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Leadership in esports teams

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Tämän opinnäytetyön tavoitteena oli lisätä ymmärrystä johtajuudesta e-urheilutiimeissä. Tavoitteen saavuttamiseksi laadittiin tutkimuskysymyksiä siitä, miten e-urheilutiimien jäsenet kokivat johtajuuden, kenellä he kokivat olevan johtajuutta ja millainen johtajuus koettiin tehokkaaksi e-urheilutiimeissä.

Viitekehys käsitteli e-urheilua ja johtajuutta. Jotta opinnäytetyö voi saavuttaa tavoitteensa, nähtiin ensin tärkeäksi käsitellä e-urheilua ja sen perusteita. Johtajuus ja opinnäytetyön käyttämä määritelmä selitettiin, samoin trait-johtajuus, attribuutioteoria, lmx-teoria, johtajuuteen liittyvä diversiteetti ja viimeiseksi virtuaaliset tiimit. Opinnäytetyössä käytettiin laadullista tutkimusmenetelmää. Työssä haastateltiin kahdeksaa e-urheluammattiasta. Haastattelut olivat muodoltaan teemahaastatteluja. Haastattelut litteroitiin ja sen jälkeen teemoiteltiin.

Tulokset näyttivät, että e-urheilutiimien jäsenet kokivat johtajuutta eri tavoilla. Vaikka ylin johtajuus oli organisaatioilla, päivittäisissä aktiviteeteissa e-urheilutiimien jäsenet osoittivat johtajuutta tiimeissään riippumatta siitä, oliko heille jaettu johtajan roolia vai ei. Tehokkaiden johtajien koettiin helpottavan kommunikointia ja motivoivien joukkueen jäseniä, ja heillä oli tiettyjä luonteenpiirteitä, kuten itsevarmuutta ja tunneälyä.

E-urheilutiimien jäsenet painottivat suhdejohtajuutta ja arvostivat läheisiä siteitä varsinkin johtajien ja seuraajien välillä. Tulokset näyttivät, että e-urheilujoukkueissa on paljon diversiteettiä ja että jotkut tiimien jäsenet kamppailivat ongelmien, kuten sosiaalisen kokemattomuuden, kanssa. Tehokkaat johtajat olivat niitä, jotka pystyivät toimimaan tässä ympäristössä ja onnistuneesti rakensivat ihmissuhteita ja luottamusta. Nähtävästi johtajuus oli usein osallistavaa johtajuutta, ja e-urheilutiimien jäsenet pystyivät ottamaan vastuuta johtajuuden prosesseissa.

Avainsanat: e-urheilu, johtajuus, laadullinen tutkimus, teemahaastattelu

Abstract

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The purpose of this thesis was to increase understanding of leadership in esports teams. To achieve this goal, research questions were formed dealing with how esports team members experience leadership, who they experience to possess leadership, and finally, what kind of leadership is experienced to be effective in esports teams.

The theoretical framework consists of esports and leadership. For the thesis to reach its goal, it was seen as important to first explain esports and its fundamentals. Leadership and its definition within the thesis were explained, followed by the trait approach, attribution theory, leader-member exchange theory, diversity regarding leadership, team leadership, and finally virtual teams. Qualitative research in the form of theme interviews was conducted with eight esports professionals, the interviews were transcribed, and the data was then thematically analyzed.

The results showed that esports team members experienced leadership in different ways. While organizations were seen as the top leaders of the teams, in daily activities, esports team members demonstrated leadership within their teams, whether they had been assigned the role or not. Effective leaders were experienced to be those who facilitated communication, motivated team members, and possessed certain traits such as confidence and emotional intelligence.

Esports team members put an emphasis on relationship-based leadership and valued close bonds, especially between the leader and the follower. It was widely presented in the results that esports team members are quite diverse and, in some cases, struggled with issues such as being socially inexperienced. Effective leaders were those who can work within this environment and successfully build relationships and cultivate trust. It seemed that leadership was often participative, and esports team members were able to take responsibility in leadership processes.

Keywords: esports, leadership, qualitative research, theme interview

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

An electronic sport, or esports, is a video game played competitively to entertain spectators (Oxford 2022). Esports teams function in a unique environment. Many of the members are young and come from vastly different backgrounds. It is not uncommon for all the members of a team to come from different countries and backgrounds, thus resulting in diverse teams. Because many esports players start so young, they neglect their education, and due to their careers typically being even shorter than those of sports players, suffer to find work after their careers. Esports professionals additionally suffer from burnout extensively, as they struggle to differentiate work from play, and everything they do is aimed at becoming a better player. Many esports players spend most of their days at home trying to get better. (Scholz 2019, 53-54.) This creates a different environment in comparison to sports. Not only are sports and esports different in how they are played, but the backgrounds of the players are often incomparable. Many esports players have spent their lives locked in their rooms playing computer games to reach a high level, while sports players have been perfecting their craft by playing with various teammates since childhood.

The dynamic that arises from the anonymity of the internet and the fact that the players are not meeting face-to-face until they reach the top creates a unique environment. Studies implicate the fact that many virtual teams fail due to social issues. Trust, credibility, and shared channels of communication are vital for virtual teams. Additionally, meeting in person has been shown to increase the development of trust. (Barrett 2014, 271-272.)

Many early esports organizations were start-ups in an industry in its infancy that exploded due to technological advancement and the rising interest in esports competitions. Leaders in esports organizations are often former players them-

selves. (Scholz 2019, 9, 54.) Esports itself can be seen as a product of digitalization. The rapid impact of digitalization and its continuing rise may lead to other such industries as esports which function in a unique intercultural and virtual environment to develop. Due to expensive travel costs, more companies are starting to focus more on utilizing virtual teams (Barrett 2014, 268). Exploring the past and current experiences of esports team members may be significant for their improvement. Moreover, the research may be practical for any intercultural teams involving young adults.

1.2 The research objective

The purpose of the thesis is to increase understanding of team leadership in esports teams. This is done via qualitative research by conducting theme interviews with esports professionals. Esports teams are a relatively new topic for research and are often uniquely composed in comparison to other teams.

The research questions are as follows:

- How esports team members experience leadership in esports teams
- Who is experienced to possess leadership within the team?
- What kind of leadership is experienced to be effective in esports teams?

As leadership is highly subjective, the first objective was to find out how each interviewee experienced leadership in their respective teams. Secondly, the source of leadership was to be determined. Lastly, it remained to be resolved what is everyone's perception of effective leadership.

1.3 Research methods

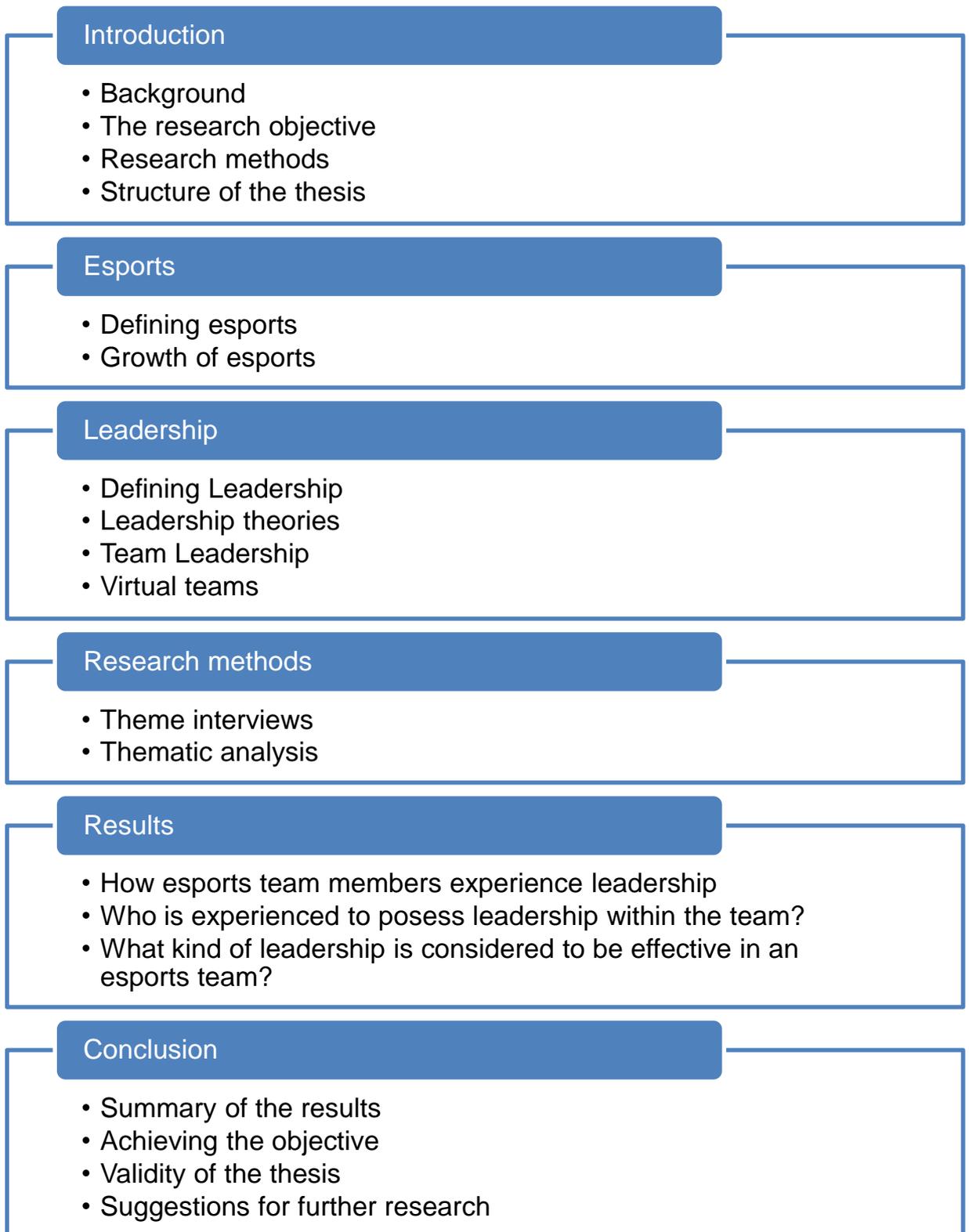
Qualitative research, specifically theme interviews, was chosen as the method of gathering data. Theme interviews are a type of semi-structured interview that highlights people's own interpretations and meanings. Another reason for choosing thematic interviews was their flexible nature. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2019,

47-48.) As esports teams vary greatly from local to virtual, are highly diverse, and may have little or many resources, a single unified perspective is impossible to determine. The theme interview differs from the focused interview proposed by Merton, Fisk and Kendall in 1956 in that a focused interview focuses on picturing a unified experience, whereas in a theme interview is more individual in nature. The point of focus lies in the themes, which bring the structure of the interview closer to unstructured rather than structured. The importance of theme interviews lies in interaction and is efficient at gathering personal and different views. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2019, 48.)

1.4 Structure of the thesis

The theoretical background of the thesis consists of esports, leadership, and team leadership. Certain approaches to leadership are presented to support the research. The approaches chosen for representation were decided upon themes arising from the interviews themselves and the assumptions made beforehand on what is relevant. It was considered relevant to create a basic understanding of esports and leadership for this thesis to reach its goal. Research methods, results, and the conclusion handle the bulk of the thesis in more detail.

Figure 1: The structure of the thesis.



2 Esports

2.1 Defining esports

Electronic sports, or esports, means playing video games in an organized competitive environment (Scholz 2019, 9). There are many different tiers in esports, starting with the amateurs and ending with the professionals. Amateurs are players who play in small-scale tournaments usually held online with minimal if any prizes. A typical career trajectory for an esports professional is to start playing games for fun, then join an amateur team and gradually rise their way up. Esports professionals make their money from salaries and tournament winnings. In general, some esports have higher tournament prices and lower salaries, and some have lower tournament winnings but higher salaries. It is not uncommon for esports professionals to make additional revenue from streaming on platforms such as Twitch and taking on sponsorships. Competitions are streamed on the internet for major audiences. (Leroux-Parra 2020.) One of the highest concurrent viewers in a single match series was achieved by the League of Legends World Championship finals in 2021, with almost 74 million peak viewers (Gough 2022).

Galaxy Game in 1971 was the first monetized video game and thus can be seen as the start of the video game industry. The video game industry is composed of developers, publishers, and distributors. Developers, which lack the resources to promote and fund their games, rely on publishers for these aspects. Distributors are the ones who bring the game from the publisher to the end consumer. (Zackariasson & Wilson 2012, 1-5.) Many of the largest participants in the industry handle all these operations themselves. For example, Activision-Blizzard develops its own games, publishes them, and then distributes them through its online store called Battle Net.

Esports is an industry-driven business. Any esports scene is based around a game that is made by a developer or maintained by a publisher. The esports scenes of their respective games belong to the developers or publishers. That

means that those in charge of the game may arbitrarily create rules or even shut down the esports scene based on their game if they wish. This is a stark contrast to sports, for example, football federations like FIFA follow market rules but cannot shut down football. (Scholz 2019, 9.)

There are publishers who let the scene develop on its own via the community managing their respective scenes and creating infrastructure, such as Microsoft and Nintendo. On the other hand, there are developers who manage their esports scenes actively and organize tournaments themselves. So far, it has appeared that the active approach has proven to be more effective. (Leroux-Parra 2020.) However, it is in the interest of the publishers to keep the esports scene healthy. Esports basically serve as a form of advertisement for their respective games, which is why these active publishers are ready to put millions of dollars towards making sure their own esports scene succeeds. On the other hand, it is not entirely unprofitable to run these esports scenes. When the North American League of Legends Championship Series (NA LCS) moved into the franchising model in 2017, Riot Games charged participants \$10 Million to enter and get a part of the revenue share of the league (Khan 2017).

The beginning of esports can be seen to have been in South Korea in the early 2000s. Due to the financial crisis, the South Korean government took steps to develop its internet and telecommunications structure. Some minor TV channels started to broadcast esports tournaments and content as it was cheap to produce. The first game to emerge above others was Starcraft. South Korea remains one of the largest markets for esports. (Leroux-Parra 2020.) Esports can be played with a computer, a mobile phone, or various consoles. While many games are designed to be competitive, this is particularly true with computer games (Scholz 2019, 8).

2.2 Growth of esports

Esports' gradual rise to the mainstream can be seen as a part of a movement away by the young from sports towards esports. Sports viewership is declining,

while esports viewer numbers are rising rapidly. (Leroux-Parra 2020.) The audience of traditional sports is aging, for example, NFL's average viewer was 50 years old in 2019 compared to 46 in 2006. Football's average viewer was 35 in 2006, while it was 39 in 2019. Sports struggle with reaching younger viewers, while an esports viewer is typically 18-34 years of age. (Scholz 2019, 8-9.) It seems that the popularity of esports is on the rise, and when these young generations reach maturity, there will be further opportunities for growth in the industry.

The prize pools for esports tournaments have been rapidly rising. Dota 2 is known for its incredibly large prize pools, with the first Dota 2 International being played in 2011 with a 1.6 million dollar price pool and in 2021 with a 40.02 million dollar price pool (Gough 2022). According to estimates, at least 2 billion people globally play video games at least casually (Skaugen 2015, as cited in Scholz 2019, 8). There are approximately 15,290 active esports athletes in the world in 2021 (Gough 2021).

The number of esports viewers has risen steadily in the past few years as shown in Figure 2. However, the numbers should not necessarily be taken at face value, as some platforms do not publicize their viewership numbers but rather as a gross estimation.

Figure 2: Esports viewers divided into esports enthusiasts and occasional viewers from 2020 to 2022.

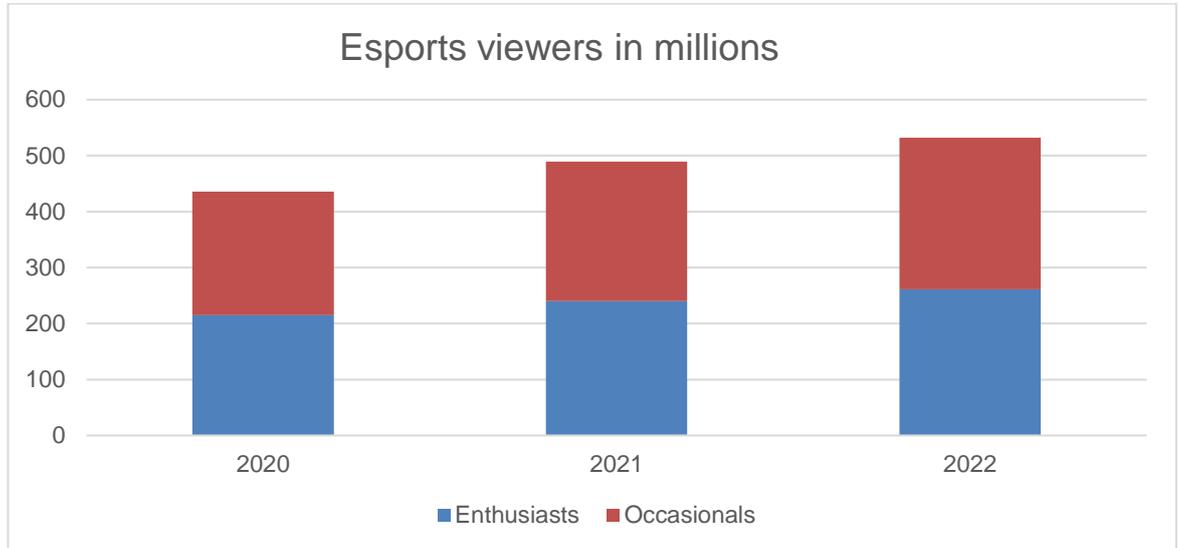
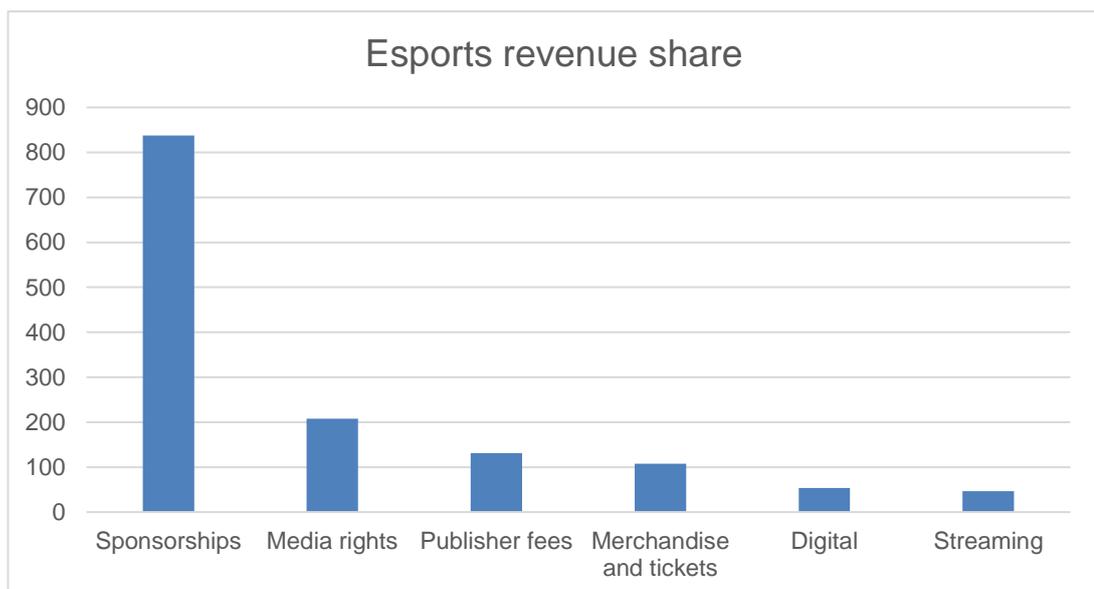


Figure 2 shows that esports viewers can be categorized into two groups: (1) enthusiasts and (2) occasional viewers. Normally, a viewer starts as an occasional viewer and then develops into an enthusiast with time. From 2020 to 2022, the average yearly growth of enthusiasts has been approximately 4.12% yearly, and the growth of occasional viewers has been 4.07%.

Figure 3: Esports revenue share.



As Figure 3 shows, most of the revenue in esports comes from sponsorships. Tournament organizers and esports organizations take sponsorships from large companies, and in return, they provide advertisements (Scholz 2019, 54). This advertisement is comprised of creating content, having the company's logo put on display, classic advertisements, and more. In essence, esports is marketing. Media rights to either livestream or televise events comprise the second largest segment.

Traditional sports revenue in 2022 was estimated to be \$501.43 billion (Gough 2022). The revenue in esports was estimated to be just under \$1.4 billion, thus it can be assumed that esports have room for growth. While there can be no guarantee esports will reach sports in mainstream adoption, it may have the potential. A company in the esports industry can be seen as a lagging early adopter. Esports has so far largely grown in isolation, but lately, major companies have started showing interest in the industry, such as Amazon which bought out Twitch, the largest live-streaming platform. (Scholz 2019, 9.)

Many games available today market themselves as free to play. However, game companies rely on in-game purchases to generate revenue. Additionally, to play video games connected to esports, you must have a working internet connection, a mouse, a keyboard, and a computer. On top of that, to play online and compete, there must be servers constructed and maintained by the developers to have access to competitive play. For example, in Africa, it is difficult to engage in competitive play. It is not profitable for developers to maintain servers there as the area is poorly developed and the potential player base remains small. Playing on servers that are far away is almost impossible, as this results in ping issues that can be detrimental to the players' success. In the future, Africa and other developing areas may be a huge market for esports. (Leroux-Parra 2020.)

In 2022, the European Parliament voted for a resolution to initiate a strategy to fund the esports and video game industries. The parliament recognizes the importance of the cultural and economic benefits of the sectors. Nepomuk

Nothelfer, the assigned professional, commented that “The resolution alone is a gigantic recognition of gaming and esports”. (Nordland 2022.) This resolution can be seen as a new era beginning for European esports, as before, the recognition gained by esports was minimal by professional entities in the Western world.

In 2021 the Olympic Committee (IOC) announced the start of the Olympic Virtual Series (OVS) which includes games based on sports such as rowing, sailing, racing, cycling, and baseball (IOC 2022). However, the significance of this can be seen as less important as these games have a minimal audience compared to mainstream esports games. Riot Games, the developer of one of the most popular esports games League of Legends has been in talks with the Olympic leadership about the game appearing as a medal event in the Olympics (Mock 2021). Nonetheless, the outcome of these negotiations remains to be seen. While it would be a huge step for esports, many are skeptical about whether video games should have a place in the Olympics or remain in their own lane.

3 Leadership

3.1 Defining leadership

Whether to define leadership in an elementary or intricate way is an interesting dilemma. It is in human nature to want clean and simple answers to concepts, as it offers its own satisfaction. However, offering a very rudimentary explanation of leadership is dangerous as it limits the ability to discover unrelated notions about the subject (Yukl 2005, 23). In the past decades, the observed value of leadership has risen not only in academic circles but also in the eyes of the public and corporations. This stems from the belief that leadership is not only an asset in the working life of an individual but in personal life as well. Leadership can be understood in a multitude of ways. It can be seen as a trait, a behavior, information processing, or a relationship. Leadership is a complicated process

with many dimensions. This can be observed when one tries to define leadership, as the definition varies depending on the person giving it, as does the meaning. (Northouse 2010, 1-2.)

Northouse (2010, 3) identified certain components within many definitions of leadership. According to him, it is a process, involves influence, occurs in groups, and involves common goals. Thereby, his definition stands as “Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal.” Yukl’s (2005, 26) definition is “Leadership is the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives”. While very similar, Northouse’s definition is more open to interpretation about what influence might be. Yukl defines leadership in a more authoritative manner. In this thesis, Northouse’s definition is used as it seems to fit the esports team environment more accurately due to the unrestricted definition of influence.

Understanding leadership as a process means that leadership is an interaction between a follower and a leader. Leadership is not reserved for the leader alone, rather, it is available to the entire group. Northouse (2010, 3) also noted that leadership cannot exist without influence. Without influence, a leader cannot affect his followers. Groups are the environment where leadership occurs. Self-leadership does not exist in Northouse’s definition of leadership. Lastly, leaders and followers must share a common goal. Leaders direct followers to this shared goal. It can also be noted that the presence of common goals decreases the chances of unethical practices. (Northouse 2010, 2-3.) For example, leaders who use coercion as a method do not share their goals with their followers (Northouse 2010, 9). However, it can be noted that if a follower deems the objective beneficial for themselves, even coerced individuals may become committed (Yukl 2005, 24).

As leadership itself, leadership styles are subjective and defined differently depending on the individual. However, most can agree that leadership styles vary

from autocratic leadership to delegated leadership (Yukl 2005, 133). Both ends of the spectrum have their definitive advantages and disadvantages, and effective leaders can swap between styles to adequately meet the situation (Goleman et al. 2002, 54). Successful communication is the cornerstone of leadership in determining the appropriate approach and creating goodwill with employees to not just meet their material needs with a salary, but their mental needs as well (Barrett 2014, 339).

Goleman et al. (2002) divide leadership styles into resonant and discordant styles. Resonant leaders can sympathize with their followers, get everyone engaged in decision-making, and make them feel valued and in sync with the group. Discordant leaders on the other hand are not on the same page as the group, which results in negative reactions and emotions. (Goleman et al. 2002, 19-21.) This can be seen as a further step from simply dividing leadership in terms of autocracy and democracy to involving the psychology of the human mind. The benefits of more democratic or resonant leadership have been noted, including higher participation, satisfaction, and better decision qualities (Yukl 2005, 135). However, with the six leadership styles ranging from visionary to commanding, it is important to note that there is no single right choice. For example, in an emergency, a discordant style may be the only solution to quickly alleviate problems. (Goleman et al. 2002, 55.)

Management is about dealing with the complexity of organizations, and leadership is about dealing with change and adapting (Kotter 2011, 38). Leadership and management both involve influence. While the two share certain similarities, management can be seen to establish order and stability, while leadership is based around adaptability and change. An organization needs both successful leadership and competent management to succeed. However, these two concepts forcibly overlap as managers must influence groups, and leaders must plan and organize. While distinct, a good leader is also an effective manager, and vice versa. (Northouse 2010, 10-11.) On the other hand, to this day there is disagreement about whether managers can be leaders and whether leaders

can be managers, or if the two roles are distinctively exclusive (Yukl 2005, 24-25).

3.2 Leadership theories

Classical leadership theories such as the trait approach, the behavioral model, and the situational model are often criticized for their insufficient perspective, as they fail to see the big picture. 50 years of leadership research have failed to provide sufficient answers to the complexities of leadership but rather have relied on simple answers. In classical theory, the focus is mostly on the traits and behavior of the leader, whereas more modern approaches recognize that it is an interactive, complex process. The border between being a leader and a follower seems intangible, as many followers can act as leaders in certain situations. (Winkler 2013, 5-6.)

3.2.1 Trait approach & Attribution theory

One of the oldest systematic ways to study leadership is the trait approach. The core idea behind the approach is that certain traits and skills determine whether someone is a capable leader and able to reach leadership positions (Yukl 2005, 43). Later, process-centered leadership was introduced, and the popularity of the trait approach lessened. However, to this day, the trait approach remains important, as certain traits are necessary for effective leadership. While leadership is not seen as exclusive as before, some traits remain important for leaders to possess. It is important to note that the traits required differ according to situation and environment. There is no specific set of traits ideal for every position. During the past century, many studies have been conducted to find this ideal set. Throughout all these studies, certain traits emerged more than others, and Northouse identified them as intelligence, self-confidence, determination, integrity, and sociability. (Northouse 2010, 15-19.)

Research shows that traits and skills are both hereditary and learned, with some being inclined towards heredity and some towards learning (Yukl 2005,

44). Essentially, the trait approach is quite simple, as it only focuses on the traits of the leader and not on the relationship between the leader and the follower, not the followers themselves. Additionally, due to its early conception and longevity, it is a vastly researched theory. Implementation can be simple, as organizations may assign personnel with certain traits to leadership positions, or individuals may themselves seek such positions if they possess the traits. People tend to want extraordinary leaders, making the trait approach to be desirable for many. However, the trait approach has many shortcomings. Even with a massive amount of research dedicated to the subject, there seems to be little consensus on what these leadership traits are. It remains highly subjective as to which traits are in fact important for leaders. (Northouse 2010, 24-27.) Moreover, some traits might be beneficial for career advancement but not for actual management or leadership. For example, an ambitious leader might advance quickly, but that does not necessarily mean he is competent. (Yukl 2005, 45.)

One of the newer additions to the trait approach is the importance of emotional intelligence. While emotional intelligence can be seen as a skill, it is related to traits such as maturity and emotional stability (Yukl 2005, 66). This consists of being aware of their own emotions, others' emotions, dealing with strong emotions, and being able to adapt to change and to solve personal issues. (Barrett 2014, 200-201.) Social intelligence is composed of social perceptiveness, which consists of interpersonal relationship skills and how they affect the group, and behavioral flexibility, which means being able to alter one's behavior to be suitable to any situation. Social intelligence is more about influencing compared to emotional intelligence and can be used for political gain, however, the two share considerable similarities. (Yukl 2005, 67.) Some researchers rate emotional intelligence as the most important factor and an essential condition of leadership (Goleman 2011, 2-7).

One can make assumptions based on the behavior of leaders about whether they have the qualities that make a great leader. This is called the attribution theory of leadership. The antithesis to this is that the conclusions found are insufficient to determine a leader's qualities. Different people may behave differently

in the same situations and thus be interpreted differently. This can lead to wrong conclusions, depending on the observer and the actor. Furthermore, the behavior may also change depending on the day or what other tasks are involved. On another day, the same actor might behave massively differently. Therefore, it can be concluded that attribution theory yields different results on different days and for different people, and the causes of why this happens cannot be reliably determined. (Winkler 2013, 12.)

3.2.2 Leader-member exchange theory (LMX)

Leaders may increasingly find themselves in the roles of psychologists, having to mediate, find solutions to problems outside of work, and taking care of employees (Forsten-Astikainen & Kultalahti 2019, 6). LMX theory observes the dyadic relationship between leaders and followers to understand the outcomes for organizations, teams, and members. The LMX approach explains that leaders have different or unequal relationships with their followers, forming closer bonds with others and lower-quality relationships with the rest. (Bauer & Erdogan 2016, 3.) In practice of LMX, teams can be divided into in-groups and out-groups. In-groups can be seen as those getting positive differential treatment and thus tend to perform well and complete tasks outside of their normal scope of work. On the other hand, out-groups only perform their necessary tasks. (Northouse 2010, 154.) However, it is important to note that the leader alone is not responsible for the creation of the relationship. It is a two-way street that requires the follower to also act and take responsibility of their own attitude and actions. (Forsten-Astikainen & Kultalahti 2019, 7.)

The basis behind LMX revolves around the fact that the leader may grant the follower desirable things, such as interesting assignments, authority, and tangible rewards. In return, the follower works harder, carries additional responsibilities, and is more committed. While the basis of the relationship seems transactional, it is important to note that high-quality LMX relationships cannot exist without personal compatibility. (Yukl 2005, 276.) LMX is useful as it directs at-

tention to relationships and communication, which no other leadership theory efficiently does. Awareness of LMX also alerts leaders to their own potential for preferential treatment and ways to improve their team's effectiveness on a personal level. On the other hand, LMX by itself is unequal and thus unfair. Furthermore, it can be seen as the most optimal outcome that everyone is in the in-group, but processes to achieve such a result have not been created.

(Northouse 2010, 155-157.) Nevertheless, nepotism has existed as long as mankind, and whether one is aware of LMX theory or not, it still exists in groups. Thus, being aware of it is better than ignorance. There may also be a connection between power distance and LMX, with high power distance cultures being more accepting of differential treatment (Kirkman et al. 2016).

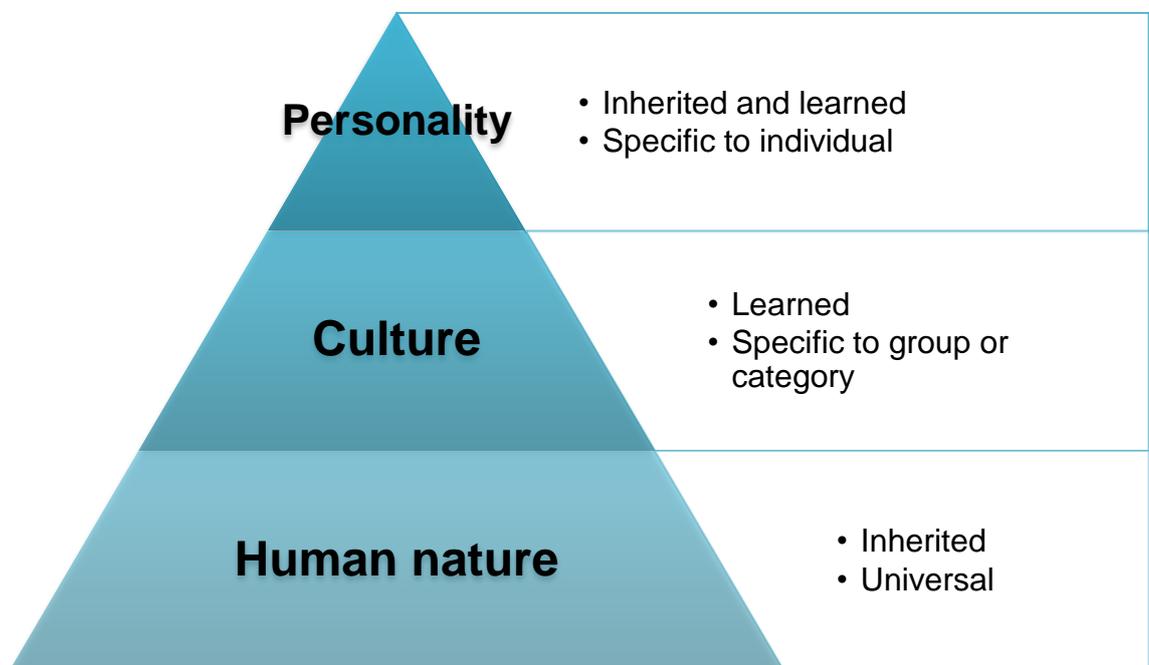
LMX theory's roots were born in 1972 when Graen, Dansereau, and Minami discovered in a study that follower perceptions of the leader varied greatly depending on the respondent. Previous studies had seen such variabilities as errors in measurement, but further exploration demonstrated an actual difference in perception. (Liden et al. as cited in Bauer & Erdogan 2016, 29.) In a study conducted in China with 900 team members, it was found that LMX resulted in a U-shape curve. Bad results were gained when team leaders practiced too much or no LMX, and the best results were obtained when a moderate amount of LMX was present. This can be explained by two reasons: 1) when there is too much LMX, the group splits due to resentment, and 2) LMX is useful at moderate levels due to no two employees being alike. (Kirkman et al. 2016.)

3.2.3 Leadership & Diversity

Globalization is playing a major role in a changing work environment. Diversity in organizations and teams is on the rise and will exceedingly do so in the future. Much research has been done on leadership in homogeneous environments, and it remains to be seen whether the ever changing demographic and cultural factors shift optimal methods of leadership. (Yukl 2005, 454-455.) Many companies actively seek out diversity in their ranks and have extensive diversity training programs (Barrett 2014, 223). It seems that rather than treating diversity as a weakness due to its potential challenges, its value is being recognized.

Furthermore, digitalization and the increasing presence of virtual teams also add to the value of multicultural or cross-cultural leadership. It is important to note that while organizational culture is often related to national culture, this is not always the case (Yukl 2005, 456). While national culture is a concept that an individual learns unwillingly, one has a choice whether to join an organization and thus partake in its culture (Hofstede & Hofstede 2007, 35). Figure 4 can be seen as a demonstration of different aspects of diversity.

Figure 4: Three levels of uniqueness in mental programming (Hofstede & Hofstede 2007, 4).



As shown in Figure 4, the complexities of human behavior can be divided into three parts. Culture is a collective factor, as it is shared by individuals living in the same environment. Hofstede describes culture as a sort of “mental programming” in which understanding we can better sympathize with people of other cultures (Hofstede & Hofstede 2007, 4).

National cultures can be divided into five dimensions: power distance, individualism, masculinity-femininity, ways of dealing with uncertainty, and long-term vs.

short-term orientation (Hofstede & Hofstede 2007, 22-29). Culture can be further divided by ethnicity, region, gender, generation, class, and religion (Hofstede & Hofstede 2007, 34). Furthermore, it is important to note differences in context, information flow, and time in different cultures. High-context cultures, such as Asian cultures, rely much on what is not said and on relationships, whereas low-context cultures, like Germans, communicate directly. Information flow dictates how and how quickly information is transferred. Time can be divided into polychronic and monochronic cultures, with polychronic cultures being flexible with time and monochronic cultures appreciating punctuality. (Barrett 2014, 230-234.)

The ideal leader for an individual reflects his or her culture. For example, in the United States, which rates as individualist and masculine, strong masculine leaders are appreciated. On the other hand, Dutch culture is rated as feminine, and as such, the ideal leader is modest, and leadership is based on consensus rather than individuality. (Hofstede & Hofstede 2007, 268-269.) Multicultural leadership requires leaders to be aware not only of their own cultural biases and preferences but those of other cultures as well (Northouse 2010, 360). Understanding cultures can bring insight not only into how people from other cultures may behave differently but also into how they may behave similarly (Barrett 2014, 225). In terms of multicultural leadership, ethnocentrism is a common pitfall for leaders. As the name suggests, it means valuing one's own culture and seeing it as superior to others. This phenomenon can be strenuous, for example, a leader from a high-power distance culture may not understand followers challenging decisions. (Northouse 2010, 337.)

3.3 Team leadership

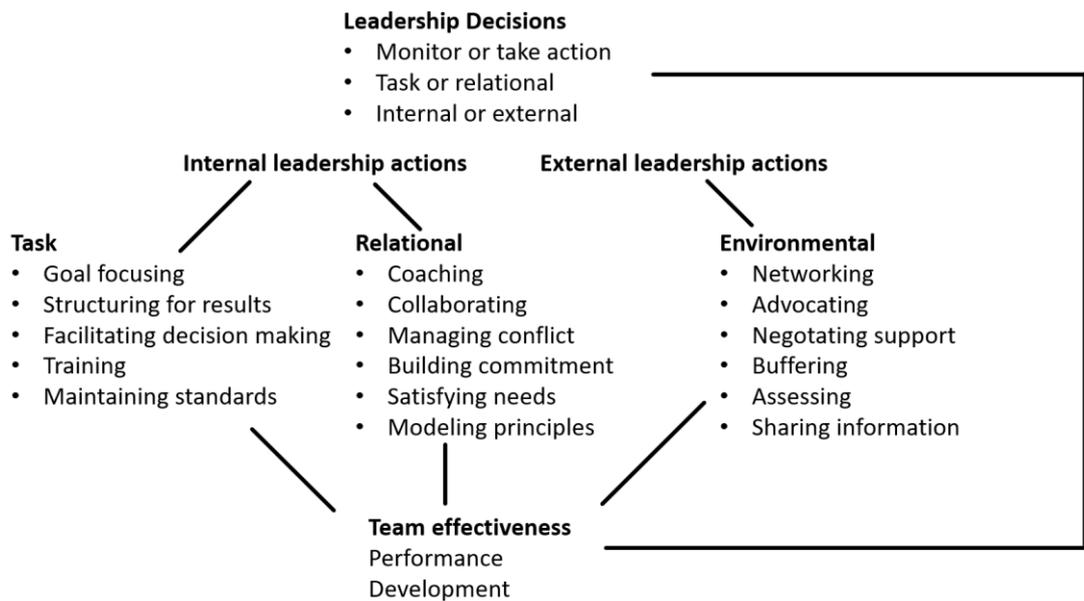
Work teams are groups working in organizations, that consist of two or more members, share common goals, are interdependent on each other in tasks, interact with each other, and have certain boundaries (Bell & Kozlowski 2013, 5). As stated in this definition, organizations and teams are not the same. However,

in esports, the term esports team is often used interchangeably with esports organization. To clarify, in this thesis, esports organizations and teams are distinct concepts.

Scharf (1989) as cited in Bell & Kozlowski (2013, 12) states that the optimal number of participants in a team is seven. Coincidentally, this is close to the number of members in a typical esports team. A typical esports team competing in a five-player game might be composed of five players, an analyst, a coach, and two substitutes who ordinarily participate to a lesser extent. However, depending on the game, the resources of the organization, and the level of competition, the member count of an esports team might be significantly lower or higher.

The functions of leadership play a crucial role in the success of a team. To ensure that a team does not fail drastically, these functions must be available to be performed by either the team leader or members of the team. (Northouse 2010, 242-243.) Building and maintaining high-performance teams is intertwined with leadership communication skills (Barrett 2014, 247). Research has shown that the usage of teams in organizations has led to increased productivity, better use of resources, and greater innovation and creativity, among other things (Parker 1990, as cited in Northouse 2010, 242). One of the most important leadership roles in teams is to ensure high commitment from members toward a common goal (Yukl 2005, 362).

Model 1: Hill's model for team leadership (Northouse 2010, 244).



At the top, the initial decisions can be seen, advancing to actions taken by the leader in the middle, and ending with team effectiveness indicators. The purpose of the model is to simplify very complex team leadership processes into a simple tool. The model deals with problems directed at the team and considers organizational and environmental factors. (Northouse 2010, 243-244.)

Whether to monitor or act is the first step the leader must take, depending on the information gathered and presented. Furthermore, assessing internal and external factors in the process is crucial for this decision-making. If a problem is immediate, action must be taken quickly, but monitoring may be more frugal to make the correct decision. Monitoring the group is teamwork that the entire team needs to take part in to improve the decision-making process. (Northouse 2010, 245-247.)

The second step is to determine whether the issue is relational, or task-based. Task leadership is about monitoring, clarifying, and planning and revolves around activities such as duties being fulfilled, strategies being followed, and deadlines being met. On the other hand, relationship leadership is about developing, supporting, and recognizing. These issues are more personal in nature and require social skills and emotional intelligence. (Yukl 2005, 130.)

Both functions interact with each other, thus, successful task leadership cannot exist with unsuccessful relational leadership, and vice versa. The final step is deciding whether to intervene internally or externally, depending on the issue at hand. For example, in the case that the team does not have sufficient resources to reach its goal, the leader should exercise external intervention and contact the organization for additional resources. (Northouse 2010, 247-248.) Task conflict and relationship conflict are both common in teams. In general, both have negative consequences and should be averted if possible, however, research shows that in specific circumstances task-based conflict can be beneficial for team effectiveness. (Kozlowski & Bell 2013, 45-46.)

The strength of Hill's model lies in its ability to simplify a complex subject. By no means does this indicate that the model is simple. It is quite detailed yet easily applicable. Furthermore, many other models leave out environmental and organizational contexts in which the teams operate. Moreover, it accounts for changes in both leaders and organizations. In the past, formal leaders had power and responsibility within the team, but in more modern times, the responsibility lies with the entire team. The model also provides a clear structure of a leader's duties and can thus be useful in selecting a suitable assigned leader if necessary. On the other hand, the model remains untested. It is highly theoretical, and while it tries to account for the complex nature of team leadership, it can be seen as too wide. It also does not offer real-life solutions to the problems it addresses. It might indicate a process that is a solution to a problem but does not tell how to do the process. (Northouse 2010, 258-260.)

Participative leadership refers to the level of influence followers have over leadership decisions. It has many levels, starting with leaders making autocratic decisions, the leader consulting followers before making the decision, the leadership decisions being made together, and finally, the leader delegating so that followers may make leadership decisions autonomously. Participative leadership has been shown to lead to beneficial outcomes when followers are reliable and share their leader's objectives. (Yukl 2005, 133, 162.)

Leadership may be assigned or emergent. Assigned leaders are leaders due to their hierarchical position above their followers and thus they exert influence. Emergent leaders, on the other hand, are considered leaders regardless of their position. There are many reasons why leaders emerge. The emergence can be attributed to natural dominance, intelligence, and confidence (Smith & Foti 1998), being able to fit in (Hogg 2011) and a personal inclination to be involved, informed, proactive, and firm (Fisher 1974). (Northouse 2010, 6-7.)

3.4 Virtual teams

In virtual teams, relational leadership is crucial. Due to team members not meeting each other face-to-face, normally obvious clues are not present, thus things such as silence or misunderstanding are harder to interpret. Leaders of virtual teams need to be especially sensitive to relational problems, as they are more difficult to detect and may result in larger issues down the road. (Pauleen 2004, as cited in Northouse 2010, 229.)

Increasing globalization, revolutions in communication technologies, and a need for expertise abroad have all influenced the rise of virtual teams. Many companies have more virtual teams than non-virtual teams, leading to the fact that the management of virtual teams is of essence to many companies' success. Virtual teams have distinct differences from regular teams, such as greater diversity in work expectations, a higher reliance on communication technology, and further a greater need for team leadership. Furthermore, virtual teams tend to be more culturally diverse and have people with different business functions, which may lead to increased conflict. Additionally, communication technology can be complicated, and expertise is required to master different methods. This increases the risk of miscommunication. The team leader must be able to resolve issues related to miscommunication and be fluent in the usage of these communication systems to provide guidance for team members, leading to more strain for the team leader. (Dyer et al. 2013, 179-182.)

Dyer et al. (2013, 182) propose four problems afflicting virtual teams over co-located teams: “(1) lack of trust and mutual understanding, (2) violated expectations, (3) lack of training and effective use of communication technologies, and (4) lack of effective team leadership.” Lack of trust and mutual understanding can be attributed to a lack of experience working with people of certain cultural and professional backgrounds. Stereotypes of how a French engineer might act and like often do not meet reality. Moreover, the realities of cultural variables on things like individualism and collectivism might not be considered at all. Team activities and personal reminders are especially important for virtual teams to remind team members of individual characteristics and preferences. (Dyer et al. 2013, 182-186.)

Violated expectations stem from different communicational behaviors, decision-making processes, and conflict resolution. Some may expect immediate answers in communication, and others may find it acceptable to take days to respond. Standards of communication are important to establish clearly to not violate expectations. Different cultures have distinct ideas of power distance and decision-making processes. High power distance means that it is generally expected that power is centralized and not everyone has to take part in decisions. On the other hand, low power distance cultures may take offense to power being centralized. The level of power distance should be made clear to all team members. (Dyer et al. 2013, 184-187.) Furthermore, it may be difficult to monitor performance, build relationships, and make sure objectives are shared and prioritized in diverse virtual teams due to their solidarity nature (Yukl 2005, 370).

In many cultures, it is offensive to voice disagreements out loud, and in others, it is expected. This may lead to conflict and miscommunication issues, as one voicing their disagreements may not even be aware of disagreements on the other side of the spectrum. Clear expectations should be set for methods of voicing opinions and disagreements to decrease communication failures and conflict. Virtual workspaces that simulate reality are useful for virtual teams. Emails, web pages, bulletin boards, audio conferences, and video conferences are all examples of such workspaces. However, there are many platforms, and

knowing when to use which one may be difficult. For example, emails are useful for exchanging data but poor for brainstorming. Proper guidelines on which scenario to use which one are important to increase levels of communication. (Dyer et al. 2013, 188-193.)

Using virtual teams has many advantages, such as reducing costs and improving efficiency, but on the other hand presents its own challenges, especially with communication (Barrett 2014, 268). Leading virtual teams is more challenging and crucial than leading traditional teams. The leaders of virtual teams should allocate more time than regular team leaders to their projects. This is due to the team leader being responsible for individual communication, organizing, and socializing. This takes more time than in an office environment due to the communicational constraints of technology. (Dyer et al. 2013, 193.)

4 Research methods

4.1 Theme interviews

This thesis used qualitative methods as a means of gathering and analyzing data. Specifically, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the study participants. The precise construction of these interviews can be defined as a “focused interview” or a “theme interview”. For a focused interview to function, certain criteria must be met. First, it must be established that the interviewees have experienced a certain situation. Secondly, before conducting the interviews, the researcher has studied the subject in question. This results in certain preconceptions and assumptions about the phenomenon. Lastly, when the focused interview’s structure is done, the interviews are done specifically to find out about the subjective experiences of the individuals. (Merton, Fiske & Kendall 1956, 3-4 as cited in Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2019, 47.)

According to Hirsjärvi and Hurme (2019, 47) there is no clear definition for a semi-structured or focused interview, However, typically, some points of view are locked in place while others are flexible. While a focused interview and a

theme interview share many similarities, focused interviews focus on picturing a unified experience, whereas theme interviews are more individual in nature, highlighting the fact that these experiences in the same environment may be different (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2019, 47-48). The interviews conducted in this thesis can be seen as closer to theme interviews in nature, as the questions remained the same for each participant, but certain subjective views were further explored with follow-up questions, and the structure was not predetermined. The questions were constructed in a way that required descriptive answers, which are easier to follow up with other questions to interpret experiences (Patton 2002, 352).

The basis of the questions asked in the theme interview was established by the theoretical framework and the researcher's own experience in the field. Esports teams offer an interesting perspective on leadership, as team members are typically very young, diverse, and socially inexperienced. The theme interviews were all conducted online and without cameras.

The original vision in terms of sampling was maximum variation sampling. According to Patton (2002, 230), this purposeful sampling style aims to capture a great deal of variation. The advantage of this sampling style is that any common patterns are of distinct value as, by logic, they should indeed be shared common experiences. (Patton 2002, 230-235.) This was somewhat successful, as there were participants ranging from amateur teams to those who had competed in world-class tournaments. There was a great deal of variation in terms of positions in-game as well and some in out-of-game roles. However, it can be noted that due to small resources and the lack of accessible esports team members, the sampling was done by convenience as well. Convenience sampling is the most disadvantageous sampling style (Patton 2002, 242).

Table 1: Study participants, their occupations in terms of esports teams and the duration of interviews.

Alias	Occupation	Duration (minutes)
P1	Pro gamer	29
P2	Pro gamer	19

P3	Pro gamer	21
P4	Coach, ex-pro gamer	28
P5	Ex-pro gamer	21
P6	Ex-player manager	35
P7	Pro gamer	24
P8	Pro gamer	19

The interviews (Table 1) ranged from 19 to 35 minutes. The short duration of interviews was due to either the answerer's limited timeframe or very short answers to questions. However, each participant had answers to the core questions surrounding the research questions. The average interview length was 24.5 minutes. The length of the total transcription document was 52 pages.

In total, 16 people deemed qualified for the interviews were contacted through Discord, of whom eight agreed to do the interview. Of these interviews, five were conducted in Finnish and three in English. These interviews were done in the span of two months. The themes included in the interviews were divided into three categories, as shown in Figure 5: (1) background, (2) conceptions of leadership, and (3) experiences. The background consisted of relevant experience in the field, conceptions of leadership about how responders understand leadership, and finally experiences on how they have experienced leadership in the esports environment.

In terms of background, the reasons why the participants started playing esports professionally had some variance. Some had a background in sports and gravitated towards esports due to their competitive nature, while others simply started playing video games and got good at them. The presence of increasing media about esports, such as YouTube videos, served as further motivators to become esports athletes.

Figure 5: Theme interview structure.



These categories each had their own sub-questions to help the interviewer with the process. The questions were chosen based on the research questions and to increase understanding regarding them. Additionally, many different follow-up questions were made based on the answers given, either to specify meanings or to ask for further descriptions of events or content. Qualitative research was chosen as the method over quantitative, as quantitative research requires more respondents whereas qualitative research can be conducted with a rather small sample size. Moreover, as the purpose of the thesis was to understand more about how esports team members experience leadership, such a subjective

matter may not have been easy to quantify. Qualitative research is not necessarily about explaining why but rather about increasing understanding about the subject (Patton 2002, 478).

The conceptions of leadership and experiences categories overlapped, but as a semi-structured interview with open-ended questions, the actual structure was not of the essence, but rather the gained answers. The structure serves as a guideline rather than an instruction. The advantage of an interview is that it can be modified in the moment (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2019, 34).

4.2 Thematic analysis

Qualitative analysis is unique to the situation, highly subjective, and intuitive, thus, there is no one correct way to do it. The flexible nature of qualitative research and analysis and its difficulty are due to its highly subjective nature. (Patton 2002, 432). However, the method deemed most suitable for this thesis was thematic analysis. The primary goal of thematic analysis is to identify themes regarding the research questions and compare them as they appear in the data (Eskola & Suoranta 1998, 174).

The transcription was done mostly verbatim, but some useless utterances were left out, as was some conversation completely unrelated to the subject. While verbatim transcriptions, even with timestamps, can be preferable, they are not necessary for all kinds of qualitative research (Hirsjärvi 2004, 140). As the method of analysis was not focused on speech, such as conversation analysis, but rather the content, non-verbatim transcriptions were deemed sufficient. Furthermore, as all the respondents giving the interview in English were using their second language and the Finnish citations had to be translated into English, this further degraded the significance of verbatim language. There is no way to determine whether something is significant for the study but the researcher's own judgment (Patton 2002, 433).

Pattern recognition is crucial in thematic analysis (Patton 2002, 453). The first step is to make out what is relevant from the mass of text to the research questions (Eskola & Suoranta 1998, 174). The relevant citations picked from the whole transcription document were then gathered into a different document and categorized into first codes and then themes. Special care was taken with citations linked to the theoretical framework and other theories, as a thematic analysis requires the intertwining of theory and research (Eskola & Suoranta 1998, 175). This document was then used as the basis for citations. Furthermore, an additional table was created from the base transcription document to emphasize certain concepts that recurred in the interviews.

From the thematic analysis, a cross classification matrix was constructed (Figure 6). A type of logical analysis, it serves as a way of showing meaningful patterns. The downside of the matrix is that it tempts the researcher into forcing subjects into the matrix to make it work. (Patton 2002, 468.) The construction of this matrix was based on the responses of participants when asked about their own roles in terms of leadership.

5 Results

5.1 How esports team members experience leadership

This chapter handles the first research question, how esports team members experience leadership. Furthermore, it will handle subjects such as how esports team members understand leadership, how they experience it, and what kind of leadership challenges they have experienced, whether from the standpoint of being a leader or a follower. Esports team members understood leadership in a variety of ways. Some respondents put more emphasis on simple concepts such as authority and understood leadership in the sense that a leader is simply someone you follow.

P2: I understand it like some person is above others, kind of says to others how things go and is the person who is asked for help if you don't know how to do something.

On the other hand, those functioning in leadership roles had a more intricate understanding of leadership, putting priority on things such as setting goals and creating cohesion. Concepts such as building trust, making sure everyone is on the same page, setting an example, and having a confident outlook were widespread views amongst the participants. However, each had their own definition of leadership, and no two were alike.

P8: Leadership. I guess it is making others act in a way that you want, well, that sounds a little bit like manipulation. Wait, motivating others, that of course comes to mind and digging from others who are lead their best performance. Kind of like their potential at the same time, getting multiple people to act towards the same goal at the same time...

How esports team members experienced leadership seemed to depend on the context. At times, it was difficult to discern whether the interviewee was talking about in-game or out-of-game leadership, and clarifications had to be made. In-game leadership was seen as very authoritarian, especially by the players who played the types of games with clear in-game leaders. Out-of-game leadership was experienced as something more democratic and process-like. At times, it seemed like there were no clear-cut leaders, but rather that everyone was doing their part. Some participants mentioned that they helped their respective leaders in whatever way they could, and some said that they took on leadership roles when they felt like it.

P1: For me the biggest difference is basically that the significance of communication is very high when comparing out-of-game leadership or in-game leadership. Well, for me, it's more like when I say something in-game people will listen.

P4: Yeah, I don't think I've was ever like a leader. You know, as a full a full-time job kind of thing, I think. At least for me, it was very much mood depending. If it felt right to do something, I would do it...

P3: I'll be more of a player that, would make sure everyone, including the leader, is on the same path... we do something together because it's a team game in the end so. If you do something together, it usually will work.

The findings show that some esports team members were struggling with social issues. Social inexperience or social ineptitude was sometimes perceived as a problem within the teams. The problems arising from this seemed to have multiple angles. Based on the data, this social inexperience emerged as immaturity, a lack of communication skills, or even toxicity.

P8: ...Because the basic esports players are not the best with their social skills, especially in esports where someone sits at home from one day to another and doesn't interact with people so, well, you have to have the ability to dig from these kinds of people the feedback, or the instinct what they really think, what they do not necessarily want or know how to communicate as aptly as the situation needs.

P5: And then you have to play the babysitter, so. So there are not these kind of tantrums in the middle of the game or after...

P4: ...Some people that are not social at all. That would be like the biggest difference, I guess in terms of people, as in if you look at sports, for example.

Finding immaturity in esports teams may not be a surprising result due to the young age of many esports team members. In fact, immaturity seemed to be the least of the problems regarding social inexperience in esports teams. It did cause team leaders some extra work, but otherwise it was not strictly experienced as negative. Teaching young people how to behave, for example, while travelling was experienced to be only a small, perhaps a little annoying issue. While immaturity itself was typically experienced to be a nuisance rather than an issue, other problems that might or might not arise from the immaturity or young age of esports team members, such as behaving inappropriately were experienced to be problematic. Toxicity was experienced by some participants, but not all.

P2: A challenge has been that at times there are toxic players and if they have disagreed with a play or so it has turned into a problem if someone has started being toxic in the middle of a game...

It could be seen that due to esports being such a pressure-prone environment with a single mistake being able to cost the match, that such an environment was

reported to cause people to act emotionally, and sometimes criticism could escalate into toxicity. Giving and receiving criticism was also emphasized, and the cruciality of it being done right was experienced as a beneficial leadership quality.

Esports team members seemed to put much emphasis on relationship-based leadership. Trust was experienced as a key quality between team members, but especially between the leader and the follower. A leader was expected to be a confidant in certain situations. This trust was based on past experiences, personal relationships, the confidence of the leader, and his expertise.

P7: With him yea, when you went into a game you had a trusting feeling that he could keep the team in order, he had good calls so it felt easy to play and everyone was on the same wavelength in the game and outside of the game

As such, communication issues within the team could sometimes be resolved by the leader taking initiative. Communication problems seemed to stem from bad English skills and people not being able to communicate due to social skills. However, it was presented in the data that leaders should be able to properly lead and communicate with this kind of people.

P1: Well the vocabulary in game is of course easy to learn but then again when you are going things through it is difficult to get to that persons head what was done wrong so at times you have to explain things as if you were speaking to an idiot.

Leaders in esports teams were experienced to work harder than the rest of the team members. Some participants in the study even made the conscious decision to avoid leadership positions to avoid the extra work. Furthermore, leading by example was a recurring theme in the interviews, and the participants clearly held leaders to higher standards. Other problems with being a leader were the increased pressure, criticism, and responsibility. As esports games are publicly live-streamed and failures broadcasted, the leaders and followers both experienced that the leader took the brunt of the repercussions and pressure. Result orientation in the field creates further pressure as one's job depends on performing well.

P6: So there's a lot of pressure on the industry and in a team environment, certainly where results are the most influential part of your job and influence so much of your success and your career that, this can cause an awful lot of pressure and stress upon a team, so...

Burnout was additionally emphasized to be a problem for leaders. This was also a reason esports team members were afraid to take on leadership roles even if they felt like they had the potential to do so, as their mentality was already being tested in the high-pressure environment.

P4: I think you can burn out a lot easier, I would say because, people are gonna kind of depend on you to a certain degree...

By some, leaders were expected to create cohesion and, to a lesser extent, structure. This meant that leaders should bring people together towards common goals and make sure that everyone knows what they are doing. The participating leaders mentioned creating a structure or a process for team members to have a more pleasant working atmosphere. Helping others and helping others grow were strong points as well. Motivating others and things such as giving motivational speeches before important games were experienced to be important factors in leadership as well.

P7: For example, before an official game everyone is a little bit tense and such, but he got, he threw in some jokes and it the atmosphere was always good...

Dealing with diversity was experienced as a non-issue for many participants, except in cases where people did not speak English well, but two of those who worked in leadership positions communicated their struggles extensively in interviews. It is common for esports teams to be culturally diverse. The two respondents said they struggled with cultural diversity, especially with how people understood time and communicated. For example, it was stated that South Europeans tended to be late a lot, which caused some animosity. The fact that the level of English greatly varied team-wise sometimes proved troublesome as well, while it was stated that the bare basic level of communication in-game was rapidly learned, such as in-game vocabulary. However, analyzing the games afterwards or forming personal relationships which were experienced to be important was

difficult. However, it can be noted that cultural diversity itself was not always the challenge, but simply dealing with different kinds of personalities.

P5: ...And in your own group you could have mates who are not the most punctual or ordered people and they act, a little bit according to feelings and instincts and do not account for others...

Esports team members were competent at acting on virtual teams. For many participants, this was the day-to-day reality of their work, as their team members lived across Europe. The main problems with working in virtual teams were experienced to be internet problems, scheduling issues, and difficulty in building relationships. It was stated that boot camps and other such activities were highly beneficial for building personal relationships, which in turn improved teamwork. This was not unanimously the case, and some felt they could form close relationships virtually as well. Furthermore, some leaders stated that working in a virtual environment was bad for the player's focus, as playing itself was not a problem, but the boring part of game analysis later would cause team members to lose attention, which did not happen in person.

P6: ...Any growth as a group that you're going to have, the sooner you're together, the better I think so that you can - you know, build chemistry together and friendship together and it's super important to be motivated and inspired by your teammates whether you're in a team or department...

5.2 Who is experienced to possess leadership within the team?

The following chapter will handle the research question about who is experienced to possess leadership within the team. Furthermore, it will inspect the sources of leadership within esports teams, such as possessing team leadership, participants own leadership, and in-game and out-of-game leadership. Esports team members seemed to have two main sources of leadership, one coming from within the team and another from the organization. The organization was seen as more of an authority figure, which makes sense since it is the organization that pays the players' salaries. The organization is also often in charge of larger leadership decisions such as roster changes or arranging bootcamps. Some organizational figures could exist within the team and take

part in day-to-day activities, however, they were not always seen as de facto leaders of the team. Typically, coaches were experienced to possess leadership. However, this was not always the case. In terms of in-game strategy before the game coaches were essential, but not always in daily activities.

P1: In this current team the coach surely, has some kind of leadership, it is a little bit different, it is more in a way of directing or suggesting ... And in this current organization also has leadership coming from the staff... and they create, I would not say pressure but rather, they are the kind of people you just have to trust.

It seemed all participants experienced the organization as the ultimate leader. However, when questioned about leadership, their comments suggested that they considered either themselves or their teammates to possess leadership, and the organizational aspect was not as apparent in all the interviews except when especially asked about the role of the organization.

P3: Oh yeah, out of game I would say it's more of the organisation that is the leader. It's not really one person. Obviously out of game the organisation makes sure that the team is on the right, you know way to success.

Out-of-game leadership was seen as something natural that those with higher social skills seemed to cultivate. The lack of social skills, in general, was often mentioned as a problem for esports team members. This was seen to be the result of esports team members' backgrounds playing video games all day at home alone and lacking social experience. Thus, it was natural that those who were more socially gifted and those confident in their abilities assumed leadership positions. This was mostly communicated by the leaders themselves on why they emerged as leaders in esports teams.

P1: Leadership comes to me by nature, essentially as ... I always have had a captain-like personality, so basically a reliable person but at the same time a person who won't talk smack behind you but rather works together.

P5: Well as I would see it, typically certain types of people gravitate towards esports teams, that they are kind of, well less confident or do not know to take role as a leader that they kind of, go with the wave or so to say that it is easy for someone to take the role...

The following cross classification matrix (Figure 6) was constructed from the participants' answers regarding their own leadership roles. P6 was not included in the matrix as his position in terms of leadership had changed a lot. The purpose of this matrix is to position participants based on their own experiences and positions in which they described their roles in terms of leadership.

Figure 6: Leader, follower, and responsibility matrix.

Cross classification matrix

	High responsibility	Low responsibility
Leader	True leader P5	Emergent leader P1, P8
	Co-leader P3	Democrat P2, P4
Follower	Diligent follower P7	Free spirit

Esports team members may be assigned in the dimensions of presenting leadership and the responsibility they take on. A true leader in this context signifies a person who willingly takes on a high amount of responsibility and shows leadership qualities. An emergent leader is one who does not necessarily consciously take on responsibility but rather emerges as one due to his own characteristics such as confidence, social skills, and leadership abilities. A co-leader takes responsibility but does not want to lead alone or does not have the aptitude to do it. A democrat contributes to the leadership process but is not as actively taking responsibility in it as the co-leader. A diligent follower takes responsibility for the process but prefers not to lead. The free spirit is of the mentality that each should do their own thing.

The emergence of leaders is no doubt common in esports teams, and even P5 could be seen as such, as in his own words, he kind of drifted into the role. However, taking a high amount of responsibility and consciously leading are the traits of a true leader. Assigned leadership in esports teams tends to stem from

the organizations themselves. However, this leadership was not necessarily seen as prevalent in the day-to-day activities of the team.

While the data suggests that in-game leaders were sometimes out-of-game leaders, it was not always the case. Especially the multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) players described their experiences with leadership as democratic. This seemed to stem from the nature of the game being highly irregular, and everyone had to take on a leadership role depending on the circumstances of the game. It was widely stated that those who were strong in the game took it upon themselves to lead due to the nature of the video game. Many study participants experienced that they were at times leaders in-game but not out-of-game. The players who played first-person shooter (FPS) games tended to have an assigned leader who would lead authoritatively no matter the circumstances in the game.

P1 (FPS-player): ...Well, for me it is in-game more like that when I say something that people listen...

P7 (MOBA-player): There are situations where the team has to play around me, in that aspect my leadership shows. I tell my teammates what I need and what has to be done and then we play around it...

This could be seen outside of the game as well. FPS players with assigned in-game leaders seemed to have a more authoritative view of leadership in general, while MOBA players saw leadership as a democratic process. As the players spend most of their days playing their respective games, it seemed to influence their thinking outside of game as well to a certain extent, but whether this was coincidental or not remains inconclusive.

5.3 What kind of leadership is experienced to be effective in an esports team?

This chapter handles the final research question, what kind of leadership is experienced to be effective in an esports team. One of the most important leader-

ship duties in an esports team is facilitating communication. This was emphasized in the data through the difficulty of communicating with some members and getting their real opinions out. Effective leaders were considered as those who could ensure that the level of communication stayed high and everyone was able to voice their own opinions. Things such as one-on-one talks were seen as beneficial to ensure that no team member left out their feelings due to social pressure in groups. To enable high-quality communication, esports leaders were experienced to need to have good social skills and high confidence.

P2: Well you have to know how to talk a lot, bring in your own opinions and well, some kind of stubbornness can be good, because if you really believe that your gameplay is the best then you can convince your teammates that it is a good play, and well you have to be kind of like a strong person.

P8: ...Well well, one on one talks with people as not everyone dares to give feedback if there is the entire team present, they are afraid that they will embarrass someone or make someone mad, well then it is good for the leader to personally discuss those kind of things, especially in larger teams.

Effective leaders were experienced to being able to build solid relationships with all of their followers. It was mentioned in the data that esports teams have a high degree of diversity, whether it be by culture, age, or personality. It seems that effective leaders were able to understand these aspects and build a foundation of trust with each esports team member with different methods. While the organization was seen as an authoritative figure, the leadership within the team was experienced to be more effective when handled more personally or democratically.

P3: ...To find what's perfect for everyone right? Because everyone is different, I think that's the biggest issues, most leaders you know - come to, because sometimes some leaders just think about what they think is the best, and that usually doesn't work out so.

Motivating, supporting, and helping teammates were seen as important to establish effective leadership within the team. Esports team members work in high-pressure environments with often large stakes depending on single matches, and thus experienced that keeping a good atmosphere and mentality

in the team even in difficult situations was essential. Effective leaders were experienced to be able to step up to the occasion.

P7: ...Some people just have the, the kind of, I don't know really how to say it, the kind of natural leadership that in some cases can lead your team to victory, it sounds really cliché but well.

Maturity was experienced to be an important factor for leaders, especially by many. Maturity in this context is not necessarily referring to age, but rather emotional maturity that comes with experience. As esports team members are typically quite young, ranging from 20 to 30 in these interviews, with some starting to play professionally at 16, maturity is looked up to. Some esports team members also experienced that they took more leadership opportunities as they matured themselves, but not all.

P4: You need to be decisive, I would say. You need to be, emotionally mature, I mean just mature.

Adaptability was seen as a valuable trait for leaders due to the uncertainty present in the esports scene. Player turnover is quite high, with player contracts only lasting for a season at worst. Furthermore, the games themselves change often through patches, and this requires adaptability in out-of-game leadership as well as in-game. The esports scene was further seen as young and volatile where things could change rapidly. Innovation and being able to take initiative were additionally seen as important traits for effective leaders for these reasons.

P8: And, hmm, maybe sometimes people that you work with change very quickly, in sports the work is typically more long-sighted...

Patience or level-headedness seemed to be important traits for esports leaders. This is due to the passionate nature of esports, where things can change very quickly, whether it be in-game or out-of-game.

P6: You have to be very level-headed. It's a very passionate industry. People can get quite emotional about different scenarios. You need to be the voice of reason and kind of be neutral in situations, able to make the logical decisions, no matter if they're upsetting or uncomfortable for people.

Expertise, or in other words, the leaders knowing what they were doing, was an important factor. This refers to being knowledgeable in-game and, to a certain extent, possessing leadership abilities out-of-game. It was often stated that the leader should have his individual matters handled in order to be able to help others. Some esports team members felt that they could not follow someone out-of-game if he was not an expert in-game as well.

6 Conclusion

6.1 Summary of the results

Qualitative research is not necessarily about the why, but rather about increasing understanding. Qualitative research may end with the presentation of the data, but it can process further into interpretation. The researcher is in an outstanding position to make such hypotheses as he has lived through the events. Such interpretation must be made clear that it is the researcher's own. (Patton 2002, 478-480.) There are two ways to approach qualitative analysis and conclusions: (1) the grounded model, sticking strictly to the data and (2) having the data be the basis for the researcher's analytical thinking (Eskola & Suoranta 1998, 145). As such, the following chapter will be the researcher's own interpretation of the data.

It seems that esports players come from many different walks of life and cultures and thus have very different understandings of leadership. Many are young or started young that they haven't had any work experience outside of school and esports teams. Others started their careers later and thus have "real-life" work experience where aspects of leadership and expectations have been wildly different to a school environment. However, whether one understands leadership or not is not necessarily relevant to being led. Those who have assumed leadership positions have a deeper understanding of leadership may it be with experience or other avenues and have given thought to the processes involved.

Social inexperience seems to be a large issue in the esports team scene according to the data, that can often be attributed to the fact that computer games attract people who are not that social but rather spend time alone. It seems that this social inexperience, which in itself is not that problematic, may lead to other symptoms such as expressing oneself in a toxic manner or not being able to communicate opinions properly.

Esports teams, in general, seem somewhat relaxed in terms of leadership. This can be seen from the responses describing organizational leadership as supportive and in other responses emitting organizational aspects altogether. The organizations seem hands-off in terms of leadership, rather sticking to a managerial role and larger-picture leadership. It may be that this approach has been deemed successful, and simply creating support structure through sports psychologists, coaches, and analysts has been sufficient. In some cases, it can be imagined that a coach has been assigned and is expected to lead the team, but esports team members did not necessarily feel this way. On the other hand, the function of esports teams is often quite singular, such as progressing as far as possible in a league where complex leadership is not necessary. Due to this, it seems esports players put emphasis on relationship-based leadership over task-based leadership. As their primary and most important task is to play the game at the highest level possible, which is a quality that stems from the players' skills and talent rather than by task leadership, relational leadership was seen as important in motivating, facilitating communication, and solving personal issues.

This seems in line with previous research conducted by Minna Kallinen-Kusima (2018, 34, 40) where she presents that Finnish esports organizations put emphasis on family-type leadership rather than a strict hierarchy and rationality. Furthermore, the leader's ability to facilitate communication is also emphasized in the paper, but as according to a coach interviewed, the problem was rather attributed to the Finnish cultural tendency to struggle with communication, the issue in this thesis was rather found to be a collective phenomenon plaguing esports players and their social inexperience.

Monitoring, clarifying, and planning are task-based leadership behaviors (Yukl 2005, 130). The importance of task leadership cannot be ignored, even though the data did not necessarily put emphasis on it. Things such as scheduling practice, making roster decisions, and maintaining standards could be seen as a given in an esports team environment and thus were not the main points of conversation in the interviews. However, these are also things that stem from the management side of things from the organization. Especially in smaller esports organizations with fewer resources, the leaders in the interviews felt that they had to take more of a role in task leadership and the management side of things, whereas larger organizations had support staff assigned to these duties.

LMX theory highlights the leader-member relationship as a critical part of leadership and emphasizes high quality exchanges between the leader and subordinate (Northouse 2010, 166-167). In some interviews this was highlighted as well. People in esports teams can be distinct from each other, and what works with one person might not work with another due to the high diversity within esports teams. As such, it seems esports leaders should take special care in forming working relationships with their co-workers and followers.

The increased workload of leaders was considered a problematic issue in esports teams. Some participants felt that they could have led yet made no effort to do so as this was extra work for them. The leaders almost unanimously stated that their leadership duties made them work more. While it is true that a competent in-game leader might be taken on a roster and paid more for their skills than their peers, out-of-game leadership seemed to supply no such benefits. Whether this is an organizational oversight, or an acknowledged fact seems unclear. Perhaps in some cases an organizational employee was expected to be de facto leader, but it was not experienced that way. Unfortunately, it seemed that the smaller organizations that have fewer resources shift more of the management and task leadership onto the out-of-game leader, and due to their smaller resources, they may not be able to pay for these duties.

Participative leadership refers to the amount of responsibility given to followers regarding leadership decisions and processes (Yukl 2005, 133). High levels of participative leadership were observed from the data with many subjects stating that they participated in leadership processes when they could. The organization was seen as an authoritative figure, but day-to-day team leadership allowed for participative leadership. As leadership was observed to be emergent rather than assigned, in these circumstances functions experienced to befall on the leaders such as motivating and helping became team efforts. Tucker (2022, 25) found that esports teams relied heavily on participative leadership, and leadership was often stretched across the entire team. Such findings were also found in the data in this thesis.

Participants seemed to place a heavy emphasis on traits. Of course, in the interview, it was directly asked what traits and skills they think that an esports leader should possess. Adaptability, authority, confidence, expertise, maturity, patience, and social skills were especially popular. Social skills, or emotional intelligence, were deemed especially important, no doubt due to the social inexperience of many esports team members. Northouse (2010, 19) listed the major leadership traits to be intelligence, self-confidence, determination, integrity, and sociability. Intelligence could be seen as expertise, but determination and integrity were not very prevalent in the data. This could be because leadership was mostly emergent, and esports team members seemed to view their leaders more as peers rather than above others in most cases.

Overall, according to the data, most esports team members seem to be flexible about their views on leadership. For some, it is something that happens naturally for many and is not given a lot of thought to necessarily. Perhaps organizations should put more emphasis on out-of-game leadership and valuing those participating in it for the mental welfare of esports team members. Leaders themselves might benefit from more closely considering their processes, such as forming unique relationships with their followers and considering individual needs and desires. Furthermore, the result-oriented atmosphere creates a high-pressure environment, and considering avenues to alleviate concerns arising from things such

as poor performances could be eased with, for example, one-on-one talks and showing high emotional intelligence.

6.2 Achieving the objective

The purpose of this thesis was to increase understanding of leadership in esports teams and answer the following research questions:

- How esports team members experience leadership
- Who is experienced to possess leadership within the team?
- What kind of leadership is experienced to be effective in esports teams?

It can be assumed that esports organizations are aware of the dilemmas surrounding esports leadership such as social inexperience, a high-pressure environment, and the importance of competent in-game leadership. However, it remains unclear whether they have been paying enough attention to out-of-game leadership outside of offering supporting structure. It can only be assumed that some organizations engage more frequently in daily leadership and some neglect it.

How esports members experience leadership had differing results. In summary, they experienced leadership to be quite relaxed outside of the game and strict in-game. Of course, experiencing is a subjective construct, and regarding the general low amount of work-life experience outside of esports teams whether this is true or not in comparison to other businesses is unsure. Leadership has different definitions depending on who defines it (see Northouse 2010).

Leadership seemed to stem from emergent leadership with organizational factors on a larger scale. Internal leadership actions in terms of relationship-based leadership seemed to stem from the team and external leadership functions from the organization, but task leadership came from both (see Northouse

2010). Many stated having a democratic role in leadership and helping others when they could without being told to do so by somebody. As such, the level of participation in leadership was high (see Yukl 2005). The main dissuasion to practicing leadership was the emergence of additional tasks that paid no monetary reward.

Effective leadership was experienced to be relationship-based in most cases. As assigned leaders inside of esports teams did not usually exist, outside of coaches who were more focused on in-game and managerial duties, very authoritative leadership was frowned on. Leaders were expected to be trustworthy, create cohesion, handle pressure, help others, work hard, and have certain traits such as emotional intelligence. Setting goals and focusing on improvement were mentioned but not highlighted. As the goal of esports teams generally was very singular, as in playing as well as possible in official games, the guidance required outside of personal needs was not that necessary. Establishing and maintaining communication were seen as crucial leadership functions (see Barrett 2014).

In the end, the goal was to increase understanding of leadership in esports teams, and as such, the objective of the thesis can be concluded to be successful. This thesis may serve as a beneficial tool for esports leaders to look at their processes and compare them to relevant theories to see points for improvement. It may be that some esports leaders are unaware of the benefits of building high-quality relationships with followers to ensure higher performance, trust, and levels of communication, and on the other hand, the problems with neglecting other followers who may not be as compatible due to social inexperience or other issues (see Northouse 2010). Other topics such as the lack of desire to participate in leadership due to increased workload, diversity, expressing certain traits, and working in virtual teams may be looked at for further knowledge on how to deal with the subject based on the real-life experiences of this study's participants and the assembled theoretical framework.

6.3 Validity of the thesis

Reliability means being able to replicate results from the study, and validity refers to that the research has studied what was implied. These terms, however, stem from quantitative research and have been criticized when applied to qualitative studies. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2019, 133.) As such, reliability will not be discussed in the following chapter, but rather the research's validity, transferability, dependability, and confirmability will be explored.

Validity can be split into many categories, but most typically, structural validity is used. This validity indicates whether the research is about what it is assumed to be about and whether the correct concepts have been used. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2019, 187.) Patton (2002, 455) discovered in a study focusing on leadership training programs that the entire concept of leadership varied in the group and was confusing. So, it was in this study as well. Due to these differences in understanding leadership, bringing in leadership as a sensitizing concept, which is something that an analyst brings to the data, might have been useful (Patton 2002, 456). As the base understanding of leadership was so varied in the group, it is safe to assume that at times participants were discussing different things that were assumed.

It can be assumed that, for example, the role of the organization might have been seen differently if everyone had the same preconception of leadership. As it is, the study was concluded with each participant's own understanding and experience of leadership. To further increase the validity of this thesis, more inquiry into the role of the organization and different conceptions of leadership could have been made.

Transferability refers to transferring the results to another context. However, due to the complexity of social structures, this may not always apply. Transferability is possible if certain conditions are met. (Eskola & Suoranta 1998, 211.) Whether or not the results are transferable is uncertain due to the subjective nature of the theme interviews and the amount of disparity in the data.

Dependability means considering the researcher's prejudices (Eskola & Suoranta 1998, 212). As the researcher has worked in esports teams before in different roles, such prejudices are sure to exist. However, it can be noted that the researcher's own experience may provide at least perceived credibility to the research (Eskola & Suoranta 1998, 210). The entire theme interview was at least partially based on the researcher's experiences, and certain results were to be expected. Whether or not this is a damaging or improving factor for the research, improving seems more likely as the researcher has lived through similar events as the participants. As it is, some assumptions might have clouded the true meaning of the participants. This problem persists regardless of prejudices to a certain extent, as speech as a method of communication is flawed. There are two problems: representation and interpretation, in which both communication failures can occur. (Eskola & Suoranta 1998, p.138.) The fact that all the study participants were former co-workers of the researcher can be seen as a type of prejudice as well.

Confirmability means that the research is supported by other similar research (Eskola & Suoranta 1998, 212). A study conducted by Minna Kallinen-Kuisma (2018) studied Finnish esports leadership. While the research questions were not completely in line with this thesis, some similarities were found. Kuisma refers to esports teams as having a softer grasp on leadership, comparing it to a family. This seems in line with the more relaxed leadership atmosphere discussed in this thesis. Kuisma also notes that esports professionals have a very classical view of leadership. This remains somewhat consistent with the findings in this thesis.

Additionally, qualitative research must have substantive significance to be relevant. The presence of substantive significance depends on: (1) how solid and consistent is the evidence, (2) how do the findings increase understanding, (3) are the findings consistent with other studies, and (4) are the findings useful for the intended purpose. (Patton 2002, 467.) While there were some inconsistencies in the data and different viewpoints were presented, substantive significance has been reached to a certain extent.

The basis of qualitative research is subjectivity and admitting it as it cannot be avoided (Eskola & Suoranta 1998, 210). The thesis remains a subjective construct and should be taken as such. No doubt, if done again, certain questions would be omitted and other questions would be added to the interviews. As such, perhaps other things would have been emphasized over others that currently exist in the thesis.

6.4 Suggestions for further research

This thesis approached the research questions from the perspective of esports team members rather than the organization. Whether or not the perspective of the organizations and their experiences on issues such as out-of-game leadership is coherent with the experiences of esports team members remains unclear. A study made from the organizational side of things could be interesting to see their views on leadership in esports teams. Furthermore, focusing more deeply on social inexperience and leadership under such conditions might prove useful not only in esports teams but in other environments as well.

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Teemahaastattelu: Johtajuus e-urheilu joukkueissa

Taustatieto

- Ikä, sukupuoli, kokemus e-urheilussa
- Miten kiinnostuit e-urheilusta?

Mielikuvat johtajuudesta

- Miten ymmärrät johtajuuden?
- Miten ymmärrät johtajuuden e-urheilu joukkueessa?
- Mitä piirteitä ja taitoja e-urheilu johtajalla täytyy olla sinun kokemuksesi perusteella?
- Minkälaisia haasteita e-urheilu johtaja kohtaa kokemuksesi perusteella?

Kokemukset

- Miten olet kokenut johtajuutta e-urheilu joukkueessa?
- Miten olet kokenut oman roolisi johtajuudessa tiimeissäsi?
- Kenen olet kokenut omaavan tiimijohtajuutta?
- Oletko koennut eroja pelin sisäisellä ja ulkoisella johtajuudella?
- Mitä haastateita olet kokenut uutta e-urheilu joukkuetta kootessasi?
- Mitä haasteita olet kohdannut työskennellessäsi virtuaalisissa e- urheilu tiimeissä?