



**MISSION 89**

**GENEVA  
GRADUATE  
INSTITUTE**

# **EXPLORING THE RISKS OF TRAFFICKING AND EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN IN THE GAMING INDUSTRY**



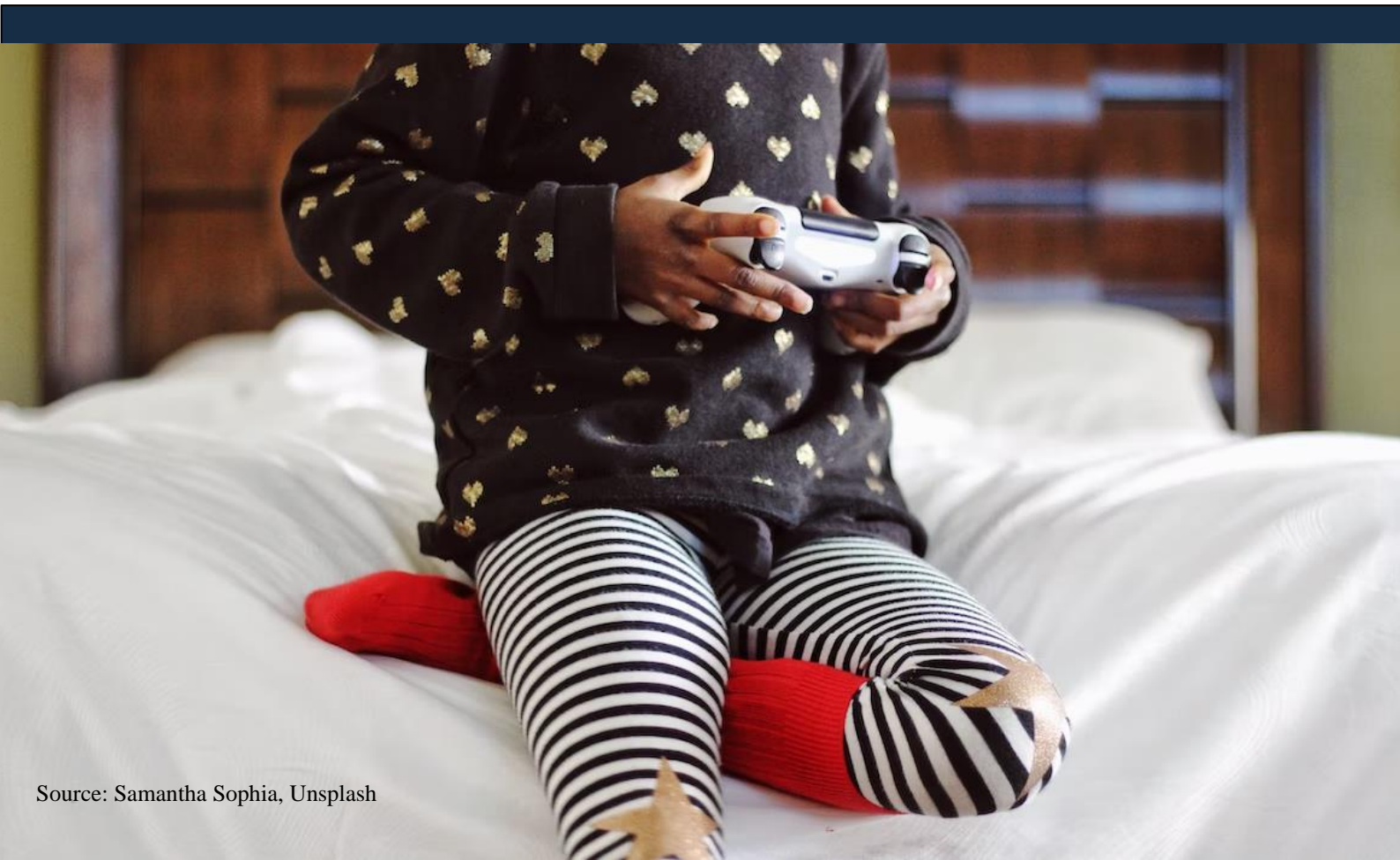
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We would like to thank each other for the support we have given to one another during the duration of the research project. We would also like to thank our teaching assistant Juliana, academic supervisor Lena and the team at Mission89 comprised of CEO Lerina Bright and her assistant Hezel.

*“if you look at just generally the amount of grooming and trafficking [...] that goes on online that’s unrelated to gaming [...] it would be disingenuous to think that there isn’t the same amount of problems on a much larger scale going on within the online community, with regards to gaming”*

- NSPCC Development  
Officer

<b>Child Exploitation</b>	The use of children for someone else’s advantage, gratification or profit often resulting in unjust, cruel and harmful treatment of the child.
<b>Cyberbullying</b>	The use of electronic communication to bully a person, typically by sending messages of an intimidating or threatening nature.
<b>E-athlete</b>	An individual who plays competitive electronic games.
<b>Esports</b>	Short for electronic sports, is a form of competition using video games.
<b>Football Factories</b>	Locations in places with potentially cheap talent that recruit children, and these children are then scouted by wealthy clubs
<b>Sexting</b>	The action or practice of sending sexually explicit photographs or messages via mobile phone.
<b>Video Game</b>	A game played by electronically manipulating images produced by a computer program on a monitor or other display.





<b>AUSC</b>	African Union Sports Council
<b>4Ps</b>	Prevention, Protection, Prosecution and Partnership
<b>CRC</b>	Convention on the Rights of the Child
<b>ECPAT</b>	End Child Prostitution and Trafficking
<b>ICMEC</b>	International Centre for Missing & Exploited Children.
<b>ILO</b>	The International Labour Organisation
<b>Interpol</b>	The International Criminal Police Organisation
<b>IOM</b>	The International Organisation for Migration
<b>LoL</b>	League of Legends
<b>NGO</b>	Non-governmental Organisation
<b>NSPCC</b>	National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children
<b>PvP</b>	Player versus Player
<b>RAN</b>	Radicalisation Awareness Network
<b>SSI</b>	Semi Structured Interviews
<b>TIP</b>	Trafficking in Persons
<b>UEFA</b>	The Union of European Football Associations
<b>UoN</b>	The University of Nottingham
<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations Children's Fund
<b>UNODC</b>	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
<b>UNTOC</b>	United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime
<b>VPN</b>	Virtual Private Network

The influence of the online gaming industry has rapidly grown in the past two decades. Internet connectivity, chat services, photo and video sharing, and other features have been added to once traditional gaming platforms, allowing players from all over the world to interact and play games with each other in real-time. As an unfortunate consequence of the improvement in digital technology in the gaming industry, human traffickers and others seeking to exploit are increasingly using online games to get access to and engage with children. These, along with many other, potential risk factors motivate our research on the risk of human trafficking and the exploitation of children in the esports industry. Our research aims to answer several questions, including:

1. How do we define trafficking in esports?
2. What are the potential risks for exploitation and trafficking that children might be facing in esports?
3. What kind of policies can be developed to mitigate these risks?

By conducting a thorough literature review, we were able to identify several different circumstances that make children more vulnerable to exploitation and trafficking and what renders esports a fertile ground for such a crime. While we were able to gain a small amount of information from our desk research, there were given gaps in the literature due to the novelty of the topic at hand. Therefore, additional research questions were further developed to strengthen our research and fill these data gaps. Some of the newly developed research questions included:

1. Is there an awareness amongst relevant stakeholders of a potential of exploitation and trafficking of children through esports?
2. What are some of the most effective child safeguarding policies?
3. Which actors are the most relevant for the safeguarding of children in esports?

As a result, we developed our 4Ps (prevention, protection, prosecution & partnership) framework to make our research as comprehensive as possible through using this framework as a guide to our research interview question development. This framework allowed us to consider all types of interventions currently present to safeguard children from exploitation. Whether it be interventions to stop an offense from occurring in the first place (prevention), interventions to guarantee the safety of the victim after the offense has taken place (protection), or interventions to hold perpetrators accountable (prosecution). All the stages are enhanced by better coordination and cooperation amongst different relevant stakeholders (partnership). The

most important findings that came out as a result of the literature review and interview process is that there are considerable risks of exploitation and trafficking children playing esports face, gender is a crucial element that impacts the risk of trafficking and exploitation, with girls being more vulnerable and that there is a lack of awareness among relevant stakeholders towards the risk of child trafficking and exploitation being present in the esports sphere.

Some of the elements that impact the level of risk that a child has to be exploited or trafficked online include social isolation, the internet connectivity rate in their geographical location and the rapid pace of digitalisation. To address these findings, we developed two outputs in this report. The first of our outputs was a risk assessment that relevant stakeholders could use and build upon to gauge the severity of risk that children in esports face. This risk assessment was guided by Daniel Rhind and Frank Owusu-Sekyere's book that discussed ways to develop and embed a safeguarding culture for children in the context of traditional sports. The second output was the creation of a list of recommendations for stakeholders that address some of the key risks associated with the trafficking and exploitation of children in the esports arena. Created according to the framework of the 4Ps, some of these recommendations include the involvement of parents in every step of a child's esports career, better coordination amongst law enforcement agencies and increased allocation of resources for the monitoring of this potential crime.

To conclude our report, we highlight that esports has become as popular, profitable and professionalised as traditional sports. The time and money children put into competitive gaming can exceed that which is required to make it to the professional level in traditional sports. Yet, the safeguarding of children who play these games, and those aspiring to become professional athletes, seems to remain relatively unaddressed compared to the magnitude of the industry they participate in. There needs to be just as much awareness for the safety and health of the children who play these professionalised games as there is about the games themselves. While our research provides one of the first insights into how the trafficking and exploitation of children can occur in the esports field, it should by no means be the last research done on the topic. As the industry continues to grow and expand over the next few years, all stakeholders must do their relevant part in ensuring that the protection of children from trafficking and exploitation in the online gaming industry is secured.

*“This threat is no longer for when your child is going to go out, this threat is in your home, it's on the tip of your nose, it's on the same iPad that you just unlocked for your kid”*

- Migration Expert

<b>1. Introduction</b>	2
<b>2. Literature Review</b>	4
2.1. Defining Trafficking for the Esports Context	4
2.2. How Exploitation Can Occur in Traditional Sports	7
2.3. How Exploitation Can Occur In Esports	9
2.4. Factors Creating Vulnerability and Susceptibility	12
2.4.1. Vulnerability	12
2.4.2. Susceptibility	14
2.5. Particularly Vulnerable Groups	15
<b>3. Framework</b>	17
<b>4. Methodology</b>	19
4.1. Research Questions	20
4.2. Literature Review	20
4.3. Interview Structure and Development	21
4.4. Data Analysis Structure	23
4.5. Limitation	24
<b>5. Findings and Analysis</b>	26
5.1. 4Ps and Other Relevant Themes	27
<b>6. Output</b>	42
6.1. Risk Assessment	42
6.2. Recommendations	43
<b>7. Conclusion</b>	46
<b>8. Bibliography</b>	49
<b>9. Annexe</b>	52



# 1. Introduction

Our capstone project, Esports\*: Exploring the risks of human trafficking and exploitation of children in the gaming industry, is a collaborative research project with Mission89, an organisation that fights the exploitation of young athletes through research and advocacy. This research project aims to learn about the potential risk of human trafficking and exploitation of children in the realm of esports, as well as work with Mission89 to develop a risk assessment and policy suggestions that will allow organisations to mitigate the occurrence of such forms of trafficking.

Esports, short for electronic sports, is a form of competition through the medium of video games. Esports often take the form of organised, multiplayer video game\* competitions, particularly between professional players, either individually or in teams. The professionalisation of esports has led to increased interest and investment over the past few years. As a result, numerous professional esports teams similar to those of traditional sports have since been established and it is expected that the esports streaming and gaming industry will grow to \$3.5 billion by the end of 2025 (Financial News Media, 2021). Due to the increased prevalence of children in the digital space, easy access to information and communication technologies as well as a plethora of other factors that this report touches on, there is a clear need for increased awareness and action taken around the potentiality of trafficking and exploitation in the esports industry.

This report will explore the risks of child trafficking and exploitation in esports. The research questions identified serve two purposes. Firstly, as a structure for the development of our risk assessment that will follow the framework of the 4Ps - which are Prevention, Protection, Prosecution and Partnership. Secondly, to begin expanding on this risk assessment and identify potentially useful recommendations to mitigate risk. The research questions are as follows:

- How do we define esports, e-athletes\* and the trafficking of children in the esports context?
- Which risks to the trafficking of children exist in esports and, if so, which groups are the most vulnerable to being trafficked in esports?
- What makes esports a susceptible field for such a crime to occur?
- What kind of policies can be developed to mitigate the identified risks?
- Which entities (e.g. private companies, federations) should have the responsibility to implement these policies?



These research questions were selected as they provide a pertinent starting point for the understanding of esports as a potential medium for child trafficking and exploitation. Answering the questions around vulnerability and susceptibility will then allow us to begin developing policies and identifying who would be the best fit to implement these policies.

This will contribute to the development of a foundation as to how we perceive the trafficking and exploitation of children in the esports context, what we define as esports and who e-athletes are. Defining esports and e-athletes is significant because of the different interpretations of what an esports might be, who an e-athlete might be and what trafficking of children is, regardless of how it might be defined in an esports context. Furthermore, since there is a lack of research on the topic, there is a need to first determine if an actual potential risk of children being exploited in esports exists. Additionally, if there is a risk, are there certain groups of children who might be at a more particular risk than others? Moreover, as trafficking and exploitation do not occur in a vacuum, it is important to determine what makes the field of esports susceptible to such offences. We will use knowledge from the research that has been done on traditional sports and apply it to the context of esports when relevant.

The objective of the risk assessment is to potentially have one of the first widely applicable tools for esports clubs, game publishers, and any other relevant stakeholders to gauge the potentiality of exploitation that their child athletes might be facing. As this risk assessment would be informed largely by the vulnerabilities and susceptibilities we find through our research questions, it will also be a tool of awareness by bringing to light the dangers that might not have been considered before. To have such a tool for a serious potential issue that has very little research around it is immensely important as it would contribute greatly to the development of child protection policies in the esports arena. Lastly, our 4Ps framework is a tool we will use to guide our interview question development and policy recommendations. This is because these pillars hone in on key aspects of work in the anti-trafficking field, demonstrated by the different roles institutions play<sup>1</sup>. Additionally, this framework will allow us to be more holistically inclusive by considering the different approaches and perspectives institutions and experts have on the issue of trafficking. Along with the risk assessment as an output, we hope that the research in this report is an output in and of itself by being a form of awareness raising for such an unexplored issue.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, certain institutions might decide to solely prosecute, while others focus on prevention

## 2. Literature Review

This literature review aims to discuss the key research questions mentioned in the introduction. For our research, children are defined as any individual under the age of eighteen, as stated in the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989, p. 2). This literature review will cover some important elements of how we currently frame the potential for human trafficking in the context of esports, the methods used by traffickers and offenders in both sports and esports, as well as vulnerability and susceptibility in both contexts. Some particularly vulnerable groups will also be discussed within the gaming context.

### 2.1. Defining Trafficking for the Esports Context

The United Nations General Assembly adopted the Convention against Transnational Organised Crime, with the supplemental Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children in 2000. This supplemental protocol is also known as one of the three Palermo Protocols. The protocol contains the most internationally agreed-upon definition of human trafficking, with 178 states being party to it (UNTC).

Paragraph A in Article 3 of the Protocol characterises human trafficking as involving three constituent elements. The first element is the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons. The second element concerns whether the means entail abduction, fraud, deception, the abuse of authority, or a position of vulnerability, in addition to the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion. However, it is important to note that the majority of this section, which focuses on obtaining consent, whether voluntarily or coercively, does not apply to children. The third and final element pertains to the exploitation of the individual. Therefore, the trafficking of children can be understood as “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, for the purposes of exploitation” (Huijsmans & Baker, 2012, p. 923).

Huijsmans & Baker highlighted some key problems with the human trafficking debate. Firstly, the issue of the vague definition of exploitation in the Palermo Protocol. This is one aspect of what makes human trafficking difficult to constitute in real-life scenarios. The terms “slavery, forced labour, practices similar to slavery, or servitude” are not defined in the protocol, and it is only assumed that definitions in other international legal instruments will be applicable (Gallagher, 2001, p. 987). This lack of clarity is explicitly demonstrated as a problem by a study of 37 anti-trafficking workers having significantly varying responses to two

hypothetical cases of potential human trafficking (Huijsmans & Baker, 2012, p. 923 - 924). These significantly varying responses are a result of different “starting principles” regarding child trafficking, rooted in different “religious, humanitarian and intellectual convictions” (Huijsmans & Baker, 2012, p. 924). For example, a case of potential trafficking might be interpreted differently by two anti-trafficking workers based on their personal religious paradigms. Nonetheless, Huijsmans & Baker still note that the Protocol is “clear” that exploitation is not limited to the examples listed in it (Huijsmans & Baker, 2012, p. 922).

However, one could argue that the lack of clarity in the definitions stated in the Protocol is instead a strength. This is as it increases the flexibility and the scope of breadth of the Protocol, allowing it to lean on other legal instruments’ definitions to serve as reliable legal tools for defining instances of trafficking under the Protocol. This for example includes that of the International Labour Organisation (ILO)’s Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour, also known as Convention Number 182. This Convention which has been ratified by all 187 members of the International Labour Organisation (UN News, 2020) noted elements of child labour to include work that causes harm to the “health, safety or morals” of children, a crucial element not included in the final version of the Protocol.

Another problem highlighted by Huijsmans & Baker in regard to the human trafficking debate is the conflicts arising between anti-trafficking measures and the best interest of child migrants. Migration is defined by the International Office of Migration (IOM) as:

*“The movement of a person or a group of persons, either across an international border or within a state. It is a population movement, encompassing any kind of movement of people, whatever its length, composition and causes; it includes migration of refugees, displaced persons, economic migrants, and persons moving for other purposes, including family reunification” (Yousaf, 2017, p. 210 - 211).*

Child migration, particularly those of older children, could be an unavoidable means of mitigating the harsh conditions of their surrounding environment (Huijsmans & Baker, 2012, p. 927). However, due to the “high vulnerability” of migrants to trafficking (Yousaf, 2017, p. 210), anti-trafficking strategies can revolve around discouraging and removing children from migration (Huijsmans & Baker, 2012, p. 927). This discouragement is rooted in a “construct of childhood” that is applied to child trafficking, defined by “vulnerability, immaturity and dependence” (Huijsmans & Baker, 2012, p. 926). As a result of this construct, the concept of children alongside work and migration is thought of as two separate entities and not something

that can intersect. This can lead to the “discouragement and criminalisation” of children in migration, increasing the risks they face when they choose or are forced to migrate (Huijsmans & Baker, 2012, p. 927 - 928). In short, not all victims of voluntary or involuntary migration are victims of trafficking (Yousaf, 2017, p. 210), and it is important to distinguish between migrants and trafficking victims. Child migration should thus share principles similar to those applied to adult migrants, like permitting safe migration, rather than being met with prosecution and punitive measures (Huijsmans & Baker, 2012, p. 927).

The definition of smuggling is also often blurred with the definition of human trafficking. In the Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air, the smuggling of migrants is defined as:

*“the procurement, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefits, of the illegal entry of a person into a State Party of which the person is not a national or a permanent resident” (Protocol Against Smuggling, 2000, p. 2).*

Smugglers are engaged by migrants to help them escape conflict, economic hardship or any other threat to their current way of life (Yousaf, 2017, p. 211). They are regarded as having been smuggled once they have illegally entered a country or state of which they are neither a citizen nor a resident. These smuggling victims cannot be classified as victims of trafficking unless the situation becomes exploitative (Yousaf, 2017, p. 211). Additionally, the primary motivation for the smuggler(s) is the money they get from providing the "means for unlawfully crossing international boundaries" (Yousaf, 2017, p. 211). However, the motivation for traffickers comes from whatever form of exploitation they are indulging in (Yousaf, 2017, p. 211).

An important difference between migration, smuggling and trafficking is the stress on the movement of people and the necessity of exploitation. A criterion of migration and smuggling is the movement of people, whereas the trafficking of persons can occur without their movement as it only requires their exploitation. The view of trafficking occurring without movement is in line with research done by Farley (et. al, 2014, p.1041) where they note that “most contemporary legal definitions of trafficking do not require physical movement”. Therefore, in relation to the esports context, our research defines trafficking in this field as any activity that occurs in an inherently competitive video game, to a child for the purposes of exploitation irrespective of the presence or absence of physical movement. Therefore, while playing competitive video games does not require movement, it should not disqualify the



potential of children in esports from being considered victims of trafficking. Hence, it would be negligent to not consider children as victims of trafficking in this context simply because the means vary from the same end. Our definition is also supported by evidence that different forms of sexual, labour and financial exploitation can occur in video games (Rüdiger, 2013; Ridgeway, 2014; Yee, 2006), a point that will be further developed in the subsequent sections.

Despite the shortcomings of the Palermo Protocol, its reputation as the most internationally accepted legal instrument to address the crime of human trafficking and its adaptability to different contexts lead us to contextualize our definition of trafficking in the esports context to fall under it.

## 2.2. How Exploitation Can Occur in Traditional Sports

Some important lessons about the modus operandi of traffickers and offenders in esports can be taken from works that have been done for other sports. Findings and analyses about the modus operandi of traffickers and predators in these sports can be important starting points to transfer into our understanding of the gaming industry since the latter remains an environment that has been seldom observed and/or studied in relation to crimes of trafficking.

The exploitation of children in traditional sports is pervasive, involves numerous actors, including strong sports franchises and is likely to happen in any sport where there is lax regulation of the child athlete market (McGee, 2012, p. 71). Sports in which trafficking frequently occurs include but are not limited to football, hockey and basketball. According to a report by the University of Nottingham Rights Lab, there are two different processes of trafficking that predominantly occur in football. Young aspiring athletes can be offered "a contract or the opportunity to trial with a club" in the first, less frequent process. However, there are typically multiple "degrees of exploitation" of the athlete within this agreement between the club, the athlete, and their agent who is more often than not the actor carrying out the exploitation (UoN Rights Lab, 2021, p. 7). The second, more common process, is when the young aspiring athlete follows the interest expressed for them by a *bogus* agent and/or club, with following their interest usually involving travelling far distances abroad. Once they arrive in the destination country, the athlete's money and identification documents are taken by the bogus agent and/or club and the athlete is abandoned (UoN Rights Lab, 2021, p. 7). Once the athlete realises the situation they are in, it becomes too difficult for them to return home, and they are also "said to be too ashamed to return home" (UoN Rights Lab, 2021, p. 7). Therefore, they remain in the destination country, likely to be exposed to further means of exploitation.

McGee, 2012, highlights that traffickers take advantage of parents' aspirations for their children, their ignorance of the crime and their illiteracy when signing their children into exploitative contracts (McGee, 2012, p. 73). Sports agents or the *bogus* sports agents as UoN refers to them, auction the child to sports franchises and clubs (McGee, 2012, p.74). However, even though they might be recruited by established, legitimate sports clubs, it is likely that very few will actually make it playing the sport as a career, and even so their contracts and treatment can be exploitative. The bogus agents also provide services such as making fake passports and other identification documents (McGee, 2012, p. 77).

McGee further highlights that for football, there are not only bogus agents, promoting false opportunities in places such as Europe, but there are “football factories\*” as well (McGee, 2012, p. 78). These are locations in places with potentially cheap talent that recruit children, and these children are then scouted by wealthy clubs. Camel jockeying is another sport that is frequently used by child traffickers. Between 2002 and 2012, as many as 40,000 children have been trafficked into camel jockeying (McGee, 2012, p. 83). Similarly to football, they are made fake promises and end up becoming exploited, often doing things unrelated to camel jockeying. Trafficking in baseball can occur in similar manners, where there are baseball academies and where players are controlled by exploitative agents. Particular examples are those of Leonys Martin and Yasiel Puig who made it to the US Major League Baseball, but who had exploitative agents (Lind, 2014, Vox). Although offenders have their strategies that are contextually specific to the sports (McGee, 2012, p. 87), there are clear patterns in how trafficking occurs in all the sports discussed. These common features include the existence of bogus agents, bogus academies, the manipulation of children and their families with false financial and career promises, the service of fake identification and always an exploitative intent. Moreover, it is usually not only the bogus agents and those working at the academies but several intermediaries and the involvement of established leagues and clubs.

Further study is required to determine if or whether these forms of exploitation and trafficking are also occurring in the esports industry. As a result, it is crucial to apply the knowledge that already exists about how human trafficking happens in traditional sports to esports, see if it can be observed and draw comparisons and differences. This is because there is a lack of information about how children may be exploited while playing competitive video games.

## 2.3. How Exploitation Can Occur In Esports

Fortunately, there has been some research conducted in the wider gaming community that can provide more tailored frameworks for how exploitation may occur in the esports field. This section aims to highlight the processes of exploitation rather than the different motivations of the perpetrators or provide recommendations on how exploitation can be mitigated.

Commonly reported methods of sexual exploitation online have to do with the grooming of young children for the ultimate purposes of providing sexually explicit content or even sex. Reports of offenders “forming a trusting relationship” with the victim and then exploiting that trust to request sexually explicit content, or using a video game to meet the victim online and then slowly building up the trust to meet in person are very common (Olsson, 2012, p. 2 - 3). A report published by the University of Applied Science of the Brandenburg Police in Germany provides an extensive classification of the different modus operandi of sexual offenders in video games. The research highlights two main types of offenders, the blackmailer type and the indirect type (Rüdiger, 2013).

The characteristics of the blackmailer type are that they act in a more “direct and open way when initiating sexual contact” (Rüdiger, 2013, p. 14) online. These individuals often manipulate and exploit young children through online communication software like Skype or Discord by asking sexually explicit questions after trust is formed (Rüdiger, 2013, p. 14 - 17). With the rise in the value of virtual currencies, blackmailer-type offenders have begun to use virtual currency as a bargaining chip for explicitly sexual content. Given the value put on items that can be purchased with virtual currency in video games, as well as the child’s desire to have all the latest features of the game, this makes any offer placed sound like an appealing trade. Another tactic the blackmailer type will use is to scout out the names of avatars and characters within the video games for those that are usually chosen by young girls and/or boys. Once they have gained the trust of their victim through these in-game communications, they will immediately try to “transfer the communication” to “an instant messenger” (Rüdiger, 2013, p. 15). Once they have done this, they will begin to ask for and receive sexually explicit content from the victim. Once the victim chooses to cease communication, the blackmailer can “in the best case”, cease communication as well, or use the sexually explicit content they have already received to blackmail their victim into further sexual interactions.

For the indirect type of offender, the modus operandi focuses much more on trust-building, using empathy, and a goal to have a physical sexual interaction with the victim. The offender attempts to find out first the age of the victim, and adjust their fake age accordingly

(Rüdiger, 2013, p. 17). Following this, they will try to build trust with the victim through conversation, interaction within the video games using their environment, and showing empathy, which is a tactic “particularly promising during puberty” (Rüdiger, 2013, p. 17). Once they have built the initial trust, the offender will take the interactions to an instant communication platform and continue the same type of dynamic, not revealing their true age or gender until much later. Once the offender believes they have gained the victim's trust, the “secrecy phase” (Rüdiger, 2013, p. 18) begins, which is defined by the offender revealing their true age and gender and presenting it as a secret that they must keep between themselves. If the victim does not cease contact, the offender will attempt to meet up with the victim.

A paper published by the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN, 2021) on grooming tactics in video games brings up some key similarities with Rüdiger’s research by using knowledge from theories of how grooming occurs outside video games and drawing connections to the potential practices of offenders in video games. Much like the empathy Rüdiger highlights for the indirect type of offender, their study notes that video games “open up emotional pathways” that offenders exploit to begin speaking about things that are not related to the game (RAN, 2021, p. 3). The different theories noted in the paper also emphasise the trust-building tactic that offenders use. In the “four conditions model” (RAN, 2021, p. 2), two key phases are the “external inhibitors” and “victim’s resistance” phases (RAN, 2021, p. 2). In the former, the offender attempts to create a situation where there is no supervision over themselves and the victim (RAN, 2021, p. 2). Due to the often inadequately monitored public chats and different communication channels of video games and the inherently private manner in which they can be played, video games automatically provide the offender with a situation where there is no supervision. For the latter phase, the offender uses lies, flattery, praise and guilt to have the victim perform a sexual activity that is aimed at gratifying the offender (RAN, 2021, p. 2). Another theory mentioned makes explicit the offender is “goal-directed” (RAN, 2021, p. 2), meaning they are strategic for a specific purpose. Therefore, offenders use rapport building, incentives as well as disinhibiting tactics to guarantee their security to begin manipulating the victim to achieve their specific aims (RAN, 2021, p. 2).

RAN also identifies seven phases of grooming that have to do specifically with online environments. Importantly, these phases for online environments share much in common with the tactics identified for grooming in the real world such as securing their environment, building trust and creating a sense of a unique relationship. Similarly to Rüdiger’s typologies of either switching over to a more intimate instant messenger platform or meeting in person, RAN also identified that offenders will, as one of their last actions, manipulate the victim into



a more one-on-one interaction (RAN, 2021, p. 3). An important final phase that RAN identified is that of the “secret society”, where the victim of the offender can begin exploiting others themselves (RAN, 2021, p. 3). This draws yet another connection with real-world scenarios of trafficking when victims of trafficking can end up becoming traffickers themselves.

Exploitative methods in video games are not only limited to sexual exploitation. Ridgeway (2014) argues that professionalised, or aspiring to be professionalised games, such as League of Legends (LoL) benefits from what is essentially the free labour of their players to brand their product, reach their professionalisation goals and remain relevant in the gaming scene. This is accomplished by their players' constant generation of material, primarily through the means of streaming. Streaming “refreshes and maintains the cultural dynamics of the game” (Ridgeway, 2014, p. 75), thus doing the branding work for games such as LoL and increasing its fame. LoL would not exist with the popularity it has today without this user-generated content (Ridgeway, 2014, p. 80). In addition to fueling its relevance and branding, user-generated content is a significant part of professionalising competitive video games. Ridgeway gives the example of Bjergsen (an LoL streamer), who streams 6 - 10 hours a day, lives with their teammates and practices every day to “retain the standards needed for the competitive level of play” (Ridgeway, 2014, p. 72). Although Bjergsen receives some financial compensation for his work in the video game via his fans, sponsor deals, and possibly participate in specialised LoL tournaments, he is by no means an outlier when it comes to his positive contributions to Riot Games<sup>2</sup> goals.

The vast majority of esports fans “want to achieve the same professional level as the scene celebs” (Ridgeway, 2014, p. 77). As a result, esports gamers who are not well-known spend many hours a day playing their favourite esports games with friends and may even create their content online through platforms such as Twitch. All of this contributes to the branding, relevancy, financial success, and professionalisation goals of these intrinsically competitive video game producers. This means that a sizeable portion of e-athletes—even amateur ones—are new digital labourers who do not benefit from their contributions to the game developer.

It is crucial to note that, unlike sexual exploitation offenders, the form of potential labour exploitation in LoL, and other inherently competitive video games, does not have the same kind of intentionality as Riot Games did not create LoL with a specific intention to exploit their players. On the contrary, these potential kinds of exploitation can occur if there is a lack of awareness regarding how esports are both played and consumed. The ways in which

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<sup>2</sup> Riot Games is the company who developed the game League of Legends (LoL).

exploitation can occur in the esports industry outlined above are by no means an exhaustive list as the potential of child trafficking in the industry remains largely unexplored.

Given this, there should be formulations of various potential forms of exploitation that are informed by what we know occurs in traditional sports and from the relatively little we know about gaming/esports in order to start learning about and shedding light on the potential issues of trafficking that can be occurring in esports. A prospective sport athlete might, for instance, be manipulated into giving up their in-game currency in exchange for a phoney chance to play professionally for a professional team that advertises itself on the unmoderated public chat rooms of video games. Additionally, businesses that profit from in-game cash or the abilities of e-athletes may have exploitative contracts or unofficial agreements that amount to financial or labour exploitation. These are examples of developing exploitation pathways that must be investigated in the field.

## **2.4. Factors Creating Vulnerability and Susceptibility**

Several different factors create vulnerability towards exploitation and susceptibility of sports and esports to harbour such exploitative practices. In this section of the literature review, factors that both create vulnerability for children and explain the susceptibility of sports and video games as mediums where trafficking and exploitation can occur will be discussed. It is once again important to consider factors that have not only been identified for the virtual world but also those that have been identified for the more thoroughly studied world of traditional sports.

### **2.4.1. Vulnerability**

Socioeconomic status is a key element that has been found to make athletes in traditional sports vulnerable to exploitation (UoN Rights Lab, 2021, p. 12). This is because gifted young athletes frequently view sports as a means of supporting their families and an escape from poverty. Therefore, while taking into account the trafficking of children in sports, weaker socioeconomic backgrounds are always regarded as a potential sign of vulnerability. The extent to which this vulnerability applies to the field of esports will be subsequently discussed. Additionally, there is the vulnerability brought about by the debates and divisions among people who work to protect children. There are already disputes and differences of opinion surrounding the action, advocacy, knowledge, and institutional support for preventing trafficking and exploitation in mainstream sports. The report from the University of

Nottingham Rights Lab cites the case of a Belgian court deciding not to pursue a "possible trafficking" charge because the young Nigerian athletes involved were not "forced to go on a journey of the uncertain end" (UoN Rights Lab, 2021, p. 7). The Palermo Protocol expressly states that consent is irrelevant in cases involving children, meaning that children are always the victim and never have a conscious decision in their fate. However, the fact that the Belgian court considered whether they were coerced or not suggests that the court also considered their consent in the matter. As a result, it should be anticipated that the divisions and debates that presently exist in the traditional sports discourse will also exist in esports. Additionally, as was already mentioned, vulnerability can result from a parent's or child's lack of knowledge about the crime, the allure of significant monetary incentives, the potential low educational level and the general excitement a child athlete feels at being given the chance to participate in a sport, which can blindside them.

The socioeconomic background factor for esports seems to fall in significance when compared to traditional sports, given the plethora of other risk factors that are more prevalent within the virtual space. A more crucial factor that puts children at risk would be the "way that children use the internet" (Singh, 2018, p. 652). For example, the content children produce and display on any virtual platform, including as we have seen in video games, can lead to "cyberbullying\*, sexting\* and fraudulent transactions" alongside privacy and security concerns (Singh, 2018, p. 652). Moreover, a unique risk factor for children playing video games can be their level of social isolation. According to research by Australia's eSafety Commissioner, just 41% of children who experienced cyberbullying between 2015 and 2016 reported it to a parent or friend (Singh, 2018, p. 656). This illustrates how children who have more challenging familial or social ties or who are more socially isolated run the risk of being taken advantage of online because they won't have anyone they can trust in the real world during times of need.

Additionally, the rapid pace of the development of online products, services and technologies have provided difficulties for law-making and enforcement authorities to manage the situation (Singh, 2018, p. 656). This rapid pace of development of the virtual world has led to the similarly fast-evolving "techniques used to target and harm children" (Singh, 2018, p. 656). As discussed earlier, there are unprecedented methods offenders use to exploit victims in the online world. These ways change as technology develops, and the pace of change itself makes it very challenging for the appropriate institutions to react, develop their appropriate policies, and respond. Furthermore, the nature of online video games gives an unfortunate upper hand to any potential offender. Online games give the offender and child a common interest (ICMEC, 2017, p. 4) that can lead to instances of more direct contact than traditional

sports. Esports traffickers might make more direct contact with their victims by using the video game itself as opposed to just posing as agents, clubs, or coaches (Lacy, 2019). Additionally, playing online games frequently exposes kids to a virtual public setting without adult supervision, which strengthens an offender's capacity to form and advance relationships (ICMEC, 2017, p. 4). Geographic barriers in online games are removed, allowing kids and offenders to interact with a much wider variety of people than they could in the real world (ICMEC, 2017, p. 5). The combination of all of these elements can significantly increase a child's vulnerability and risk by lowering their inhibitions when approaching strangers (ICMEC, 2017, p. 5).

### **2.4.2. Susceptibility**

There are factors that make sports and video games susceptible to this crime. Firstly, sports' "positioning as a "non-political" space where millions are entertained, and where the most talented can fulfil their dreams" creates an image of the field as being beyond "such considerations as human rights" (UoN Rights Lab, 2021, p. 3). A former UEFA official has even called the trafficking of young athletes "an urban legend" (UoN Rights Lab, 2021, p. 7) used to promote protectionist policies. This interpretation of sports leads to the ability of awareness to penetrate and remain in the public consciousness extremely difficult and makes it easier for offenders to continue their actions with impunity. The image of esports is only different in that it has even less awareness of the potential risks athletes in the space face. Video games can exacerbate all the risks that playing traditional sports already entails because of their aesthetics designed for young audiences and their advertising of being "free to play." These elements in particular make parents less likely to recognize any risks the video game may have (Rüdiger, 2013, p. 13).

Moreover, in traditional sports the "likelihood of failure is high" (UoN Rights Lab, 2021, p. 12). One journalist investigating youth soccer clubs in the UK found that "more than 90% of those who join a premiership academy will fail to make it into the first team", and "most won't even become professional footballers" (Williams, 2009). This likelihood of failure creates risk of exploitation by demanding a lot from the athlete (time, labour, money) and potentially not providing what was expected in return. Additionally, the majority of young athletes who don't succeed professionally don't have a programme that offers them alternative opportunities, which puts them at greater risk for exploitation as adults or whenever they give up their activity. This can be applied to esports as well, with only a few out of the many able



to make it due to the finite positions available in legitimate competitive sports clubs. Additionally, since e-athletes don't need to sign up for a professional team or academy to devote as much time to their sport or compete, this type of uneven return on their time investment may be more prevalent as is discussed in the article mentioned above by Ridgeway.

The virtual space e-athletes find themselves in also has its particular susceptibilities. Singh (2018) highlights the difficulty in prosecuting transborder crimes, with “dual criminality” clauses requiring crimes to have taken place both in the victim's country and the country where the offender lives. As mentioned previously, the gaming world is essentially a borderless global public space, with players often interacting across different domestic and international borders. This, along with the ability of offenders to remain hidden online through different technical measures such as Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) – which can hide the geographical location of their users – make it much more difficult to address crimes committed in the virtual world and facilitates an attractive space for crime to be conducted. Additionally, it was found that in Germany in 2012, 66% of 6 to 9-year-olds and 75% of 10 to 13-year-olds spent their spare time playing video games (Rüdiger, 2013, p. 11). This should be expected as being higher globally now a decade since. This highlights the ultimate point that any time “there’s a forum where children are at, predators are going to go to those areas” (Rogers & Capitanini, 2012), bringing inherent susceptibility to the field of esports.

It is thus evident that there are transferable factors from traditional sports to esports, such as benign interpretations and a high likelihood of failure for the athlete, that can create a vulnerability for children to be exploited and that make these spaces susceptible to such crimes. In addition to these similarities across traditional sports and esports, there are factors more specific to the virtual space, such as the use of VPNs, that can also contribute to creating vulnerability and susceptibility.

## **2.5. Particularly Vulnerable Groups**

What has just been discussed are the baseline factors that create vulnerabilities and susceptibilities. The present section of this literature review aims to discuss the factors that make particular groups of children more vulnerable to exploitation and trafficking.

It is difficult to pinpoint whether there are particular groups of children that are at more risk than others. In a report published by Interpol regarding general sexual exploitation of children online, not specifically for video games, of the 72.5% of cases where gender could be

identified, 64.8% of children were girls (Interpol, 2018, p. 3). 76.6% of the analysed cases were white children, 56.2% were prepubescent children and when the victims were younger, the abuse “was more likely to be severe” (Interpol, 2018, p. 5). The disproportionate vulnerability of girls is also supported by findings from a study that had 48% of girls under the age of 14 reporting to have had experienced unwanted sexual communication online (Katzner, 2007). All of this appears to indicate that young girls are particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation in the online world.

Moreover, there is a vulnerability associated with countries that have a low internet penetration, which tend to be middle and lower income countries. Those countries generally have fewer resources at their disposal and show a lack of domestic legislation in the field of online child safety due to its relatively low priority (Singh, 2018, 657). This can lead to the fact that children who do use the internet and, therefore have access to video games, are particularly vulnerable. It's important to reiterate that these risks exist in countries with high internet penetration even though they are generally well-prepared to address issues of online child safety (Singh, 2018, p. 656), especially given that there are more potential victims due to more children having access to the internet.

The list of groups mentioned, such as young children as well as girls and children from countries with weak legislation on online safety, are by no means an exhaustive list. More research is required to better identify groups that can be potentially vulnerable to exploitation. Importantly, it should be remembered that certain groups, such as those from historically marginalised and oppressed backgrounds who suffer significant vulnerability in the real world, may also continue to do so in the virtual world due to their colour, ethnicity, etcetera. At this point in our research, we believe that it is likely that younger children, particularly girls, and those playing video games in countries with low internet penetration are just some of the particularly vulnerable groups to potential trafficking in esports.

### 3. Framework

As mentioned in the literature review above, several factors make trafficking in persons (TIP) highly complex and difficult to address adequately. These factors include but are not limited to, the invisibility of the crime, the naturalisation of certain acts of conduct related to the crime, underreporting of TIP and structural inequalities. Likewise, the consequences of this crime stretch beyond the individual affected and has a ripple impact on their families, communities and society. For the topic to be understood comprehensively, a framework that allows us to gather and analyse information holistically must be used. Therefore to understand how different forms of inequality intersect and increase the vulnerability of certain groups, our research team has considered the 4Ps Framework to be used alongside an intersectional approach (Crenshaw, 1991, p.1242 - 1243) to understanding vulnerabilities as a means to meet this objective.

The 4Ps framework is categorised into Prevention, Protection, Prosecution and Partnership. Previously known as the 3Ps (Prevention, Protection and Prosecution), the predecessor of the 4Ps framework was based exclusively on what is established in Sections 2 and 3 of Article 4 of the Palermo Protocol. 2009 saw the inclusion of Partnership as the 4th P of the framework through the United States of America's (USA) Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA). It was included by the Secretary of State of the USA to emphasise the importance of cooperation amongst different stakeholders to combat the crime<sup>3</sup>. The inclusion of the partnership pillar had a significant impact on legislation worldwide. Even though national and international cooperation among different stakeholders was not something new, the inclusion of this pillar amplified the necessity of carrying out efforts in a more structured manner. The USA's adoption of the fourth pillar is significant as they annually compile a report on human trafficking that incorporates input from other countries. This report then serves as a tool to understand the dynamics of the crime but also as a means for the USA to evaluate the situation of countries and provide funding to combat trafficking (Lagon, 2015, p. 21–35).

To better understand the framework, it is important to outline each pillar of the framework and their contribution to the understanding of child trafficking vulnerabilities (US State Department, 2019).

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<sup>3</sup>The inclusion of the fourth P was made after an Op-Ed in the Washington Post made by Hilary Clinton in 2009, where she acknowledged the importance of partnering with stakeholders to tackle trafficking in persons. This led to the inclusion of the partnership pillar on the TVPA and other national laws as mentioned.

- **Prevention:** This pillar is one of the most complicated pillars to be both understood and implemented. This is because it covers not only the provision of information or the amendment and creation of new legislation, but it also aims to address the root causes such as gender inequality, power imbalance, poverty and the lack of safety regulations in the esports industry that increase children's vulnerability to being trafficked.
- **Protection:** This pillar entails protecting victims and survivors to reconstitute their rights. A victim and survivor-centred approach includes not only identification and referral but also individualised support to them and their families to avoid re-victimisation (US State Department, 2019)
- **Prosecution:** This particular pillar garners the most attention as it is considered the most relevant instrument of the international legal framework, as outlined in the Palermo Protocol. This pillar considers effective law enforcement as an important action for different governments and that they should improve their methods of investigation and prosecution regarding cases of TIP and the conviction of traffickers to end the said crime (European Commission, 2019, p.30-33). One of the critical challenges of this pillar, however, is that the location of the victim and the offender are never always the same, this means that there would be challenges to the prosecution of the crime, as cross-border jurisdiction would require international cooperation.
- **Partnership:** This pillar crosscuts the aforementioned pillars as it highlights the importance of stakeholder coordination to prosecute those guilty of TIP, prevent TIP and effectively protect the victims of TIP so that there is no re-victimisation or the duplication of efforts (European Commission, 2019, p.38-40). Different actors include but are not limited to, governments, UN agencies, private corporations and esports game developers.

While international law places a significant amount of focus on states and their responsibility of preventing TIP in line with the 4P framework, it is not the sole responsibility of states. Different stakeholders such as non-governmental Organisations (NGOs), international corporations and UN Agencies also have a role to play due to their institutional commitments and mandates, for example:

- Based on the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organised Crime (UNTOC), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has the mandate to support states that are facing threats related to transnational



crimes. In the phenomenon of TIP, UNODC focuses on the criminal justice and prosecution aspect of the crime (UNODC, 2020, p.16,19).

- The International Organisation for Migration (IOM), works to provide technical assistance to states to ensure systematic and humane management of migration as well as provides humanitarian aid to migrants in need, including those who are victims of trafficking. Thus this body roots its support in the pillars of prevention and protection.
- Mission89 is an NGO that raises awareness of child exploitation\* and the trafficking of young athletes, thus centering their mandate of responsibility on the pillar of prevention.

Despite not being public entities, different stakeholders both assist states to address TIP and contribute in different ways to the 4Ps framework. While there is no formal obligation to implement actions along the framework of the 4Ps, a significant number of these organisations have included it in their mandates regarding the tackling of trafficking in persons to provide a safe space for athletes. This means that individuals could work on projects in their areas of expertise to fight trafficking within the context of the 4Ps, in addition to helping nations achieve their commitments to the international community.

As our research aims are on the trafficking of children in the greater context of esports, the 4Ps framework provides a beneficial guide to understanding the risk and the development of research. Therefore, the research team believes that an analysis of the actions and roles of stakeholders, framed along the framework of the 4Ps is a crucial means of understanding the topic holistically. This will allow our team to identify root causes, consequences and the subsequent necessary actions that stakeholders can take not only to assist states but also to prevent child trafficking.

## 4. Methodology

Our methodology for this report included developing research questions to guide our desk research, a literature review, creating a preliminary interview outline, creating a list of relevant stakeholders and beginning the process of our interviews. Our research is entirely qualitative, with desk research and interviews being the two main processes that substantiate our outputs which are recommendations and a risk assessment. We decided that the qualitative approach would be best suited for this research due to, but not limited to, the ever-evolving nature of the modus operandi of traffickers, the lack of information available about trafficking

in esports and our limitations of being able to gather quantitative data for this topic. Our talents were best served by the qualitative method, but more significantly, the potential of child trafficking in esports is mostly under-researched. Being able to build well-substantiated approaches through an extensive review of relevant literature, along with interviews with a plethora of different experts is necessary to provide the required understanding to begin appropriate quantitative research in the future.

## **4.1. Research Questions**

The first phase of our research involved developing our research questions. Given the unexplored nature of our topic, beginning desk research without these questions to guide us would result in us gathering data that could be irrelevant to our potential aims. We decided to formulate our research questions in a way that could theoretically follow the chronological development of our research. For example, our first questions include (as stated in the introduction), how trafficking could be defined in an esports context, what the potential risks might be to children, and what makes sports a susceptible environment for trafficking to occur. Then, only after answering these questions, could we begin to think about answering questions such as what policies can be developed to address these potential risks and which entities should have a responsibility to implement these policies. This is what is meant by the chronological development of our research. We believe these research questions would provide a comprehensive overview of this unexplored field by providing definitions, identifying risks, modes of mitigation and responsible entities for the implementation of the mitigation.

## **4.2. Literature Review**

The next phase of our research involved the gathering and studying of the literature we believed to be relevant given our research questions. We used Google/Google scholar as the search engine to find our sources, alongside a variety of keywords that were not specific to esports. This is a result of there being a dearth of information about trafficking specifically in esports, and therefore any query that included esports as a keyword in relation to trafficking or exploitation would not yield significant or relevant results. Therefore, most queries included the keywords of “sports”, “trafficking”, “exploitation”, “children”, “online”, and “technology”. Specific search queries would be used when we had a clear understanding of what we wanted to find, such as discussions on the legal definition of trafficking in persons under the Palermo Protocol. Although our sources had quantitative data, we did not put this data through any form

of quantitative analysis, and instead used the data to substantiate common patterns we noticed throughout all the texts. For example, although there might be statistics on the rate of complaints submitted by children about unwanted sexual contact online, these statistics were not analysed, and instead used to support the recurring pattern that was found in the texts of young children being especially vulnerable to unwanted sexual contact online. Once we had gathered sources we believed to be relevant to our research questions, we immediately divided them equally among group members. Again, given the unexplored nature of this topic, there were very few source types that we did not consider. Whether it was a report by a police academy, a published UN report or a legal review, all sources were considered if they were believed to be relevant to the research questions. Furthermore, again due to the difficulty of finding information on this topic, we took advantage of a snowball technique by using the references that were cited in the pieces we were finding as a search tool itself. Since our methodology with the literature review was to be guided by the research questions we developed from the very beginning of our project, any sources that were considered to be irrelevant to answering these research questions were not considered but saved for potential future use.

### **4.3. Interview Structure and Development**

The third phase of the research involved semi-structured interviews (SSI). This type of interview allows both interviewers and interviewees to be more flexible and to get more engaged during the conversation. The semi-structured method, which contains both closed- and open-ended questions, helps us maintain our attention on the main subject while allowing us the option to ask follow-up questions that weren't initially planned but that emerge from the interviewee's comments. Likewise, interviewees are more open to sharing valuable information than in structured interviews where they would have to adhere to a specific set of questions. Even though SSIs present limitations such as being time-consuming considering the preparation they need, the time invested in the interview as well as the analysis of the information gathered, SSIs have considerable advantages for qualitative research as you can get further and more valuable information from the interviewees (Adams, 2015, p. 492-495).

Jointly with our partner Mission 89, we identified 33 organisations and experts in the field and were able to interview seven. The different actors belong both to the private sector such as UN Agencies, esports organisations, and NGOs and the public sector such as government representatives who work on the topic of safeguarding in sports. The main criteria

for selecting these stakeholders were their expertise in trafficking in persons, particularly with children and online, as well their expertise in esports. The interview guide used for the SSI takes into account the profile of the actor that will be interviewed, meaning that actors like UN Agencies with specialised work on trafficking in persons would have to respond to more technical questions on the topic of trafficking. On the other hand for game publishers, we have focused on elaborating questions that relate to esports and its dynamics, as they may not be familiar with the technicalities of transnational frameworks to combat trafficking in persons. Before interviews, interviewees were sent a consent form<sup>4</sup>, that requested their consent to be recorded, quoted and whether we could use their position title and name. We believe it was important to have the possibility of recording the interview so that the post-interview analysis would be easier to conduct. This allowed us as researchers to be more engaged as well without having to constantly take notes, potentially triggering a Hawthorne effect bias<sup>5</sup> if the interviewees noticed when and when we didn't take notes. We requested to quote them, and to be able to use their title and/or name, due to the credibility this would add to the substance of our report since a significant amount of data for our research would be taken from the information gathered from the interviews.

As we progressed in our interview process, we had to revise some of this methodology. At the beginning of the interview process, our methodology to contact our interviewees was to send them an email and schedule a time for an interview through email correspondence. We quickly realised that this was too inefficient and inconvenient for both us and the interviewee. Therefore, we quickly transitioned to Zoho Bookings, an online booking system, which allowed us to send an email to all our interviewees with a link that would enable them to schedule themselves into an available time slot at their convenience. The second major revision we made to the interview methodology was to the interview guide. Along with tailoring the interview questions to the expertise and background of the interviewee and being guided by our overarching research questions (as discussed in the introduction, and will be later), we began to also categorise our questions into fitting the framework of the 4Ps. This further organised our questions and was a better approach to integrating the 4Ps framework into our research methodology.

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<sup>4</sup> Available in annexe

<sup>5</sup> The Hawthorne effect is a type of reactivity in which individuals modify an aspect of their behavior in response to their awareness of being observed.

## 4.4. Data Analysis Structure

After the interviews were conducted, the data analysis phase of our research began. We used Microsoft Word's (Word) dictation tool to transcribe our interview recordings and Solveig Osborg Ose's "Using Excel and Word to Structure Qualitative Data" method, hereafter referred to as "Ose's Method", to analyse and structure the data collected. We chose this method because it suited our exact needs during the interview analysis phase. We wanted to use Ose's method to structure our transcribed interviews into categories of the 4Ps framework to put alongside any other recurrent themes we noticed did not fit into the 4Ps but were important to discuss. As Ose states, "no software can actually analyse qualitative data; only the human mind can do it" (Ose, 2016, p. 148), and this was our guiding principle while structuring the data.

There were several other reasons why Ose's method fit our methodological needs well. Firstly, the purpose of the method is suitable for the type of data we collected, that being "large amounts of unstructured [qualitative] data" (Ose, 2016, p. 147). Additionally, the technique works well for "open-ended questions" like the ones we asked during the SSI and when "there are four or more interviews." Furthermore, Ose writes that the methodology works well for research with "no specific existing theory or hypothesis to be tested" (Ose, 2016, p. 147), much like our research exploring an issue with virtually no already existing research behind it. This method also suited our needs for pragmatic reasons as it did not require "additional expensive software" and "uses programs available to most researchers" (Ose, 2016, p. 161). Additionally, having very little background in practical qualitative research as a research team, this method only uses Word and Microsoft Excel (Excel) and using the step-by-step instructions by Ose, our practical capabilities were sufficient. Through this method, we were able to consider the extent of our own capabilities, while also making use of a technically sound method to effectively structure our data.

Although Ose provided detailed instructions on how to put the methodology to use, we read Ose's article and essentially created a numbered instruction sheet for ourselves that highlighted the parts of Ose's methodology that we did not understand. This resulted in a set of instructions with 21 steps that we utilised to structure the data. Without going into specifics, there were three basic parts to the procedure. The first was reading through each interview transcript in its entirety before dividing it into paragraphs with the interviewees' comments and our questions. After that, the data collected were put into an Excel spreadsheet and categorised according to the 4Ps with any additional topics that were pertinent given their recurrence or consistency with our desk study put in a separate section. For example, the number "1" would

equal “Prevention”, and we would identify responses that would fall under that theme whenever policies to safeguard children in sports were mentioned by an interviewee. Last but not least, this coding procedure would enable us to import the data from the Excel spreadsheet into a new Word document which would be organised under several subject headings. As a result, this process not only contributed to the analysis of our data by requiring us to carefully consider connections between interviewee responses and various thematic areas, but it also assisted us in organising and streamlining the process by helping us structure our data efficiently.

## 4.5. Limitations

While the data we have gathered provides strong insight into the world of child trafficking in the gaming industry, there are certain limitations in our research due to circumstances beyond our scope of control. One of the limitations that was uncovered during the process of this research was lack of research on the topic at hand. This limited our ability to find specific informative sources that were directly related to the context of esports. For example, our literature review explores frameworks of trafficking in the context of traditional sports and then applies them to supplement our understanding of potential trafficking and exploitation in the esports sphere, driving us to take a level of authority on the topic that we do not necessarily possess. This also leads to the questioning of our credibility and authority to propose definitions for child trafficking and exploitation in the context of esports. While we substantiate our claims through research and interviews, they do not come from any experts in the field, as it is an emerging field with little research about it. Furthermore, the lack of present information on the topic limits the veracity of our claims, in the sense that the discussed vulnerabilities and susceptibilities are all hypothetical and potential vulnerabilities and susceptibilities largely based on the transfer of knowledge from the context of traditional sports. Another limitation of the lack of information and prior research on the topic meant that there were a limited number of individuals that we could potentially interview. While our interviewees consisted of important stakeholders, for example those from the gaming, migration and child safeguarding industries, there were no individuals currently looking specifically into the phenomenon of child trafficking and exploitation through esports.

There were also some limitations present in our interview process and development. Our initial interview questions were too general, thus we began to integrate the 4Ps framework into our interview process after a review of our first set of data. As the use of the 4Ps framework was not initially part of our interview question structure, our first few interviews are not as



comprehensive as the latter. Moreover, most of the interviewees were contacts provided by our partner organisation. While they were a wide range of contacts, ranging from game developers to migration and crime agencies, there was a potential of selection bias. As they were potentially contacted based on their existing concern or awareness about the topic at hand. This has the potentiality to be considered selection bias as having interviewees that were already concerned about the potential threat of child trafficking that the esports space could create might provide skewed perceptions regarding the occurrence of this phenomenon. Another type of bias that potentially appeared was response bias. There might be response bias in the research because of the type of people that responded to our requests for interviews. While we reached out to approximately 33 potential interviewees, only seven organisations responded, all of which had a particular interest in the subject.

As stated above, we unfortunately were only able to interview seven interviewees. The low number of participants hurts the generalisability of the findings and we are unable to be fully confident of our recommendations' applications to the wider public. This limitation was born out of our struggle to reach out to interviewees during the first half of our interview process, during which we relied completely on our partner organisation. It was not until mid-way through our interview process that we began to use a booking app that enabled interviewees to sign up for an interview at their own convenience, without having to coordinate back and forth to set a designated time. Nevertheless, we tried to minimise the impact of this limitation by ensuring that all of our interviewees came from a diverse range of backgrounds. We were able to minimise this impact by interviewing individuals from the fields of academia, esports, migration and child safeguarding. An important stakeholder that we were unable to interview were children. Although a limitation that we were not practically able to work around due to ethical reasons, the inability to interview children should be considered a significant limitation as they are the group that the research centers around. Therefore, while our research provides recommendations on how to best protect children, they are not informed by the opinions and concerns of children themselves.

Lastly in regards to the data analysis, we used Ose's method for analysing data as its simplicity would accommodate for our technical limitations as a research team. The strengths of Ose's method was elaborated upon in detail in the section discussing our interview analysis method, but these strengths should not wholly compensate for our limitation as a research team of having limited qualitative research experience of this kind in the past. For many of us, this was the first time we had transcribed interviews, coded them, and done a thematic analysis. Therefore there is the possibility that we have overlooked important themes that need to be

addressed further. Thus, future research must build on our analysis to create and develop more comprehensive analytic tools that are specific to the context of esports.

## 5. Findings and Analysis

Our findings and analysis are derived from a mixture of what we found during the literature review phase of our research, but mostly through the information provided by our interviewees. The information provided by our interviewees, as discussed before in the methodology, were responses to tailored questions to each under the framework of the 4Ps. In addition to this, a significant part of informing the type of questions we asked the interviewees were also the research questions that arose from gaps we identified during the literature review or remaining research questions that went unanswered during the literature review phase. These overarching research questions going into the interview phase were:

- Is there an awareness, or consideration of, the potential of exploitation and trafficking through esports amongst experts in the fields of sport, esports, migration, child protection, etcetera?
- Have the vulnerabilities/susceptibilities identified in the literature review been considerations that have been made in their field?
- Do they find our identified vulnerabilities/susceptibilities relevant?
- What are some policies, best practices, frameworks, etc. that have been most effective in establishing prevention, protection, prosecution and partnership? What are some practical approaches that have been taken to realise the 4Ps framework?
- Which actors are the most relevant when considering the overall safeguarding of children in sports?

Given the format of our interviews were SSI, these questions were not necessarily asked if the interview developed in a different way. However, all of these additional research questions augment the ones that were developed to guide us during the literature review, fill in gaps that arose out of that process, and they are all applicable to any potential interviewee. This is what made them a relevant, suitable and necessary follow-up to the research questions that were developed at the beginning of the project.

To organise the data and provide the analysis of the findings in a clear and concise manner, this section has been divided into a section of findings in line with the 4Ps framework, and then subsequent sections on themes that frequented the interviews. This has been done to

highlight the use of the 4Ps framework for research analysis and recommendation development without diminishing the importance of other relevant themes discussed by key stakeholders.

## 5.1. 4Ps and Other Relevant Themes

### 5.1.1. Prevention

The prevention pillar is one of the most important pillars of the framework as it requires the most understanding of what it comprises and how to implement it in order to be as effective as feasible. This is because there are a variety of players involved, including those who carry out prevention measures and beneficiaries. It also seeks to address structural issues, which cover interrelated disparities that have existed for a long time.

Regarding the stakeholders that should be included in the discussion and address of trafficking, the socio-ecological model developed by Bronfenbrenner in the 1970s is extremely relevant due to its comprehensibility as well as its emphasis on the importance of relationships and interactions between different individuals. This model places the individual at the core, surrounded by four systems (Kilanowski, 2017, p. 295):

1. The **microsystem** which includes close interactions and relationships, is predominantly used in the context of familial relationships.
2. The **mesosystem** which includes those who have direct and constant contact with the individual, is predominantly used in the context of friendships.
3. The **exosystem**, is used to describe the context of positive and negative interactive forces on the individual that do not have a direct impact, much like the influence of a community.
4. The **macrosystem**, which includes societal and cultural values and influences.

This model has been adapted to understand violence and human trafficking through the merging of the systems. This means that the relevant actors like the individual, their family and friends, the community and as well as private actors and/or the state, who are in charge of developing and implementing public policy, interact and merge into forms of different relationships (Organisation Mondiale de la Santé, 2002, p. 13–15).

The relevancy of these relationships and interactions that children who are victims of trafficking have with these actors play a key role in the prevention of this crime, particularly in the case of esports, where the risks present in those of traditional sports trafficking are transferred and further amplified. There is a significant lack of awareness regarding the risks

that come with being an esports athlete and what those risks entail. A UK journalist who was looking into young football clubs found that "most won't even become professional footballers" and that "more than 90% of those who attend a premiership academy will fail to make it into the first team" (Williams 2009). This point is further supported by the development officer at the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), who emphasised the low number of athletes in traditional sports who find success as professional players. This creates more vulnerability as the individual and/or their family believes in the false promise of a bright future, which lead to the potential of children moving abroad to pursue these dreams but being abandoned, having then to live in precarious conditions. This phenomenon could also potentially happen in the esports industry taking into account how simple it is for children to interact with strangers through video games and the internet in general.

In regards to this point, the expert on migration confirmed that there are increased risks when technology is used as a means to recruit, and even in some cases, exploit children. The expert stated that

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*“this threat is no longer for when your child is going to go out, this threat is in your home, it’s on the tip of your nose, it’s on the same iPad that you just unlocked for your kid”.*

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This was further supported by the development officer at NSPCC, who argues that “you’re never going to be able to physically stop it from happening (...) you’re just going to have people making the same mistakes that they’ve made in football and in gymnastics and tennis”. This demonstrates that the lack of awareness about potential outcomes, the modus operandi, what to avoid, and how to respond in an emergency from both the individual and their family is significant, all of which if not identified could result in a child being a victim of trafficking.

However the lack of awareness is not the mere fault of the individual, nor is it of the family. The community as well as public and private institutions have an important role to play in mitigating child trafficking in the online sphere. With respect to the community and their roles, the gaming community, in the case of esports, interacts most frequently with children. This means that the community has the potential to become a safe haven for children to seek support from others but also for actors to be proactive when a threat is identified. While proactivity in dealing with a threat would be the ideal scenario, reporting and alerting someone about the threat is not always a plausible solution. This statement is supported by a ranking official in the African Union Sports Council (AUSC) who notes that “they (esports athletes and parents) are afraid it (reporting) would put their own desires at

*risk, (...) that they would not have to fear their own position in the league, on the team... ”. It is thus through regulation and awareness raising do private and public actors come to play an important role in mitigating child trafficking in the online sphere.*

However, the lack of awareness is not the mere fault of the individual, nor is it of the family. The community as well as public and private institutions have an important role to play as well. While the esports industry is rapidly expanding both socially and economically, governments and other private corporations have not focused many of their efforts on regulating esports and providing appropriate frameworks to mitigate the potential risks of child trafficking in this domain. This creates a legal “vacuum” for traffickers to then commit such crimes without then having to deal with the consequences of their actions, but more importantly, it leaves children vulnerable without advocacy or report mechanisms present.

While there is an absence of awareness campaigns in relation to esports and trafficking carried out by governments, it does not mean that private actors can’t take action themselves. The migration expert stated that *“Facebook does have an international commitment to preventing trafficking and smuggling”*, however a lot of their filters to detect this situation only work in English, meaning that they don’t have any prevention mechanisms in other languages. The possibility to improve initiatives like Facebook's and create new ones that would stop trafficking in esports is made possible by the tremendous advancements in technology over the past few decades. There is already a window of opportunity for private actors to get involved, commit, and act to make the esports arena a safer space, as End Child Prostitution and Trafficking International (ECPAT) officials actually mentioned discussions in the European Union around the topic that could result in an obligation for private actors to take preventative measures as the aforementioned.

Furthermore, the development officer at NSPCC highlights the importance of parents’ involvement in prevention and the role they could play alongside those of private actors.

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*“Parents need to be involved at every step (...) they need to understand the very real dangers of the stuff that their kids are doing not just online safety but you know general just safety, and they need to understand what potentially is the worst that could happen and then you'll find that generally picks up some ears and widens a few eyes and perhaps they become a little bit more engaged”.*

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They assert that private actors, in addition to parents, are also accountable for being aware of the risks and subsequently helping to mitigate them. This could potentially be done through the organisation of awareness events where private organisations engaged in esports and/or human trafficking can discuss the risks present online as well as how to prevent and manage them. The officer emphasises that another aspect that can be applied from traditional sports to esports is the fact that children would be left alone in an environment without proper accompaniment and supervision, where they might not have the skills to handle the risks safely and may end up becoming victims of crime. The migration expert also acknowledges this transfer of risk and the fact this is already a reality

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*“if work has moved online if friendships have moved online if dating has moved online, why is it so weird that recruitment would not become an e-business”?*

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In addition to raising awareness, prevention efforts should target structural elements or underlying causes that increase the likelihood that certain groups, in this scenario children, may experience human trafficking. This is because in general, children and teenagers who have experienced displacement, acute poverty, and a lack of access to services and rights like education and abuse are more likely to become victims of human trafficking (UNICEF, 2017). In the context of esports, interviewees noted that poverty and gender-based violence are two factors that would raise the risk of them being sought out for child trafficking and potential exploitation. In regards to poverty, the lack of resources to guarantee a good quality of life and/or the window of opportunity to improve one’s financial situation make these false promises of success more enticing. As a result, an individual might be caught up in these dangerous liaisons in hopes of bettering their future. With respect to the aspect of gender, on the other hand, interviewees noted that it is extremely harmful to ignore power structures and gender norms because doing so could result in disregarding a factor that greatly affects how an individual interacts with various systems and actors.

This extends beyond the immediate family systems to private and public actors who, if they ignore this underlying structural problem, may not pass laws or carry out initiatives that should target prospective victims differently in light of their gender and environment. Ranking officials at ECPAT state that *“I am 100% convinced that child traffic needs almost gender approach because many forms of trafficking of children are specifically different for girls and boys and for different reasons and in a different context and I think that then understanding the gender norms and power structures that lead to situations of child trafficking”*. They added



that, “*gender differentiates the way that sexual exploitation of a male child might be different or might be perceived differently in the eyes of the law from that of a female child*”. Similarly to that of traditional sports, the role of gender plays an important aspect when considering the circumstances that make certain groups more vulnerable than others. This statement by these ranking officials highlights the importance of contextualising prevention activities, both when raising awareness and addressing root causes, to carry out actions that are truly aligned with the needs and realities of a given context. This is as the potential initiatives developed could be received by stakeholders in different ways. For example, if received positively, this could facilitate the questioning and reconstruction of their attitudes and beliefs with the purpose of developing prevention mechanisms that provide short, medium and long-term positive results that are sustainable even without the presence of private organisations, which are highly dependent on economic resource availability. This is particularly relevant to our research as it highlights the need for understanding different vulnerabilities to ensure the installation and development of adequate and effective safeguard mechanisms.

### **5.1.2. Protection**

When we asked our interviewees about the protection of child trafficking victims, how it had been done and where room for improvement lay, the majority of their responses focused on prevention. In addition to contributing information on what trafficking looks like and how to respond when athletes or others spot warning signs, interviewees made significant contributions to the discussion about the need to address the core reasons that put children at greater risk of being victims of trafficking. However, as illustrated in the preceding section and elaborated in the next paragraph, these could not be regarded as protection measures because all of them are intended to prevent trafficking from happening, which are prevention activities.

The protection of victims of trafficking is the second pillar of the 4Ps and could entail a set of different actions depending on the context and national legislation. For the purpose of this research, protection is understood as what is established in Article 6 of the Palermo Protocol which in spite of having a focus on criminal justice, it details certain dispositions to provide protection to victims through these terms outlined below (UN, 2000):

- a. Protect the privacy and confidentiality of the victim,
- b. National legal and administrative systems must guarantee that victims receive information about legal and judicial procedures and be provided assistance so that their concerns are taken into account during the judicial process,

- c. States with the cooperation of private actors should guarantee that victims have adequate shelter, information and advice about legal procedures, health, psychological and material assistance and opportunities for employment and education,
- d. States must guarantee the safety and security of victims, and;
- e. States should guarantee that their legal systems have compensation as a form of reparation.

This definition implies that the protection of victims of trafficking takes place after the individual has gone through an experience of trafficking, meaning that other actions that could be taken before trafficking occurs constitute prevention of the crime.

With respect to this, protection would occur outside of the online environment and necessitate a number of referral paths, procedures, processes, and specialised services that are offered in-person to the individual who underwent the experience. At present there is no available data, neither from desk review nor through interviews, related to the protection of victims of child trafficking associated with esports, hence the actual understanding of the purposes of trafficking in this domain and the specific profile criteria of victims is significantly limited. As the protection of victims of child trafficking has been thoroughly analysed and guidelines to mitigate the traditional version of this crime have developed worldwide, it is worth noting that victims of child trafficking in the esports field could potentially benefit from processes that are already in place. However, the ways in which these must be improved and tailored to the slightly different context will be detailed in the next paragraph, as they would face similar challenges other children who need protection face when trafficking occurs in other fields.

While the protection mechanisms for victims of child trafficking could vary in different countries, some of the major shared challenges according to the latest TIP report include: 1) the lack of specialised interventions and case management, 2) the limited number of specialised shelters, 3) limited identification of victims, 4) inadequate processes in relation to access to justice and other rights, and 5) the insufficient budget to protect victims comprehensively. It is crucial to keep in mind that providing protection is challenging, expensive, and primarily the state's responsibility. Although states typically lack the technical capabilities required to provide specialised protection as well as the money to give full protection to victims of trafficking, private players play a significant role. Regarding this, the report emphasises the significance of coordinated efforts with other actors, such as UN agencies, civil society organisations, and international cooperation, to provide technical and financial assistance, which is crucial to improve the delivery of services and improve the capacities of states.

(Department of State of the United States of America, 2022, pp. 81,84,98,101,112,117) Without having effective and esports specific protection mechanisms in place, we are likely to see the exponential increase in online trafficking of children in the gaming domain.

### **5.1.3. Prosecution**

The third pillar of the 4Ps is prosecution, and as was said in the framework section, it frequently receives the most attention from the various stakeholders because of the Palermo Protocol's emphasis on criminal justice. Practitioners and academics have criticised this emphasis as it runs the risk of oversimplifying the concept of human trafficking by reducing it to just the interaction between the victim and the perpetrator (Gallagher, 2012). As mentioned in the prevention and protection pillars, human trafficking affects not only the victim but also their families, communities and societies. Hence there is a pressing need for it to be tackled more thoroughly. This is not to say that the investigation and prosecution of the crime should be put on hold, but rather that it is critical to consider human trafficking not only as a criminal offence but also and perhaps more importantly, as a human rights violation that has serious and long-lasting implications on those affected by it.

The prosecution of trafficking in persons is a very challenging activity to carry out due to several reasons: a) the underreporting of human trafficking because victims and their families are afraid they won't get enough protection after reporting, and because they don't trust the judiciary system, b) the difficulty in identifying the exact instance of trafficking due to the nonchalant attitudes towards some of the ways they manifest in, such as begging, forced labour, adult sexual exploitation and domestic service, c) corruption within the system including the corruption from prosecutors, judges and police officers, d) difficulties collaborating with other nations due to limited technical capabilities and e) the lack of human and financial resources (UNODC, 2020, p. 19, 20, 46, 51). When trafficking takes place online, perpetrators, victims, clients and servers can interact while they are in different countries. This means that in the event that trafficking occurs, each of these actors potentially falls under a different jurisdiction. As a result, this increases the complexity in regard to the process of investigation and prosecution due to the potential judicial differences. Another difficulty that arises from the need to investigate and prosecute online trafficking crimes relates to the insufficient digital expertise and capacities of law enforcement authorities and the establishment of a uniformed online trafficking mitigation technology (Working Group on Trafficking in Persons, 2021, p.

4). While there are significant challenges present in the realm of online prosecution, there must be an emphasis on the importance of international cooperation on a transborder crime.

This is where private actors begin to get involved in this pillar. Private actors play a crucial role in addressing child trafficking because they can offer the following to prosecutors: a) technological capabilities to enhance their investigation processes, b) capacity building on how to investigate and maintain the chain of custody with both digital and physical evidence when exploitation is carried out in person; and c) assistance in the development of protocols to conduct online investigations while ensuring the compliance with human rights (Working Group on Trafficking in Persons, 2021, p. 3, 4).

Regarding underreporting, the ranking official at the AUSC stated that if an athlete believes that reporting could endanger his or her career, they will not report the crime. This is in addition to the fear of victims not receiving protection. This may also be connected to the underlying issues discussed in the prevention section, where success in esports, similar to success in the traditional sports domain, may be seen as a solution to financial hardship. They also brought up the possibility that reporting an incident could have negative effects on the athlete, and in the context of our research the e-athlete brought up the crucial principle of not punishing trafficking victims when discussing prosecution.

The principle of non-punishment of victims is essential to be understood by prosecutors, police officers and judges, to avoid causing harm to the victim. The principle of non-punishment is based on the understanding that as a result of trafficking during some of the different phases such as transportation and exploitation, victims may engage in illegal conduct such as the possession of fraudulent documents, involvement in drug production or distribution, cross borders irregularly, these conducts are the result of the trafficking experience as victims would not have otherwise committed if it wasn't because of coercion, deception and other means used by traffickers. When these means are used, consent for committing these crimes or being exploited ends up being irrelevant as victims did not take their decisions freely or in an informed manner (The Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking in Persons, 2020, p. 1,3,5).

According to UNODC, "Trafficking in persons could not proceed on a wide scale without corruption". Corruption is hence one of the most significant obstacles to the investigation and prosecution of human trafficking. It encompasses a variety of activities like providing false documentation, assisting recruitment agencies, enabling illegal movement, alerting traffickers when there is a police operation, obstructing the reporting and gathering of evidence, influencing witnesses, and interfering with prosecution among several other things.

(Department of State of the United States of America, 2022, p. 47). The migration expert used the Uruguayan operation "Oceano" to illustrate this point. In this case, 15 children were saved from a shocking scenario where judges, police departments, and prosecutors were all compliant in this act of child trafficking. This particular problem is quite alarming since it affects the institutions in charge of upholding justice. Addressing this is urgent and of utmost importance; otherwise public, and sometimes even private, institutions will continue to complicitly participate in the never-ending cycle of trafficking.

Child trafficking in the esports domain differs from that in the traditional sports domain due to the fact it does not require their physical movement to be considered as trafficked and/or exploited. Therefore, international cooperation is crucial for the successful implementation of mitigation strategies and prosecution of the particular crime. As the victim and perpetrator might be located in different countries and even regions, the issues of joint investigations, mutual legal assistance and the collection of digital evidence with shared protocols and procedures must be adequately addressed. There is a need for countries to increase cooperation in developing policies, sharing intelligence and using technology to their advantage in order to investigate and prosecute the crime.

#### **5.1.4. Partnership**

Partnership plays a “key role in anti-trafficking efforts at all levels” (Khartoum Process, 2021, p. 38). As mentioned in the framework, it crosscuts all previous pillars by enhancing relevant actors’ abilities for prevention, protection and prosecution. Several of our interview responses served to inform us as to how the best policies, practices or frameworks regarding partnerships could be shaped.

The migration expert stated that *"there needs to be more coordination and communication between borders and between states...the integrated border management approach...which is not happening"*. With the modus operandi of trafficking becoming more digital, especially through the phenomenon of trafficking in the online gaming domain, there needs to be an increased level of coordination between different law enforcement officials. However, the context in which they were discussing coordination was not specific to only esports, but with the understanding that traffickers in general are also taking their practices into the digital space. Therefore the increased coordination amongst law enforcement officials to improve general technological capacity would not just mitigate the crime in the physical space but also in potential cases involving esports.

The establishment of national and international federations that comprise different esports teams indicates to us that there are growing partnerships between certain esports actors. There are many such federations in all regions of the world, for example, the Namibian Electronic Sports Association (Namibia), the Brazilian Confederation of Electronic Sports (Brazil), the Malaysia Electronic Sports Federation (Malaysia), the Finnish Esports Federation (Finland), the Australian Esports Association (Australia) and the Jordan Esports Committee (Jordan). When asked if they are aware of any partnerships, the ranking official in the AUSC responded: *“I know that there are collaborations and there are ongoing activities, and the industry’s growing and becoming vibrant”*. This highlights to us that discussions are not just happening between esports teams, but also amongst public institutions, state entities and esports organisations. Thus the ranking official’s assessment of the industry as *“growing”* and *“vibrant”* can therefore be applied to the overall global esports industry. It is therefore crucial that these partnerships between the government sector and esports actors begin to take place to ensure that the esports industry grows alongside safety mechanisms and safeguarding assistance that can be further supported by those in the governance sector.

The migration expert stated that *“ethical tech companies and individuals as well, who are invested in good tech and good initiatives”*, highlighting the importance of seeking out strategic partnerships in the quest to mitigate online child trafficking. Through our interviews, we noted that the work of the esports expert serves as a real-world illustration of how these tactical partnerships might promote safer esports environments for children. Their project at EXPLOIRiT in Switzerland focuses on providing a space where children can play esports under a kind of supervision that is both pedagogical and supportive, creating a safe space for children to game without risk of being trafficked or exploited. They achieve this through, among other things, educating kids on how to handle the emotions that come with online, the importance of healthy sleep habits and the importance of staying in school. This has been successfully done through a partnership with Noetic, a Swiss esports organisation.

The esports expert informs us that: *“one of the first things we [EXPLORiT] launched was [the partnership with] Noetic. They are five years more advanced in terms of how we can use esports as a tool to teach useful stuff to kids and how we can create healthy environments [for children in the context of esports]. We made a partnership with them [Noetic]”*. Although the esports expert acknowledged that they would still have worked to create a safe esports environment for children even if the partnership with Noetic had not taken place, it nonetheless emphasises the significance of partnerships in maximising an organisation's capacity to achieve its goals. Noetic is just one of the esports-related organisations that can offer knowledge and



services regarding how to appropriately introduce children to online gaming and the world of esports. Esports federations, teams or governing bodies can collaborate with organisations like the Esports Integrity Commission and the Esports Research Network to discuss as well as share knowledge and best practices.

However, another consideration that needs to be made in approaching strategic partnerships, is how to approach relevant actors who do not share an interest in the protection of children from trafficking and exploitation. As the development officer at the NSPCC emphasises:

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*“The thing with safeguarding is, it is really a journey that you need to convince people to come on with you. You can demand it gets done, but it will be done grudgingly. You need to sell it to them and convince them that why you are doing it is going to be good for them, in the long run...”*

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The migration expert agrees, stating that "they [tech companies, esports actors] have to be brought on board," but that doing so will require "a lot of lobbying and advocacy" from a grassroots level. Therefore, partnerships need to be strategic in the sense that relevant organisations should seek out partnerships with those who are already doing the work that they want to be doing in order to maximise their potentials for success, like the partnership between EXPLORiT and Noetic. However, partnerships must also be strategic in developing ways in which different stakeholders that might not necessarily place trafficking and exploitation of children as their highest priority can collaborate effectively.

This analysis has contributed to the provision of crucial knowledge regarding the best use of partnerships, which has been incorporated into recommendations for relevant stakeholders. This analysis has provided us with insight as to how partnerships between law enforcement agencies, such as Interpol and Frontex, need to be strengthened. It has also provided us with an understanding of new up-and-coming partnerships between esports and governmental entities in the African region as well as the importance of being both strategic and conscientious when approaching potential partnerships.

## 5.1.5. Other relevant themes

### 5.1.5.1. Modus Operandi and Technology

There was a significant recurrent pattern noticed between the literature review and multiple responses from the interviewees, highlighting the role that technology plays in the issue of potential exploitation and trafficking of children online and specifically how technology can influence the modus operandi of offenders.

The literature review covered the growing role that technology plays in child trafficking and exploitation in both the esports and non-esports fields. This included the use of VPNs, social media as an intermediary channel, the challenge of prosecuting cross-border crimes and the rapid development of technology being both a liability for law enforcement and even a benefit to easily adaptable offenders. These themes also emerged from our analysis of the interviewees.

The expert on migration highlights that, although *“Atari was a digital sport... it was not connected to the internet”*, emphasising the particular effect the internet has brought upon online games that might have been considered a sport, or at least competitive, without an online element. Not being an expert in the field of esports, they connect the theme of the internet to how offenders in the human trafficking and smuggling fields have adapted their modus operandi to benefit from it. For example, they stated that:

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*“suddenly, you don’t need to actually see a person face to face, you could just start chatting them up, talking about dating, falling in love with you...let’s start gaming together, we’ll become pals”*.

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They continue to expand on this point by bringing attention to the fact that *“other flags that you might be able to see in a real-life relationship...you don’t have to go through those barriers anymore”*. This reinforces the modus operandi that was discussed of offenders using online video games because of the barriers, such as geography, that these mediums remove in the establishment of an intimate relationship. The migration expert indicates that this method is also being used by offenders in the wider trafficking field. The significance of this point rests in the apparent use of the internet as a tool that is being taken advantage of by traffickers being a cause for alarm in the discussion of trafficking and exploitation in esports – a phenomenon that is inherently based upon internet connectivity.

When asked whether they have seen offenders using social media as a way to pitch their services to potential victims online, the migration expert confirmed that *“they’ll definitely advertise this”, but “they know they [the victims] don’t need an incentive because they know the situation is bad”*. Just as offenders using video games attempt to transition their victims from gaming platforms to social media platforms, it is apparent that social media is used in a similar manner in the larger field of trafficking. Moreover, it is clear that vulnerability to being trafficked and exploited is intimately connected with the situation the potential victim finds themselves in within their context. Whether it is children with strenuous familial relationships or those in economic destitution, vulnerability begets vulnerability in the field of trafficking.

There is a double negative impact when discussing technology as it relates to exploitation online, and the potential for trafficking and exploitation in esports. This is that since technology has a rapid pace of development, it both makes it hard for law enforcement and other relevant actors to keep up their approaches to it and makes it easier for offenders to find new adaptive modus operandi. This was brought to attention in the literature review, particularly by Singh 2018 and was subsequently touched upon by the development officer from the NSPCC. They claim that one of the things they have learned throughout their career is that *“people that want to abuse children are very, very clued up on the ways and means that they are able to do that”*, meaning that offenders are informed about every potential change in technology that can provide them with an upper hand. The development officer at the NSPCC gets more specific as to how they think this can apply specifically to esports, continuing to say that:

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*“that kind of medium [esports], for them, is like opening a sweet shop...they’ll find every way that they can to exploit that entire system to abuse children because it’s an easy way to do it”*

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This highlights how esports can just be perceived by offenders as a new development in the wider field of technology and that they are likely to at least try to use it to their advantage while it remains under-scrutinised.

Lastly, the transferability of the modus operandi of offenders in traditional sports to that of potential offenders in esports was raised as a point. When asked if there was cause for concern to consider putting resources into the potentiality of such crimes occurring in the esports domain, given the parallels of how technology is used, with how trafficking occurs in traditionally studied fields, NSPCC responded:

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*“100%, I think that [putting in resources] is the case because, if you look at just generally the amount of grooming and trafficking and child abuse that goes on online that’s unrelated to gaming, just related to social media...it would be disingenuous to think that there isn’t the same amount of problems on a much larger scale going on within the online community, with regards to gaming.”*

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This is to further reiterate that trafficking and exploitation in esports is a cause for concern because how this crime can be perpetrated is not novel. It is thus important to note that the ways in which the crimes can be committed in esports are either analogous with, or at least similar to, the modus operandi that has already been in use in trafficking and smuggling in general.

The analysis in this section has served to answer an important question going into this phase of the research, do experts in the field find our identified vulnerabilities/susceptibilities relevant? It is clear that experts in migration and child protection see the use of the internet and social media as tools being used by offenders, that the rapid pace of development of technology benefits offenders and that there is a strong similarity between how offenders use technology now and how they could put it to use in gaming.

#### **5.1.5.2. Policy and Technology**

This theme of analysis arose from the connection made between the use of technology to promote policy by the development officer from the NSPCC and the migration expert. Having a brief discussion on this is significant so that the research can consider how technology can be used beneficially to promote positive policies.

The development officer at the NSPCC listed some advantages their organisation had as a result of technological mainstreaming. It is now easier to connect with people online, not just in the sense that it is easy to have a virtual meeting, but that having large online group meetings has become much more professional and has had higher rates of participation. In this way, when an organisation like the NSPCC seeks to inform communities about their updated policy, *"you can now get 50 or 60 online, rather than having the same eight to 20 people turn up when you're presenting it face to face"*. Additionally, it increased efficiency because the firm could connect online more readily and would no longer need to send personnel flying across the nation. However, they did note that leaning too heavily on technology for the dissemination of policy can result in some problems. This includes *"the same people turning up"* and *"not always the people that you need to be reaching,"* respectively. They state in their conclusion that there needs to be a balance and although technological developments have made it simpler to connect with a larger audience, *"to communicate your core message effectively is far better in person"*. The migration expert cited a project they had started in the Philippines where an app was used to spot probable cases of labour trafficking and/or exploitation as a significant example of in what spaces could this crime occur. Those who work in the field of trafficking utilised the app the most. The app would suggest if there was a case that required additional investigation for possible labour trafficking and/or exploitation based on the score at the end of these questions. According to the migration expert, individuals who used the app, including health care professionals and labour inspectors, *"thought it was quite successful"*.

This research places a lot of emphasis on the risks and vulnerabilities that can result from technology, therefore this is a crucial thematic point for examination. It's crucial to recognise that individuals working to stop child trafficking and other forms of abuse can also utilise technology to their advantage, instead of technology merely existing as a destructive force. Although these are just a few examples as to how technology can be used to mitigate the potentiality of child trafficking and exploitation, it is crucial that all of these mechanisms are understood so that the beneficial use of technology can be maximised.

## 6. Output

### 6.1. Risk Assessment

The evaluation and documentation of the effectiveness of risk responses in dealing with recognised risks and their root causes, as well as the effectiveness of the risk management process, is referred to as a risk assessment (Johnson, 2020). It is a necessary step in building an incident management plan. The decision to develop a risk assessment was, as we felt, a more adequate reflection of the external processes needed to overview and identify the gaps and areas of risk that can occur in the online space. A risk audit, on the other hand, would be more of an internal, detailed and thorough examination of internal policies which would be difficult to carry out on our end. Hence why a risk assessment seems better and is more similar to what we have created thus far.

In our research, the design of our risk assessment strongly follows the recommendations of the International Safeguards for Children in Sport Developing and Embedding a Safeguarding Culture report (Rhind & Owusu-Sekyere, 2017). This is so that the risk assessment developed fully addresses the multiple elements that could potentially contribute to online child trafficking/exploitation mechanisms. The risk assessment therefore will help us create policy recommendations that outline the ways in which certain steps can be taken as mitigative and/or preventive measures. The risk assessment is divided into several categories, such as communication and culture. It aims to allow relevant stakeholders to develop a policy that addresses all forms of potential harm toward children in regard to the threat of online child trafficking/exploitation in the gaming industry.

The risk assessment also aims to encourage more game developers and organisations to develop games that inform and pass knowledge regarding child protection legislation to children. This is to provide children with knowledge about their rights, and where to look for help and guidance if they need it. We believe that games that teach children about serious matters in a lighthearted manner have the ability to empower them subconsciously while simultaneously acknowledging the extra barriers certain children with additional vulnerabilities face in their quest for help, support and safety. Our risk assessment has been included in the annexe.



## 6.2. Recommendations

Honest discussion of the risks of trafficking in the online gaming sphere is imperative. Not just the kids, but also their parents, should receive these messages. Additionally, perpetrators should also be aware of the consequences of their actions. This section aims to outline recommendations that the research team has developed based on the culmination of information gathered and analysed in this report. The goals of these recommendations are to serve as reliable informants that different relevant stakeholders can use to inform their specific policymaking as it concerns the exploitation and trafficking of children in esports.

Recommendations regarding the prevention of potential exploitation and trafficking of children in esports include:

- The exploitation and trafficking of children through esports should be taken seriously by all relevant actors, including child protection services, migration groups and law enforcement institutions. This also includes esports federations, governmental institutions and grassroots organisations.
- Relevant stakeholders should allocate resources to both the monitoring of this potential threat and important safeguarding measures that can act as preventative measures. These measures include, but are not limited to, awareness raising targeted at parents and children about potential risks, the inclusion of parents during every step of the process in a child's involvement with an official esports activity and the creation of general regulations applicable to the esports field.
- The general regulations created should be drawn from the existing rules and regulations that exist for other sports, such as football, whenever possible in order to expedite the process of regulating this largely unregulated sport.
- Encourage technology firms to use more thorough scanning techniques and hasten the development of tools for identifying online human trafficking, including the trafficking of children, while ensuring that content resulting from online sexual exploitation is removed from online platforms to prevent further victimisation and exploitation.
- Every preventive measure must take into account factors such as gender, age, geographic location, race, disabilities and social as well as familial relationships.

- Increased research should be done specifically on the potential trafficking and exploitation of children in esports.

Additionally, due to the ability of the crime to reoccur, both victims and survivors should not fall prey to trafficking and exploitation once again. Therefore to mitigate shortcomings in protective responses, resources should be put into:

- Case management and interventions that are specifically tailored to dealing with victims and survivors who are children, for instance, and that are particularly sensitive to and knowledgeable about doing so.
- The creation of a safe space and community for both victims and survivors.
- Increased financing for technical capacity building that can serve as protective measures for both victims and survivors of exploitation as well as trafficking through esports. These measures include, but are not limited to, protecting the privacy and confidentiality of the individual(s), accessible legal and judicial assistance, adequate shelter, and mental/physical health services.
- The development of investigation mechanisms to identify cases of TIP related to esports that may take place both online and offline.
- The development of tools and procedures to adequately address corruption within institutions particularly those in charge of investigating and prosecuting traffickers.

In the case of governmental and law enforcement institutions, relating to the prosecution pillar, these actor's abilities to respond to such crimes should be modernised by:

- Organising trainings and information sessions on technology, such as VPNs, and how they are used by offenders to both exploit and traffic children.
- Organising trainings regarding online investigation methods, such as the collection of digital evidence and data responsibility and consensually.
- Reforming the legislative approach and understanding of online transborder crimes. This is as online crimes could potentially happen across differing regions and as such, there is a need for the development of efficient ways to prosecute offenders that use this complexity to their advantage.
- Public organisations must create legal frameworks for how esports should operate and the safeguards they can use to reduce the risks to children. Private parties could assist in developing and implementing this procedure.

It is crucial to remember that these cases are not unique and thus partnerships must be formed between all relevant actors, including schools, parents, and civil society organisations to raise awareness and increase advocacy around the threats of exploitation and trafficking that children face in esports. Due to the novelty of the issue of exploitation and trafficking of children through the medium of esports, in regards to partnerships, our recommendations for this aspect include:

- The creation of an oversight body and mechanisms to monitor this crime and work closely with states to prosecute the crime.
- Inclusion of this means of crime and its prevention mechanisms in international mandates.
- Increase discussions amongst key stakeholders such as esports entities and both local as well as international authorities about how each other's interests can be served. These partnerships should be mutually beneficial with the protection of children from exploitation and trafficking serving as the leading principle.
- Increasing knowledge sharing, capacity building and technical expertise amongst all key stakeholders.
- Partnerships between different law enforcement agencies globally should be formed to monitor cross-border crimes.

Alongside these recommendations framed around the pillars of the 4Ps framework, there must be the understanding that esports differs from video games. This inherent difference lies in the reliance of internet connectivity and the professionalised, competitive nature of esports and the risks that arise from this. This understanding could shift the paradigm from esports being viewed as a generic type of gaming, to an online public space where different individuals interact for strongly desired goals, and it is in this unregulated virtual world that the risk of exploitation and trafficking transcends. There must be careful consideration and high levels of awareness as to how technology is used. For instance, all relevant parties should take into account the dangers associated with esports technology, such as VPNs, in-game chat, social media channels, etcetera. This is as technology can also be used for more positive purposes, such as to monitor potential offenders, raise awareness and disseminate rapidly evolving policies. Last but not least, esports are growing rapidly in popularity among children of this generation and the next. Given that it is a space where many children frequent, it should be of importance to everyone who works to safeguard children and keep them from being subjected to any kind of exploitation.

## 7. Conclusion

Our research thus far has made further evident the lack of knowledge and awareness that exists of the potential for child trafficking and exploitation in esports. Nonetheless, there have been several pertinent starting points identified and created through this research to begin addressing how one might go about assessing the risk of trafficking and exploitation of children in the esports industry. These starting points include defining e-athletes, esports, the role of technology in child trafficking and the role of relevant stakeholders in mitigating this phenomenon from occurring. Additionally, a deeper understanding of vulnerabilities children face when in the realm of esports, the susceptibilities that exist in this domain and the markers of unique risks that could put certain children more at risk than others has been achieved. These starting points should contribute to future desk research, but more particularly the development of policy-forming processes that will help in the creation of a broadly applicable and thoroughly informed framework. The hope is that this potential framework can effectively assess and address risks of child trafficking and exploitation in the esports industry.

Through a thorough discussion and analysis regarding the legal definitions surrounding the concepts of migration, trafficking and exploitation, our research calls for stakeholders to consider child trafficking under the jurisdiction of strict, universally accepted legal frameworks. The emphasis of “movement” in the traditional definitions of trafficking should be loosened, given that more contemporary definitions of the concept note that it does not require movement. Particularly in the context of esports, movement does not need to occur for a child to be subjected to exploitation, given the inherent nature of how esports is played. While the means of exploitation and trafficking might differ to that of traditional sports, the result of both trafficking in the context of sports and esports are the same, and that is the exploitation of children.

We have highlighted that there is real reason for concern for the exploitation and trafficking of children in the esports industry for two fundamental reasons. The first reason is that many vulnerabilities that make children targets of trafficking in the traditional sports industry, such as socioeconomic status and age are transferable to the context of esports. There is also a substantive amount of evidence that indicate children have been, and continue to be, sexually exploited through video games. Furthermore, we have noted the potential of esports, through our example of LoL, to be an arguable form of labour exploitation. Therefore, we have concluded that children are susceptible to different forms of exploitation in esports. Secondly, the medium of esports, just like traditional sports, is a fertile ground for such crimes to occur

due to the lack of proper oversight and safeguarding mechanisms in place. The perception of sports as being apolitical, a potential vehicle for economic mobility and an opportunity for success are just a few reasons as to how this medium remains under the radar as a potential arena for such heinous crimes of exploitation to manifest.

In addition to identifying vulnerabilities and susceptibilities, we used our literature review to focus on some particularly vulnerable groups. These groups included younger children as we found evidence that younger children face more severe forms of abuse online. Our desk research found that children with unstable family relations are more susceptible to being exploited due to the potential lack of support they would have if they encountered abuse online. On top of that, younger girls are at a higher risk due to the gendered nature of traditional trafficking that can be transferred to the realm of esports. The information that we have found through this research should serve to inform the development of specific policies and frameworks that can more effectively target the safeguarding of these particularly vulnerable groups. However, a large majority of the data referenced gender as binary, therefore a future avenue for research in this regard would be to consider the vulnerabilities faced by children who fall outside this binary, and the potential means to navigate and develop safeguarding mechanisms for them.

Throughout our research, we constantly tried to consider and integrate the 4Ps framework into all our research processes. This allowed us to develop a comprehensive approach to understanding the crimes of exploitation and trafficking. This use of a well-established approach that covered every potential stage of intervention required to safeguard children: prevention, protection, prosecution and the key catalysing mechanism of partnership proved highly beneficial and greatly impacted the development of our outputs. As a result of using this framework to guide our interview with a diverse range of relevant stakeholders, we have been able to produce a list of important recommendations for different stakeholders that have interests in safeguarding children in esports. We have also been able to develop a risk assessment that can be used and further built upon by these relevant stakeholders that also establish a strong, informed foundation for the safeguarding of children in esports.

To conclude, we would like to highlight the fact that children in the esports industry face real risks of exploitation. While this report should serve as evidence to raise awareness of these potential crimes in the esports field, the research regarding this phenomenon should not stop here. The digital world of esports is growing rapidly in both popularity and profit, with the major driving force behind this growth being children. This alone calls for the utmost attention towards their safety and health, to ensure that children are not subjected to abuse and

exploitation in any way, shape or form. Through our process of exploring the risks of trafficking and exploitation of children in the gaming industry, we hence call for the partnership of all to take the significant action that the risk warrants and to consider the potential implications towards children that would arise if not taken seriously.

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## 9. Annexe

### a. Timeline

Terms of Reference (**28th March 2022**)

Literature review (**March - June 2022**)

- To better detail the broader context of esports and the risks it harbours in terms of child trafficking.
- Review existing regulatory frameworks for protecting children against exploitation and trafficking of children and their applicability to the gaming industry.

Identify Potential Interviewees (**April - June 2022**)

Inception Report/Preliminary Risk Assessment (**31st August 2022**)

- This report that details preliminary research findings will be sent to Mission89 and then further disseminated by the organisation to different stakeholders, to encourage stakeholder participation in the interview and data collection process.

Preliminary Report (**September - 28th October 2022**)

- Complementing the previous reviews. (**July - October 2022**)
- Interview conduction. (**June - November 2022**)
- Policy Recommendations will consist of our literature review, data from our interviews as well as anything else provided by extended desk research and our partner organisation.

Final Report and Final Risk Assessment (**2nd December 2022**)

- Refining and revising data analysis

Final Presentation (**13th December 2022**)

### b. Example Interview Questions

#### General

1. Could you tell us about the nature of your time in the Esports industry, and then specifically your role at [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] itself?
2. Based on your background in the esports industry, do you believe that there is a risk of consistent exploitation of children - including the potentiality of trafficking?
3. Based on your personal and professional experience and knowledge of the esports industry, have you ever heard of cases of potential trafficking and any advocacy around the potential issue?

#### Protection

1. From your experience and knowledge of the esports industry, what do you think are some of the greatest vulnerabilities *and* risks (can be any risk) that children face?
2. Based on your understanding of the esports ecosystem, which “actor” do you think would have the most impact to address risks children face in their games? (Publishers, domestic legislators, parents, esports leagues, etc.)

#### Prevention

1. Based on your professional career in the esports industry, what have you noticed as some effective policies to prevent kids from being vulnerable to exploitation?

#### Prosecution

1. Based on your experience in the esports industry, what have you learned are the best approaches to holding esports teams, leagues, game publishers to account when they are accused of exploitative behavior?

**Partnership**

1. From your time in the esports industry, what in your opinion are the most effective methods to establish a line of communication with game publishers and esports leagues?
2. In your opinion, based on your experience working in the gaming industry, would there be any difficulty in establishing a connection with publishers of games/esports leagues about any issue like this?
3. Could you tell us about [REDACTED]

- c. **Interview Analysis Instruction Sheet (in document form submitted separately for formatting purposes)**
- d. **Risk Assessment (in excel sheet submitted separately)**



# MISSION 89