they said ‘training’, ‘analysis’, or ‘team coordination’. Daniel explained, ‘I don’t say I’m gaming—I say I’m training. It makes a big difference to how people react.’ When speaking to adults, Julie softened even her in-game terminology: ‘I never say “kill” when I talk to my mum,’ she said. ‘I say “take out.” It just sounds less intense.’

This adjustment extended beyond vocabulary to self-presentation. Several students preferred to call themselves elite athletes in formal contexts, especially when speaking to teachers, employers or distant relatives. Julian put it this way: ‘If I’m chatting with a girl I like, I say I do elite sports. Then maybe later I say it’s esports.’ The comment, while playful, highlights a broader tendency to sequence information and lead with socially accepted terms before acknowledging the more stigmatised aspect. This framing was reinforced by the teachers through symbolic norms, a key example being a ban on energy drinks in the school’s esports room. Practical reasons were also provided for the ban: to protect equipment and avoid distractions. ‘We wanted the room to feel like a training facility, not a gamer den,’ said Teacher 1.

Beyond these discursive practices, the participants emphasised structure and discipline as markers of legitimacy. A common strategy was to highlight the esports programme’s rigorous routines. The students described strict weekly schedules, including physical preparation, results analysis, team organisation and participation in games. Erik mentioned that the group had even registered for a half-marathon, in part to challenge the stereotype of esports students as couch potatoes. ‘We wanted to demonstrate that we’re not just sitting there,’ he said. ‘We are training like other athletes, just in a different way.’

Beyond training, students also participated in organised outreach. Marie was part of a student-run business composed entirely of esports students, which livestreamed school events, ran information booths and supported local initiatives. These activities were often carried out while wearing sweaters that identified them as members of the esports track. ‘We were there in school sweaters, talking to people about what we do,’ she explained. ‘It really did make some parents see it differently.’ For Marie and others, such outreach was not only a way to build relevant skills but also an opportunity to counter scepticism and foster legitimacy. The teachers did not view this as merely a publicity stunt; the students genuinely acquired valuable life skills from these activities and also influenced public perceptions. As Teacher 2 put it,

‘Sometimes a parent would say, “My kid plays way too much,” and we’d respond, “Okay, but here’s what structured gaming can look like.”’

Some students’ professionalisation included participating in activities outside of school. David described his involvement in the national sports federation, where he contributed to policy formulation and campaigned for esports to be recognised as a legitimate component of youth sports.

A third approach focused on framing esports as future-relevant, emphasising their value for education and professional life. Students and teachers discussed the development of transferable ‘21st-century skills’, including communication, critical thinking, creativity and cooperation. These skills were often highlighted in contrast to media portrayals of isolation or addiction. Several students described including their esports experience on their CVs when applying for weekend jobs or internships. Even recalled, ‘I spoke about teamwork and discipline. Not only did I mention that I played games but also what I accomplished in them.’ Max added that a school partnership with Manpower, a global recruitment and staffing agency, had coached them on how to present esports as relevant work experience: ‘We discussed how to articulate it—focusing on structure and responsibilities—in that manner.’ These efforts suggest a broader cultural translation, whereby students and teachers actively reframe esports not as a distraction from the future but as preparation for it.

## 5. Discussion

Esports is attracting growing attention and recognition within society, yet the everyday experiences of students and teachers in esports education remain complex. As the results indicate, legitimacy is not automatically conferred but must be actively fostered amid persistent scepticism from parents, peers and even fellow educators.

A key insight concerns how esports become socially acceptable when framed within educational structures. Many students experienced early scepticism from parents, consistent with Nordic and international research highlighting concerns about screen time, addiction and social withdrawal (Meriläinen & Ruotsalainen, 2023; Rustad et al., 2024; Svensson et al., 2024), but rebranding gaming as ‘esports’ embedded in formal schooling often alleviated concerns. Technological domestication theory helps explain this transition (Silverstone & Hirsch, 1994); unfamiliar practices become ‘tamed’ when integrated into everyday life and aligned with institutional norms. The school served as a domesticating force, providing purpose, structure and

symbolic legitimacy. Although parents' support was often conditional (linked to performance or prospects), reframing gaming as a discipline shifted perceptions. Our findings align with those of Leis et al. (2024), who showed how academic expectations shape parental support for esports. Other studies similarly indicate that such support is often granted only when the activity appears to be structured or linked to tangible outcomes, such as scholarships or career prospects (Svensson et al., 2024). Comparable shifts have been observed in Hong Kong, where initially sceptical parents became more supportive once schools implemented structured esports programmes (Cheng et al., 2022), underscoring how institutional settings provide crucial leverage for legitimisation. This highlights an important implication where schools not only deliver curriculum but also perform symbolic work that can reshape broader cultural understandings of youth practices. Furthermore, these findings echo Williams et al.'s (2025) sociocultural model of esports expertise, which identifies family and school contexts as pivotal in shaping opportunities and constraints for aspiring players. Our study extends this perspective by illustrating how such negotiations unfold within a formal educational programme, where teachers actively mediate legitimacy.

Legitimacy also intersects with identity work. Students expressed frustration at being seen as 'just gamers' despite their regimented training. In social identity theory, this illustrates the tension between self-categorisation and societal labelling. Group membership serves as a source of self-esteem, provided that the group is viewed positively. To counter the 'gamer' stereotype, often associated with laziness, isolation or addiction (Chan et al., 2022; Ketelhut et al., 2023), students reframe their identities in the language of sport, ambition and professionalism. This strategic identity work aligns with Cestino et al.'s (2023) finding that esports participants engage in public storytelling to reposition gaming as legitimate (see also Zhao & Zhu, 2020). Comparable dynamics have been observed in studies of fan identification, both in sponsor-sponsee relationships (Calapez et al., 2023) and in esports viewing behaviours (Navarro-Lucena et al., 2024), highlighting the broader importance of social identity processes in how legitimacy is formed in esports. Our findings add to this body of work by showing how such identity strategies are translated into the classroom, where the language of sport and professionalism becomes a means to counteract stigma and secure institutional recognition. The students also cited cultural moments, such as the Ibelin documentary, as narrative resources for explaining and legitimising their practice. Such events show how public discourse oscillates between

panic and prestige (Cohen, 2011), providing new discursive tools for identity construction.

To gain credibility, students and teachers employed deliberate strategies of boundary work (Gieryn, 1983), that is, symbolic and practical efforts to position esports as compatible with mainstream values. Language was carefully managed: training replaced gaming, and students referred to themselves as athletes, not gamers. This strategic rewording echoes earlier findings that highly competitive players often reject the label 'gamer' in favour of 'esports athlete' to emphasise skill, merit and seriousness (Taylor, 2012). It also mirrors the struggles for legitimacy in other emerging sports, such as skateboarding and snowboarding, in which athletes distanced themselves from subcultural stereotypes and aligned with institutional norms (Wheaton & Thorpe, 2018). Our findings also broaden the concept of boundary work as applied in esports research. Whereas Naweed et al. (2023) analyse how players distinguish legitimate from illegitimate conduct in competitive play, we demonstrate how students and teachers use symbolic and linguistic boundary work to position esports as compatible with educational values. This suggests that legitimacy in esports is not only about gameplay norms but also about embedding the activity within culturally sanctioned domains, such as schooling. Similar dynamics are evident in the institutional work of national esports associations, which, as Witkowski (2023) showed, negotiate legitimacy by mediating among grassroots actors, commercial stakeholders and state frameworks. Seen together, this highlights how legitimacy is co-constructed across scales: from micro-level classroom practices to meso-level associations and policy frameworks.

Teachers played a key role as mediators, interceding among institutional expectations, parental concerns and student experiences. We conceptualise their role as that of 'technological translators', bridging cultural gaps and reframing gaming as legitimate skill development. As in the 'institutional work' of collegiate esports directors to align esports with traditional sports models (Fisackerly & Hwang, 2024), the teachers in this study framed their programme in terms of skill, structure and accountability, anchoring esports in familiar educational logics.

Despite these efforts, the study reveals challenges related to inclusion and equity. Two students, both girls, lacked access to proper gaming setups at home, with one remarking that her parents were less willing to invest in equipment for their daughters. These observations, though anecdotal, echo broader findings that early exposure and material support are key

factors shaping pathways in technology-related fields. Darvin et al. (2021), for instance, highlighted the persistent underrepresentation of women across all levels of the esports industry, identifying structural and cultural barriers such as toxic masculinity, harassment and the so-called 'glass monitor' that hinders access and advancement (see also Rogstad, 2021; Williams et al., 2025). This underscores the need for future school-based esports programmes to pay attention not only to legitimacy in general terms but also to who is included or excluded when legitimacy is granted.

If esports are increasingly framed as a site for developing 21st century skills (Radmann & Midthaugen, 2024) and fostering social capital (Yeomans et al., 2025), structural barriers – whether economic, cultural or gendered – risk perpetuating existing inequalities. Future research should investigate how these dynamics unfold over time and across contexts. Comparative studies may explore how national narratives define legitimate youth activities. In Norway, cultural values emphasise nature, outdoor life and physical activity (Grindheim, 2021). Understanding the interaction between these values and emerging practices, such as esports, is crucial for recognising whose interests are prioritised and whose are marginalised when legitimacy is granted or withheld.

## 6. Conclusion

As schools embrace esports, new issues arise concerning authenticity, recognition and equity. This study investigated how students and teachers in a Norwegian esports programme navigated societal and parental perceptions of esports. The findings show that legitimacy is not merely conferred from above but also constructed from below through the everyday work of framing, translation and symbolic boundary-making. Parental support, while increasingly common, is often conditional on esports being framed as structured, educational and potentially productive.

The teachers' mediating efforts demonstrate how legitimacy is actively shaped not only by students but also by adults who work to connect youth practices with institutional and generational expectations. Their contributions helped shift perceptions of esports from entertainment to discipline and from distraction to development. Simultaneously, students engage in identity work to distance themselves from the stigmatised gamer stereotype. Through strategic self-representation and symbolic actions, they align esports with socially valued domains, such as sports, education and work. However, the findings also reveal persistent ambivalence and inequality, particularly in

terms of access, recognition and gendered expectations.

Esports education provides opportunities for skill development, community engagement and identity formation, but its success relies not only on curriculum or competition but also on a broader cultural effort to legitimise it to families, educators and society at large. As esports continue to expand in education, the question is no longer whether they belong but rather how – and for whom. These findings underscore the importance of further investigating how legitimacy is negotiated across institutions, generations and social identities, particularly as esports evolve into both a cultural practice and an educational arena. Since these insights are derived from a single Norwegian school and do not include parental perspectives, future research should expand to other contexts and stakeholders to examine how the legitimacy of esports is negotiated across schools, families, generations and cultural settings.

## 7. References

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