Towards Gender Equality in Competitive Online Gaming: How Women Esports Players Seek and Select Potential Teammates

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Abstract

Esports has been considered an important CSCW research context for studying computer-mediated teamwork. Yet most existing work has largely been based on male esports players' practices, potentially leading to limitations and biases. Despite playing an increasingly significant role in this traditionally male-dominated space, women esports players' unique teammate-seeking experiences remain understudied. Based on seven in-depth interviews with women esports players, this preliminary study examines how women players seek potential teammates and the criteria they use to decide whom to continue playing with. We contribute initial empirical insights into how women players construct safer pathways into esports teamwork and suggest future directions for supporting marginalized users in fast-paced, time-sensitive online collaboration.

CCS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing → Empirical studies in collaborative and social computing**.

Keywords

Esports; Women; Gender; Computer-Mediated Teamwork; Virtual Teams; Team Formation

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1 Introduction

Esports generally refers to a range of computer-mediated competitive gaming activities that involve both professional and amateur forms of play and are often associated with spectatorship [9, 10]. In this sense, esports is not limited to a single game genre or level of expertise but spans multiple titles, formats, and degrees of institutionalization [12, 14, 31]. As many esports titles require fast-paced, high-pressure, and highly interdependent teamwork among online players [9, 19], existing work has explored esports as an important context for HCI and CSCW research on computer-mediated teamwork, offering insights into understanding how people form teams [11, 19], coordinate time-sensitive teamwork under pressure [21, 24, 32, 41, 45, 46], and sustain social relationships [1, 10, 27, 29] in competitive virtual spaces. Taken together, these works highlight that safe and sustainable team participation can provide esports players with crucial social and emotional values, including social support, sense of belonging, and opportunities to unwind [10, 16].

However, these works also reveal a significant limitation: most existing insights into esports teamwork and team formation have largely been based on male esports players' practices [15, 26, 33, 40]. This is a critical gap that limits our understanding of computer-mediated teamwork in fast-paced, time-sensitive contexts due to the lack of diverse perspectives, such as those of women esports players who are playing an increasingly significant role in this traditionally male-dominated space. Therefore, through seven in-depth interviews with women esports players across game titles and experience levels, we empirically examine how they seek and select teammates in competitive online environments. We aim to address the following research questions:

RQ1: How do women esports players leverage unique strategies to seek potential team members?

RQ2: Once they identify a potential pool, what are women esports players' criteria and expectations for selecting appropriate team members?

In doing so, we contribute to CSCW and HCI research on computer-mediated teamwork by providing preliminary empirical evidence of how women players actively construct safer and more trustworthy pathways into team-based play in highly competitive online environments. This not only provides additional insights to advance existing CSCW and HCI literature on esports teamwork and team formation by revealing women esports players' unique strategies and approaches but also highlights women's growing role in shaping the core social dynamics in the modern landscape of esports. In the broader sense, these insights may inform future research on designing fast-paced, time-sensitive online collaborative spaces to better support marginalized users in seeking teammates, evaluating team fit, and building further interpersonal relationships.

2 Related Work

Prior studies have established the importance of teamwork and team formation in esports as a key CSCW research agenda for understanding and designing for fast-paced, time-sensitive computer-mediated teamwork. For instance, previous work has examined **how esports**

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teams are formed and maintained through matchmaking [11, 19], friend networks [10, 22], and external platforms [11, 43, 44]. Indeed, esports players do not always enter play with fixed teams; they often encounter and assess potential teammates through multiple channels, including in-game random matchmaking [11, 19] and external platforms such as Discord [11, 43, 44]. Another line of work has investigated **how esports players coordinate during gameplay**, including communication, information sharing, and cooperation under time pressure [21, 24, 32, 41, 45, 46], as well as how such high-intensity competitive environments may affect players' mental well-being [1, 27, 29]. However, most existing work is still based on male esports players' perspectives and experiences, which may introduce potential limitations and biases. In contrast, while women esports players have continued to show growing visibility and participation in esports [3, 20, 23, 37, 38], as the minority gender group in the esports space, how they might uniquely seek potential teammates and approach teamwork in esports compared to male players remains understudied.

Indeed, recently, women esports players have begun to play an increasingly significant role in this traditionally male-dominated space. We have witnessed a rapid growth of calls for greater participation by women competitors and for women-focused competitive infrastructures [7, 28]. One especially visible example is *VALORANT*'s VCT Game Changers, a Riot-run competitive initiative designed to create more opportunities and visibility for women and other marginalized genders in esports [37]. In parallel, more women players and fans are actively engaging with professional esports fan communities [23]. Taken together, these new developments suggest that women's collective presence in this male-dominated field is becoming increasingly visible. However, **the majority of existing literature on women esports players has so far focused on toxicity directed toward them**, such as hostile verbal aggression [2, 25], in-game sabotage [18], gendered stereotyping [8, 34], gendered expectations [17], and harassment [6, 30, 36, 39]. While these works highlight the need to better support women esports players in this traditionally male-dominated space, they also reveal an urgent research need to move beyond documenting toxicity alone to depict a more comprehensive picture of women esports players' lived experiences in this space and how they are also significantly shaping the core social dynamics of esports – how esports teams are formed and perform through computer-mediated collaboration. Our work thus represents our first endeavor to explore this understudied problem space.

3 Methods

Recruitment and Participants. The university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved this study for research ethics. To recruit women esports players with team-based gameplay experience (whether in a formal pro team, a casual or amateur team, or temporary teams formed with strangers), we used a combination of **direct contact** of our connections in the esports community and **snowball sampling** [13] from February 23, 2026 to May 8, 2026 to reach participants with relevant and diverse experiences in esports teamplay. We also sought diversity in the form and degree of esports involvement, including both participants who approached esports primarily as a recreational and social activity (e.g., casual or amateur players) and those who engaged with it in more competitive and institutionally structured ways (e.g., pro players). In total, we interviewed seven women esports players who play a variety of esports games and demonstrate various gameplay experiences, as shown in Table 1 in Appendix.

Interviews. We conducted all interviews through audio and video chat on Zoom. Before each interview, we confirmed that participants had read the consent form, answered any questions they had, and verified their relevant team-based esports experience. Participants were also informed that they could skip any question they did not wish to answer. Overall, our semi-structured interviews covered women players' demographics and gameplay backgrounds, how they pursue and engage with their esports teams, social dynamics within their esports teamwork, and their broader experiences in esports as women. Interview questions that are particularly relevant to this study included those about how participants sought and evaluated teammates in esports contexts, such as *"How do you meet potential team members?"*, *"Do you feel this process is different for women esports players compared to male esports players? Why or why not?"*, and *"What qualities or characteristics do you think make a good teammate in esports, regardless of gender?"* We also asked participants to reflect on women's unique expectations and relationship dynamics in esports team play through questions such as *"Do you perceive that male teammates have different expectations of you as a woman player compared to their expectations of other male teammates? Why or why not?"*. Across these topics, we focused particularly on how women sought potential teammates, how they evaluated who was worth continuing to play with, and how gender shaped these processes. The seven interviews totaled 655 minutes, with an average length of 93.6 minutes.

Data Analysis. After completing the interviews, the interview recordings were transcribed for data analysis. We then conducted an in-depth qualitative analysis of the interview data. In line with Braun and Clarke's guidelines for reflexive thematic analysis (TA) [4], the first author first familiarized herself with the data by repeatedly reviewing the transcripts, generating initial codes and themes relevant to our research questions. Then, both authors discussed and compared patterns across participants, iteratively combined codes and themes, and developed sub-themes. Through this process, we developed the final findings presented in this paper and selected representative quotes to illustrate each theme [4]. In addition, in line with reflexive TA, it is crucial to disclose our **positionality**, as it helps contextualize how our identities may influence the analysis and interpretation of our data [5]. We acknowledge that our interpretations are shaped by our long-term engagement with the esports community. Both authors are women. The first author is an experienced game researcher, and the last author has been studying esports players and teamwork for more than a decade. Therefore, our data analysis may have been influenced by our own identities and pre-existing relationships with the esports community. Yet, such knowledge also helped us better contextualize and interpret women esports players' teamplay experiences.

4 Findings

In addressing **RQ1**, we identify two unique strategies women esports players in this study have used to seek potential teammates.

For **RQ2**, we show how these women further evaluated which teammates were worth pursuing, not only based on gameplay skills and competence but also on communication compatibility, respect for and sensitivity to gender equality, and the capacity to foster trust and emotional safety.

4.1 Women Esports Players' Unique Strategies for Seeking a Pool of Potential Teammates (RQ1)

Compared to existing CSCW literature on understanding esports team formation [11, 24, 32, 35, 42], our preliminary study highlights that women esports players' teammate-seeking is not simply a matter of finding available players or recruiting players who have superb skills. Instead, before deciding who is worth teaming up with, they tend to leverage two unique strategies to first identify the pool of potential teammates.

Strategy 1: Seeking potential teammates through socially filtered channels rather than fully open recruitment. Women esports players in our study often seek potential teammates through **trusted chains** such as friends, family members, classmates, and friends of friends, rather than through direct encounters with strangers in-game or online. P1 explained, *"Usually it's from friends of friends... It's never like meeting somebody through a game... It's usually just through other people."* Similarly, P4 noted, *"The only people I play with are friends, classmates, and family members,"* adding that *"playing esports together is quite an intimate thing for me."* P7 described a comparable pattern in which a group chat of *"eight or ten people"* served as the pool for forming a five-person team, with *"classmates, and then people they know"* gradually being added in. In this sense, women's teammate-seeking often began not with open searching, but with socially filtered recruitment through already trusted or semi-trusted networks. Some participants even emphasized the importance of **women-centered online spaces** for their team-seeking. P2, for example, described joining *"Discord servers where it's like they're entirely women-run,"* emphasizing that members even had to *"show proof that you are a woman to be in there."* For these women, these online spaces served as intentional infrastructures for finding teammates who had already been pre-screened for safety and comfort. Even when women did not exclusively seek potential teammates in all-women groups, they still preferred to identify a pool of potential teammates through existing Discord or online social circles rather than through open, anonymous recruitment.

Strategy 2: Intentionally Managing Online Gender Visibility and Self-Disclosure While Further Narrowing the Pool. Compared to general team seeking and recruitment methods in esports [11, 19, 32, 43, 44], another unique strategy women esports players in our study have used is actively controlling how visible their gender identity is while narrowing down the potential pool who would be worth further engagement. Participants often treated early interactions as a "testing period" to evaluate potential teammates. In doing so, they often minimize voice participation online, mute chat, rely on pings as non-verbal communication, or tone down gendered cues in usernames and profiles when initially interacting with potential teammates. Importantly, this strategy is not only for screening potential teammates but also for self-protection in the team seeking process. P1 said that *"as a woman, it makes me not want to talk and want to expose my gender… because I don't know how they're gonna react,"* while P3 explained, *"I've tried sort of like tone down the gender characteristics of my in-game name...I'll avoid talking too much… in the first few games. In 99% of solo queues, I don't use chat. I just mute chat… I only use pings."* Similarly, P4 described becoming *"very cautious"* and trying to use a more gender-neutral ID after randomly matched teammates inferred her gender from her username and harassed her. Together, these accounts show that participants highlighted that their teammate-seeking strategies were often entangled with self-protection methods: by intentionally deciding how much of themselves to reveal, women esports players were also deciding whom they feel safe to pursue as a potential teammate.

4.2 Women Esports Players' Specific Criteria for Selecting Appropriate Team Members Out of the Pool (RQ2)

After leveraging the above-mentioned strategies to identify a pool of potential teammates, women esports players in this study described a set of *selection criteria* for deciding who was worth pursuing as their teammates.

Criterion 1: Communication compatibility and rational decision-making, not skill alone. Across the interviews, participants repeatedly emphasized that a good teammate for them was not simply someone with strong mechanics, but someone who could communicate well, stay emotionally steady, and make decisions in ways that supported team coordination with women players. Many of our participants highlight that they need their teammates to have good personalities first: to be *"open-minded"* (P1, P2, P5) and *"do not easily go tile "* (P2, P4, P5, P7) beyond just playing well. P1 further emphasized *"They have to be open to criticism."* Communication compatibility and team spirit also emerged as important criteria for evaluating potential teammates even for highly competitive players. In a collegiate pro esports team setting, P5 valued *"Someone who's open to communicate, open to feedback."* P7's also argued *"if someone has no team spirit at all, if they're too independent, doing everything by themselves with no communication, that's bad too."* She also valued teammates who could contribute to collective growth: *"I really like that feeling of improving together. I like people who are competitive in a positive way."* Together, these accounts suggest that women esports players often evaluate potential teammates through communicative and rational compatibility: their teammates not only need to play well but also should be willing to coordinate, regulate their emotions, and support sustainable team play with women players.

Criterion 2: Respect for and sensitivity to gender equality within an esports team. Almost all of our participants expressed a key expectation that their teammates should be respectful toward women: *"They have to be respectful to women..."* (P1, P2, P3, P4, P6, P7). For these women, respect and sensitivity to gender equality in an esports team are not bonus traits but a deal breaker for whether someone is worth pursuing as a teammate at all. Participants often picked up on this criterion through subtle details revealed in early teamwork. P7, for example, explained that male teammates often *"expect you to be more self-sacrificing,"* such as assuming that women

should play only stereotypically feminized positions (e.g., support or healer). P2 summarized this expectation, *"If you're a girl, you can take healer."* P3 similarly observed that if a woman joined a Flex team and then spoke on mic, *"people will have the expectation of what kind of roles you will play."* P7 further added that male teammates *"They tend to assume that people who play clash lane are men... they don't think many women can play clash lane really well."* Across these examples, participants' accounts point to a shared concern: gendered role assumptions can suggest that a potential teammate might not recognize them as equal players, which is a key criterion for whether they stay or leave a team. Indeed, although different esports games may structure roles differently (e.g., MOBAs or tactical shooters make roles or positions highly visible while some FPS titles rely less on fixed role divisions), participants largely rejected the tendency to expect women's team behavior based on how they should fit certain "roles" in gameplay.

Therefore, once participants perceived that this baseline of respect had been violated, they would often immediately leave that team. P4 drew a firm line around gendered joking, explaining, *"I'm not really offended by sex jokes, but I'm really offended by gender jokes,"* and describing how she and another woman ultimately exited the group after such remarks: *"We stopped talking to them for a long time. We quit the group chat and we never joined again."* P6 similarly recalled that being the only woman in a male friend group once felt *"problematic,"* leading her to realize that *"these people were not good friends"* and later seek teams with *"mutual respect going both ways."* Taken together, these accounts show that women esports players treat respect for and sensitivity to gender equality within an esports team as a non-negotiable baseline for continued team play.

Criterion 3: The capacity to provide a sense of trust and emotional safety. Beyond communication compatibility and respect for gender equality, women players also expected their teammates to demonstrate the capacity and willingness to offer emotional steadiness, reassurance, and a basic sense of trust over time. This does not mean that their teammates should become a source of strong emotional support. Rather, it means that they should feel comfortable with making mistakes in gameplay without humiliation, feel emotionally safe enough to continue playing, and trust that others would not judge or exploit their vulnerability. Several participants described this sense of trust and emotional safety as developing gradually through repeated interaction with potential teammates. P1 noted that she was *"very careful about the teams I'm playing on,"* while P2 said, *"I have to be careful about who I'm meeting up with and if I really know them and if I really trust them."* P3 similarly described watching quietly for *"the synergy"* in the first few games before deciding whether to stay within a team. In this sense, such emotional trust is not separate from teamwork, but part of what makes their continued participation in esports teamplay sustainable.

5 Implications and Future Work

Discussion and Design Implications. Building on prior work on esports team formation, our study shows how gendered risks shape women esports players' teammate selection in competitive online gaming. First, different from male esports players' team formation practices that have been extensively studied [11, 24, 32, 35, 42], women players search for potential long-term teammates mainly by socially filtered approaches (e.g., through trust chains) rather than open calls, and they tend not to expose their gender and slow down self-disclosure while identifying potential teammates. Second, consistent with prior teamwork research, women players also valued teammate qualities such as communication, emotional stability, and cooperation [9, 12, 19, 43]. However, our findings show that women's expectations may go beyond these general teamwork qualities. In particular, women do not primarily emphasize game skill alone. Instead, they pay more attention to whether potential teammates would treat them with gender equality, especially the expectation that women should play supportive roles and the tendency to undervalue women players' contributions.

Taken together, these preliminary insights raise new questions for CSCW and HCI research about how marginalized users form teams and build collaborative relationships in fast-paced, time-sensitive online collaborative spaces. For instance, should future teammate-finding systems provide trusted and moderated pathways for marginalized groups, such as women, to seek teammates? Should future platforms give marginalized groups, such as women, control over when gender cues become visible during teammate search and early communication? Should future systems better recognize support-oriented contributions, such as healing, shielding, utility use, and team-stabilizing behavior, while avoiding designs that reinforce the assumption that women naturally belong in easy, cute, or supportive roles?

Limitations and Future Work. Our findings should be interpreted as preliminary. This study involved seven participants and did not use open recruitment, which may have introduced sampling bias. In addition, our analysis focused on shared patterns across various esports games rather than examining game-specific differences in depth. In future work, we plan to expand this study to include a larger, more diverse participant pool across different esports genres, regions, skill levels, and team structures. We also plan to further investigate how teammate-finding tools, moderation systems, and women-centered competitive infrastructures can better support women players as they move from protected social circles into broader esports teamplay ecosystems.

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A Appendix

A.1 Interviewee demographic information

A.2 Disclosure of Generative AI Usage

All aspects of research design, participant recruitment, data collection, qualitative analysis, interpretation of findings, theoretical framing, and manuscript writing were conducted exclusively by the human authors. Grammarly, an AI tool, was only used in a limited capacity to assist with grammar correction of the manuscript.

Table 1: Interviewee demographic information

ID	Age	Race	Loc.	Exp.	Involvement	Games Played	Recruitment
P1	23	East Asian, White	USA	9 years	Serious hobbyist	*Valorant, Paladins, Overwatch, Apex*	Direct contact
P2	24	White	USA	12 years	Serious hobbyist	*Valorant* and other FPS games	Snowball sampling
P3	27	East Asian	USA	10 years	High-investment competitive	*League of Legends*	Direct contact
P4	28	East Asian	UK	11 years	Recreational / social	*Overwatch, League of Legends, Hearthstone, Apex*	Direct contact
P5	19	White	USA	6 years	Collegiate competitor	*Marvel Rivals, Overwatch, Apex*	Snowball sampling
P6	26	East Asian	USA	13 years	High-investment competitive	*League of Legends, Valorant, Deadlock*	Direct contact
P7	33	East Asian	UK	6 years	Serious hobbyist	*Honor of Kings, League of Legends*	Direct contact

Note. The *Esports Involvement* category captures participants' overall degree and form of engagement in esports, rather than a formal skill ranking or professional status. It was assigned based on participants' self-reported levels of investment and involvement in structured esports teamplay settings. *Recreational / social* means that participants engaged in esports primarily as a leisure or casual social activity; *Serious hobbyist* means that participants treat esports as a meaningful and serious hobby but do not engage in structured and institutional competitive esports gameplay (e.g., in a pro team or attending organized tournaments);*High-investment competitive* means that participants may or may not engage in structured and institutional esports gameplay (e.g., in a pro team or attending organized tournaments) but they mainly focus on winning and often play advanced or expertise-based roles; and *Collegiate competitor* means that participants are embedded in formal university esports team structures and engage in structured and institutional esports gameplay (e.g., attending organized tournaments).