How does Astralis work innovatively to accommodate social sustainability?

ASTRALIS

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Abstract

Esports has expanded rapidly in recent years, gaining a varied global audience and significant economic investment. Despite this growth, research has mostly focused on performance measures and economic implications, with little emphasis on social sustainability issues. This study seeks to fill the void by evaluating Astralis' social sustainability activities, focusing on player well-being, diversity, and ethical considerations. Using a critical realism framework, the study examines Astralis' approach through three layers: empirical (observable data), actual (underlying mechanisms), and real (causal drivers). This multi-layered analysis reveals how Astralis navigates industry norms and leverages communication channels to drive positive change. The research design integrates qualitative methodologies, including interviews with industry figures and analysis of industry controversies. Additionally, content analysis of Astralis' social media engagement on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, X, and YouTube offered a quantitative measure of audience reach and interaction. The findings show that Astralis prioritises player well-being with comprehensive support systems that include access to physical trainers, dieticians, and mental health professionals. The organisation also actively supports gender diversity and inclusion, encouraging women to participate in esports. Social media analysis shows that Astralis efficiently engages with its audience, promoting a community-oriented approach despite occasional ethical issues. The combination of Everett Rogers' Diffusion of Innovations Theory and Institutional Theory creates a framework for assessing the validity and impact of Astralis' social sustainability projects. These theoretical lenses emphasise the relative benefits of holistic player care and inclusion strategies in promoting organisational legitimacy and industry-wide change. However, problems like preserving transparency and resolving ethical quandaries highlight the necessity for continued efforts in social sustainability. This study emphasises the significance of comprehensive approaches to player care and diversity in esports, calling for a more socially responsible industry. Organisations such as Astralis can help the esports ecosystem's social viability by addressing ethical duties and harnessing social media for community participation. Future studies should focus on these elements to increase knowledge and practice in this rapidly growing sector.

Keywords: Astralis, Esport, Sustainability, Inclusion, Mental Well-being, Critical Realism

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1. Introduction

Esports, a rapidly growing industry, merges the worlds of gaming and sports into a competitive, dynamic, and widely engaging phenomenon. As it continues to captivate audiences worldwide, it offers not only entertainment but also a unique blend of social, cultural, and economic impacts. However, despite its expanding influence, esports remains a relatively unexplored domain in academic research, especially concerning its social sustainability aspects. Our study seeks to bridge this gap by delving into the multifaceted social dimensions of esports. Moving beyond the traditional focus on competitive performance and economic benefits, we examine critical areas such as health, diversity, community well-being, and ethical considerations within esports organisations.

By providing a comprehensive analysis, we aim to shed light on how esports influence society in both positive and challenging ways. The most notable aspect of our research is an in-depth look at Astralis, a well-known esports company best recognised for its winning Counter-Strike team. Through interviews with key figures like Sofus and Kasper, we learn about Astralis' comprehensive approach to player care, which includes access to top-tier physical trainers, dieticians, and mental health specialists. This proactive approach to player welfare is about more than just optimising performance; it's about guaranteeing the players' longevity and health, which aligns with broader research highlighting the need for comprehensive support systems in esports. Astralis supports female participation and offers assistance to women pursuing jobs in gaming. This dedication to inclusivity aligns with broader social ideals of gender equality and demonstrates a deliberate attempt to remove barriers to female involvement in esports. Our research digs at the ethical landscape of esports, including the intricacies of financial partnerships and organisational duties.

By exploring situations like Astralis' indirect ties to questionable financial backers, we highlight ethical dilemmas and the industry's need for openness and accountability. This critical perspective sparks a larger conversation about how esports organisations can confront these obstacles while upholding ethical standards and social responsibility. In addition to resolving gaps in the current literature, our findings offer useful recommendations for future research. By providing insights into the social elements of

esports and recommending areas for additional investigation, we hope to encourage future studies to expand on our results and advance our understanding of this subject.

Our research expands the understanding of esports by incorporating diverse social factors and ethical considerations. Understanding Astralis' practices shows how the esports scene may become more inclusive, healthy, and morally responsible. As esports continues to grow and influence millions worldwide, it is critical to understand and address these societal issues to maintain its long-term development.

1.1 Motivation

We were first exposed to the professional gaming industry, along with many other young gamers, when Astralis burst onto the scene and began winning titles. Even though they were still a young team, their management style was unique in the esports industry (Kjær, 2021). Astralis was the beginning of the flair and dedication to turn the esports sector into a more professional one (Kjær, 2021). While there was no social approval in 2017 from parents, politicians, schools, and other institutions, many think that Astralis was the catalyst for the current transformation (Laursen, 2021). The taboo around playing video games has been lifted thanks to the constant efforts of Astralis (Kjær, 2021). Although traditional sports have long held a prominent position, esports has grown in popularity in recent years, both as a spectator sport and as a competitive activity. It is also evident that several individuals watch esports without even playing the games (Kjær, 2021). Each of these elements has contributed to esports' growing prominence in the public's eyes.

Talks about esports in Denmark frequently centre on worries about bad behaviour and health problems, particularly concerning younger players. However, it is important to acknowledge the benefits and social value that esports provide (Hørsholt, 2022). Early English proficiency, problem-solving abilities, communication, and teamwork are all facilitated by gaming (Hørsholt, 2022). Furthermore, the esports sector has enormous potential for worldwide expansion and has already had a beneficial societal influence in Denmark. For the past six years, Astralis has led the way in the advancement of elite esports, placing a strong emphasis on player well-being and professional standards. Their strategy has affected esports culture as a whole as well as fan behaviour and player performance.

The former CEO of Astralis, Anders Hørsholt, draws attention to the growing influence of esports on Denmark's social and economic fabric. Hørsholt highlights the potential for esports to create jobs and expand income, citing its competitive advantage in digital engagement with mainstream entertainment. As an example, the company highlights Astralis' quick development from a team of 10 to roughly 90 workers (Hørsholt, 2022). He exhorts Denmark to take advantage of esports' potential for economic growth as well as for youth empowerment and the promotion of innovation in the digital sphere.

As an esports organisation, Astralis works in an environment where motivation and involvement are essential. The article from the American Psychological Association emphasises how esports can promote social sustainability in addition to entertainment. Astralis is leading an industry that attracts gamers of all ages to virtual worlds by participating in esports (Granic et. al. 2014). These settings promote perseverance, collaboration, and achievement celebration, reflecting the motivating philosophies that lead to success in both virtual and real-world settings (Granic et. al. 2014). We can also notice how video games support an incremental hypothesis of intelligence by placing more emphasis on effort than natural aptitude. This way of thinking is influenced by both its players and viewers (Granic et. al., 2014). Esports environments, such as Astralis', foster a culture of resilience and constant progress by offering prompt and specific feedback.

1.2 Research Questions and Objectives

In this study, we seek to investigate how Astralis is at the forefront of creative approaches to promote social sustainability in the esports industry. Our goal is to conduct a thorough analysis of the operational strategies and tactics used by Astralis to address issues related to social sustainability. We aim to critically assess how well Astralis' creative efforts contribute to the esports industry's social sustainability objectives. Furthermore, our goal is to investigate how Astralis' social sustainability initiatives affect a variety of stakeholders, from sponsors and the larger community to team members and fans. By applying innovative methods and tactics, we hope to provide Astralis and other esports organisations with practical insights and suggestions that will help them improve their social sustainability practices even more.

Research Question: How does Astralis work innovatively to accommodate social sustainability?

1.3 Background and field of research

What is gaming?

The act of playing video games on a computer, gaming console, or mobile device is referred to as gaming (Wright, 2022). Gaming has become a popular form of recreation for people of all ages and backgrounds, with advancements in technology continually shaping and expanding the gaming industry. From casual mobile games to competitive esports tournaments, gaming offers a diverse range of experiences and opportunities for players to engage and connect with others worldwide (Wright, 2022).

What are esports?

Electronic sports, or esports for short, are competitive video gaming events where professional players pit themselves against one another in a variety of well-known video games (Leroux-Parra, 2020). Players compete for monetary awards and recognition in these events, which are frequently set up as leagues and tournaments (Leroux-Parra, 2020). The popularity of esports has skyrocketed in the last few years, drawing millions of viewers to live-streaming and in-person tournaments (Leroux-Parra, 2020). Because esports are competitive, participants invest a great deal of time in developing their talents, taking gaming to a whole new level.

What is Player versus player (PVP) games?

In the PVP genre of video games, users engage in real-time competition or battle against one another. Playing these games requires a combination of quick reflexes, strategic thinking, and clever gameplay to outwit and outmanoeuvre opponents (DreamsQuest, 2024). First-person shooters, fighting games, battle royales, and MOBAs (Multiplayer Online Battle Arenas) are a few examples of PVP games (Rouse, 2011). PVP games' competitive nature frequently results in close matches, exhilarating wins, and heartbreaking losses. In the realm of player-versus-player gaming, players need to continuously adjust and enhance their abilities to maintain a competitive edge (DreamsQuest, 2024).

Who is Astralis?

In January 2016, the Danish esports organisation Astralis was established. With a primary concentration on Counter-Strike: Global Offensive (CS:GO), the squad became well-known very quickly and became one of the best in the world. Astralis has been recognised as the best team in the world and has won numerous major tournaments. Apart from their triumph in CS:GO, Astralis has also ventured into other video games, including FIFA and League of Legends. (Astralis, 2024)

Astralis, the first company in the esports market to launch an IPO, is a trailblazing force in the space. This daring decision not only signified a major shift in the way the global entertainment business viewed esports, but it also set a precedent for future esports companies (Astralis, 2024). Astralis is well-positioned to take the lead in determining how esports and gaming will develop in the future because of its desire for excellence and constant progress as its purpose.

What is transformation in gaming?

The fact that gaming has grown from a specialised hobby to a major cultural force shows how much of an influence it has on modern culture (Dusathsara, 2023). By exploring important facets of the gaming industry and illuminating the complex interactions between culture, technology, and people. Looking at the world of esports, where professional gaming has become a popular phenomenon characterised by large-scale competitions and rising interest. Cross-platform gaming encourages inclusivity and connectivity among players across many platforms and creates a global sense of community. Moreover, social media capabilities are incorporated into gaming systems to support player community building, content sharing, and real-time involvement (Dusathsara, 2023). Examined in detail is the rise of independent gaming as a venue for artistic expression and creative experimentation, demonstrating the variety and inventiveness of the gaming business. Revolutionary for the gaming industry was the impact of streaming services such as Twitch and YouTube Gaming, which have made content creation more accessible and raised gamers to the position of influencers (Dusathsara, 2023). Gamification is being used by enterprises outside of games to improve learning, behaviour modification, and engagement across a range of industries.

1.4 Glossary

Counter-Strike: A popular team-based first-person shooter game where players complete objectives like bomb defusal or hostage rescue. Counter-Strike Global Offensive (CS:GO) and Counter-Strike 2 (CS2) are the two latest iterations of the game, with CS2 taking over from CS:GO on September 27, 2023 (Counter-Strike 2, 2024).

League Of Legends: A widely played 5v5 multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) game where teams of champions compete to destroy the opposing team's Nexus (Riot Games., 2024).

FIFA: A leading football simulation video game series where players can manage teams and compete in matches mirroring real-world football (EA, 2017).

Heroic and Godsent: These two teams launched at the same time as Astralis and also shared their offices in the early days. Heroic (EGamersWorld, 2024) has since become a direct rival to Astralis in the competitive CS scene. Godsent (EGamersWorld, 2024) have not had as much success, but they have been around the scene for many years.

Roster: A roster is a five-player squad playing for a team in competitive games (Esportsguide, 2020).

Counter-Strike Major: A Major is described as the most prestige event in the Counter-Strike circuit, some have described it as being equivalent to the World Cup (Šimić, 2024).

IPO: Initial Public Offering, the process by which a private company offers shares to the public for the first time to raise capital (Curry, 2024).

First-person shooters: Video games where players experience the action through the protagonist's eyes and engage in gun-based combat (Rouse, 2011).

Fighting games: Video games focused on close combat between characters with unique moves and abilities, often in a competitive format (Rouse, 2011).

Battle royales: Multiplayer games where players compete to be the last one standing on a shrinking map, often with scavenging and survival elements (Takami, 2023).

MOBAs: Multiplayer online battle arena games where teams of players control individual characters and work together to destroy the opposing team's base (Stubbs, 2024).

1.5 Significance of the Study

This research explores Astralis's groundbreaking role in advancing social sustainability in the esports scene. In addition to changing the culture of esports, Astralis' creative methods have established a standard for responsible gaming. Through an analysis of Astralis' methods, we can learn more about how esports companies may incorporate professionalism and player well-being into their operations, which will ultimately lead to the advancement of industry standards. Additionally, this study investigates the larger effects of Astralis' social responsibility programmes on a range of stakeholders, such as sponsors, supporters, and the local community. By conducting a thorough analysis of these effects, we hope to determine how well Astralis' tactics work to build goodwill and encourage diversity within the esports community. This study adds to a large body of research on social sustainability in esports, synthesising major findings on topics such as health, gender equality, governance, and community development. We hope to provide comprehensive knowledge of the problems and potential for promoting social sustainability in the fast-changing esports ecosystem by relying on multidisciplinary themes from sport-for-development, governance systems, and gender representation.

1.6 Literature Review

The rapid expansion of esports has not only transformed the landscape of competitive gaming but has also brought attention to its social dimensions, including health, gender equality, diversity, and community well-being. This literature review aims to synthesise key research contributions in the realm of social sustainability within esports, examining various themes and perspectives from scholarly works.

In the context of health and gender equality, Astralis, as an innovative organisation, can be analysed through the lens of a practice-based approach. Astralis employs both Apollonian and Dionysian practices to accommodate social sustainability. For instance, the organisation may implement structured programmes and initiatives (Apollonian) aimed at promoting health and gender equality within its operations (Fuglsang, 2021). Simultaneously, Astralis fosters a culture of creativity and collaboration (Dionysian) that encourages experimentation and the emergence of innovative solutions to complex societal issues (Fuglsang, 2021).

By embracing both Apollonian and Dionysian practice approaches, Astralis demonstrates its commitment to social sustainability by addressing health and gender equality through purposeful strategies and spontaneous (Fuglsang, 2021) creative endeavours. Further research could explore the specific practices and interventions employed by Astralis to promote social sustainability and their impact on organisational outcomes and broader societal well-being.

Successful social transformation requires several key element, like clear and desirable goals, effective strategies, changes in organisational structures, and a social process for rapid transmission and adoption (Jacobs, 2021). Jacobs (2021) framework highlights the multifaceted nature of social transformation. It underscores the importance of not only clear goals but also reshaping the organisational structure and fostering rapid adoption through social processes. Moreover, social transformation is not confined to specific geographic areas or sectors but encompasses all aspects of society worldwide (Jacobs, 2021). While visionary leaders and organisations can catalyse change, a critical mass of informed individuals across various sectors is essential for meaningful progress. The emphasis on visionary leadership and organisational structure aligns with the impactful change that requires coordinated efforts across society. Jacobs (2021) discusses how particularly noteworthy the call for a global social movement rooted in high values and fueled by the aspirations of youth is, presenting a compelling vision for a better world. This perspective prompts reflection on broader societal implications and action in advancing movements towards positive global change.

Sport-for-social-change (SFSC) and sport-for-development (SFD) have become popular paradigms for understanding how sport may be used to advance social goals. Sherry et al. (2015) discusses how SFD and SFSC provide a platform for utilising sport as a tool to contribute to economic development, social inclusion, healthy lifestyles, and gender equity. These frameworks offer valuable insights into how esports organisations can harness their platforms to address social issues and promote community development. One of the noteworthy segments of the limitation and future research are challenges related to the focus on the funding of the studies. Another area for improvement is the necessity for

researchers to adapt research methodologies to local contexts and collaborate with communities, which may require additional time and resources.

Esports governance has also emerged as a critical area of inquiry, with Peng et al. (2020) exploring the governance structures within the industry. Their study reveals the evolving nature of esports governance and the challenges posed by stakeholders. The findings suggest a shift towards a network administration organisation (NAO) model, highlighting the need for collaboration among stakeholders to ensure social sustainability.

Cunningham et al. (2017) contribute to the conceptual discussion on esports and its implications for sports management. They argue for the relevance of esports within sports management scholarship, emphasising its potential to contribute to diverse social outcomes, including health promotion, diversity, and inclusion. Despite debates surrounding its status as a formal sport, esports represents a significant study area within the sport management discipline.

Gender representation remains a significant issue within the esports industry, as highlighted by Darvin et al. (2021). Their study examines the underrepresentation of women in esports environments, drawing parallels with gender disparities in traditional sports. The findings underscore the importance of promoting gender equality initiatives within esports organisations to create inclusive and supportive gaming environments.

Shaw (2011) examines the construction of gamer identity and its intersection with gender, race, and sexuality. By challenging assumptions about the gaming audience, Shaw emphasises the need to focus on the construction of the medium rather than the audience itself. This shift in academic attention is crucial for developing arguments for representation in games that do not rely solely on demographic markers.

Trepte et al. (2012) investigate the social dimensions of online gaming and their impact on offline social support networks. Their study reveals the potential of online gaming communities to foster meaningful social connections, highlighting the importance of recognising the social benefits of esports participation.

The literature reviewed underscores the multifaceted nature of social sustainability in esports and the importance of holistic approaches to address social issues within the industry. By drawing on concepts from sport-for-development, governance, gender representation, identity formation, and social support networks, esports organisations like Astralis can innovate and implement strategies to promote positive social outcomes and foster inclusive gaming environments.

As part of our research into social sustainability in the fast-paced realm of esports, we have travelled through several facets of this developing sector. A wide range of topics, from gender equality and health efforts to community well-being and governance, have been revealed by our literature research. Through this investigation, we have seen how Astralis and other organisations handle these complex problems by using a wide range of tactics to advance social sustainability. Esports organisations have a sophisticated approach to addressing social concerns by fusing organised activities with creative and collaborative cultures.

Our compilation processes of research draw from a wide range of frameworks and viewpoints, such as practice-based approaches and sport-for-development models, to represent the multidisciplinary character of studying esports. However, even with this diversity, enduring problems like unequal representation of women and the intricacies of changing political systems surface. These difficulties highlight the constant discussion and creativity needed to develop welcoming gaming spaces and promote social sustainability within the esports industry.

As authors contributing to the discourse on social sustainability in esports, we draw upon insights from a variety of scholarly works to inform our positioning. For instance, the notion of combining planned activities with innovative and cooperative cultures echoes Fuglsang's (2021) analysis of Astralis' practice-based approach to accommodating social sustainability. Similarly, our discussion of the enduring challenges in the industry, such as the unequal representation of women, resonates with the findings of Darvin et al. (2021) regarding gender disparities in esports environments. By referencing these studies and others mentioned in our literature review, we anchor our perspective in the existing body of

research and contribute to the ongoing conversation surrounding social sustainability in esports.

2. Methodology

2.1 Philosophy of science

Science philosophy serves as a kind of road map for our exploration of the universe of knowledge. It clarifies how and what we can learn from the world and how we study it. Critical realism provides an intriguing perspective in this area by challenging conventional wisdom and opening our minds to new possibilities (Egholm, 2016). According to critical realism, we should examine more than what is immediately apparent or quantifiable. It implies that, despite our inability to see them directly, there are underlying patterns and structures influencing everything in our environment. These systems influence our thoughts and behaviours, although they are frequently hidden from view (Egholm, 2016). Critical realism regards individuals as components of broader groups or systems. These systems affect our behaviour, even though we aren't always conscious of it. However, we also have the ability to alter these systems through our own actions, so it's not a one-way path.

Critical realism promotes a combination of big-picture thinking and detail-oriented learning. It implies that we should develop concepts based on what we already know and then validate them in practical settings (Egholm, 2016). This improves our comprehension of the hidden structures. Furthermore, critical realism serves as a helpful reminder that science is about more than simply numbers and facts; it's about comprehending the world in order to improve it. Science can assist us in creating a better future by examining how society functions and highlighting injustices (Egholm, 2016). Simply put, critical realism in science philosophy encourages us to see past the obvious, investigate the unspoken factors influencing our reality, and consider the ways in which we may apply this understanding to bring about constructive change.

The use of critical realism in case studies is a shining example of methodological depth and integrity. By means of its philosophical perspective, critical realism provides a deep comprehension of the subtleties that underlie social phenomena, motivating us to explore under the surface and uncover the underlying mechanisms and structures at work. This

framework functions as a compass inside a study case, making it easier to investigate the background, identify the causal mechanisms, and place the results in the perspective of larger social, economic, and cultural environments. It tackles basic ontological and epistemological questions, offering things to consider on the nature of reality, the relationship between agency and structure, and the subtleties of interpretation in comprehending social realities (Easton, 2010).

In the Philosophy of Science section, we explore the importance of critical realism in relation to the Astralis case study. By applying critical realism, we can illuminate how this philosophical framework guides our research, fostering a deeper understanding and awareness of the social phenomena at play. Critical realism encourages us to seek beneath surface-level observations and examine the underlying structures and patterns that shape Astralis' organisation and their innovative approach to social sustainability. For instance, when examining social sustainability within Astralis, critical realism prompts us to investigate beyond superficial practices and identify the underlying mechanisms or structures that contribute to constructive or counterproductive outcomes. Consider the team's initiatives to promote diversity and inclusion within their organisation. Critical realism would prompt us to scrutinise not only the visible diversity policies but also the underlying power, cultural norms, and institutional structures that either support or hinder the implementation of these policies. Critical realism enables us to demonstrate the methodological integrity and depth of our approach in the Astralis case study. For example, when analysing the team's efforts to reduce their environmental impact, critical realism encourages us to go beyond mere observation of eco-friendly practices and explore the broader socio-economic systems and power relations that influence sustainability initiatives within the esports industry. Furthermore, critical realism addresses important ontological and epistemological issues, providing clarification on the nature of reality and the connection between agency and structure within the context of Astralis. For instance, when examining the dynamics between player autonomy and organisational structure, critical realism prompts us to consider how individual agency is constrained or enabled by broader institutional norms and market forces in the esports industry. By incorporating critical realism into our analysis, we aim to offer a nuanced understanding of how Astralis navigates the complexities of social sustainability, shedding light on both the visible practices and the underlying mechanisms that shape

organisational behaviour and outcomes. This approach allows us to uncover the intricate interplay between agency and structure, providing valuable insights for theory development and practical interventions in promoting social sustainability within the esports industry.

2.2 Data Collection Methods

This section describes the methodology used to collect the empirical data required to fully investigate Astralis' intriguing ways of fostering social sustainability in the esports industry. Building on the motivational underpinnings and contextual backdrop described in previous parts, we proceeded on a thorough path that included desk research, semi-structured interviews (Appendix 1 and 2), and an investigation of Astralis' social media presence. These data collection methods were carefully planned to provide multidimensional insights into Astralis' pioneering efforts and their implications for promoting social sustainability within the esports ecosystem.

Data triangulation

To confirm the strength and dependability of our research findings, we used a process known as data triangulation. Data triangulation is the deliberate use of various data-gathering methods or sources to cross-validate and confirm findings, lowering the possibility of bias and boosting the reliability of our conclusions (Carter et al., 2014).
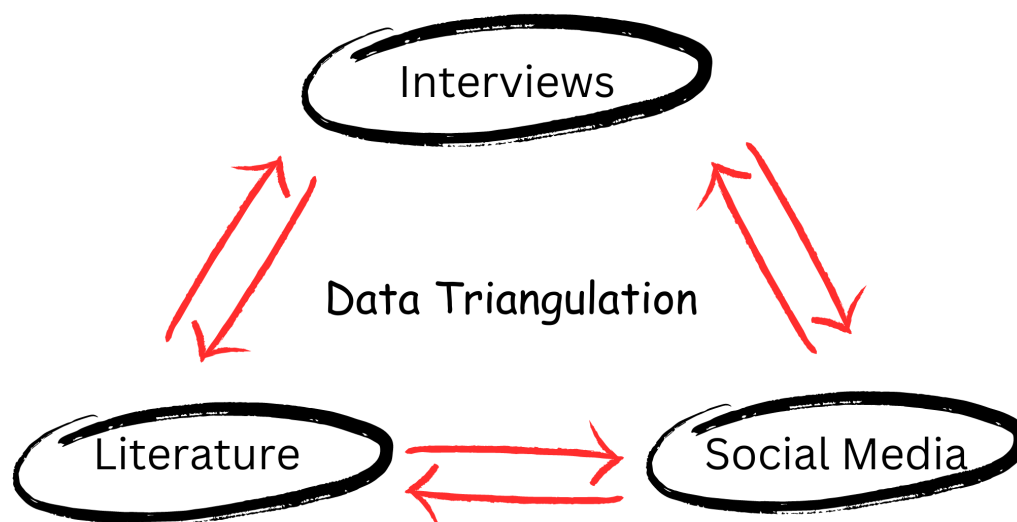
We are utilising this methodological technique in the context of critical realism to overcome the constraints of a single data source or analytical methodologies and navigate the

complexity of social reality. By using multiple data sources, we might detect hidden patterns or structures that could not be visible through a single method with bias and capture the multi-dimensional structure of social phenomena. This method recognises the limitations of individual data sources and the value of cross-validation in creating more reliable reality interpretations (Bhandari, 2022).

These data sources were chosen because they are complimentary and can provide different insights into Astralis' initiatives. Desk research gave a broad contextual understanding, semi-structured interviews allowed for in-depth exploration, and a review of Astralis' social media presence provided immediate insights. By combining information from numerous sources, we hoped to provide a comprehensive and nuanced picture of Astralis' diverse approach to social sustainability in esports.

The desk research thoroughly examined many information sources to gain comprehensive insights into the multiple aspects of esports, organisational innovation, and social sustainability frameworks. Aside from scholarly literature and industry publications, online forums, gaming communities, and popular media outlets were surveyed to gather personal opinions, grassroots views, and emerging trends impacting the esports environment. Historical evaluations of Astralis' corporate communications and press releases also provided important insights into the evolution of the company's strategic vision, operational culture, and social sustainability activities over time. Further research into long-term patterns in esports sponsorship, fan engagement measurements, and rules and regulations could provide nuanced perspectives on the sector's evolution and Astralis' place within it.

In our research, we are exploring how the three-layer framework of critical realism, coupled with desk research, enhances our understanding of reality's complexity. This framework assists us in grasping the foundational layer (the actual) by uncovering underlying mechanisms and structures. Moreover, it helps us navigate the real layer, where structures translate into observable phenomena and intricate relationships emerge. When it comes to our data collection strategy, we recognise the importance of integrating data triangulation. By doing so, we ensure that our findings are accurate and reliable. This involves leveraging multiple sources and methods to validate our insights across different layers. We will detail

how each piece of data and empirical evidence reflects the lenses of theories used in this project and also illuminate the interaction between ontology and epistemology. This understanding not only enriches our research methodology but also provides valuable insights into the actual and real layers guiding our interpretation of observable events, interactions, and phenomena.

The semi-structured interview approach was deliberately constructed to engage a wide range of stakeholders that have a connection directly related to Astralis. Beyond clarifying Astralis' organisational ethos and strategic directives, these interviews provided an ideal setting for delving into nuanced topics such as the psychological aspects of professional gaming, the different sustainability efforts of Astralis, and the changing educational structures provided to young "gamers" in Denmark. As a foundation for our questions in both interviews (Appendices 1 and 2), we used the three layers of analysis to match each question to the appropriate layer. When producing a helpful question, we first created a research question for what we wanted to investigate and then located its layer in the three layers of analysis, and then, with these two things, we had the necessary knowledge to construct interview questions (Appendix 3), which displays each question along with its research question and layers.

An in-depth examination of Astralis' social media presence (Appendix 4) enabled an investigation of its digital engagement methods, audience segmentation approaches, and brand identity efforts. Beyond quantitative measures like follower counts and interaction rates, this provided insight into the emotional resonance of Astralis' content and the effectiveness of its community-building activities. Furthermore, comparing Astralis' social media efforts to those of industry peers and traditional sports teams could provide valuable insights into emerging best practices, successful narrative techniques, and audience engagement advances. Social media presence enhances comprehension of reality by complementing the three-layer framework of critical realism. It facilitates the identification of observable manifestations (the actual), the application of data analysis techniques (the empirical), and the discovery of underlying structures (the real). Through the analysis of social media data, we are able to better understand online social dynamics by navigating between observable occurrences and hidden structures.

2.3 Data Analysis Techniques

Critical realism provides a deep framework for data analysis methods that go beyond its basic critique of positivism and hermeneutics to become a critical counterbalance to the increasing power of social constructivism (Egholm, 2016). Leading academics like Roy Bhaskar, Margaret Archer, and Tony Lawson are at the forefront of critical realism, an approach that questions the idea of a single, cohesive science and instead offers a complex theory of reality that is split into three different layers.

The real, or first layer, explores the intricate structures and workings that underpin perceptible events. This is where the world's ontological basis, which consists of the underlying forces and structures that influence the potential courses of events and acts, is discovered. This layer, which paves the way for later observable events, is the foundation of reality, where causal mechanisms function beyond the layer of immediate awareness (Egholm, 2016). When we methodologically work with the real layer in this study, we focus on identifying and understanding these underlying structures and causal mechanisms. We translate this into empirical observations by analysing patterns, tracing the origins of observable phenomena, and constructing theoretical models that explain the deeper realities shaping observable events.

As we proceed to the second layer, we come across the actual, which is made up of all the observable things that come out of these underlying structures. This layer represents a complicated interaction of several causes and surrounding elements, as opposed to a straightforward causal link. In this case, events originate from the interaction of multiple underlying systems and contextual factors rather than just being the product of linear cause and effect. When we methodologically work with the actual layer in this study, we focus on analysing observable events and phenomena to uncover the complex interactions and underlying systems at play. We translate this into empirical observations by conducting detailed case studies, performing comparative analyses, and using statistical methods to identify patterns and correlations that reveal the deeper processes influencing visible phenomena (Egholm, 2016).

The transitive dimension is represented by the empirical layer, which is where data analysis methods are applied. This layer deals with occurrences and phenomena that can be observed; it is the epistemological domain in which theories and scientific analyses are produced. But these assessments are necessarily coloured by the opinions and convictions of the researchers, underscoring the complex interplay between ontology and epistemology (Egholm, 2016). When we methodologically work with the empirical layer in this study, we focus on collecting and analysing data related to observable phenomena. We translate this into empirical observations by using various data analysis techniques, such as statistical analysis, thematic analysis, and grounded theory, to interpret the data. This approach involves recognising the challenges and uncertainties that come with interpreting social phenomena while navigating the changing relationship between visible phenomena and hidden structures. (Bhaskar, 2020).

The lens of diffusion of innovation theory to the three layers offers valuable insights into the dissemination and adoption of new ideas, practices, or technologies within a social context. This theory clarifies how underlying structures and mechanisms affect the diffusion of innovations across various social environments within the context of critical realism. When we methodologically work with the diffusion of innovation theory, we analyse the procedures by which innovations are presented and assimilated into society. We do this by examining case studies, conducting surveys, and using statistical models to track the spread and adoption of innovations. T With this method, the hidden factors influencing the diffusion process can be seen. This theory emphasises the significance of comprehending the socio-cultural, institutional, and economic elements that mediate adoption patterns while acknowledging the diversity of actors and environments involved in innovation spread. By incorporating diffusion of innovation theory into data analysis, we can identify patterns of adoption, resistance, and adaptation, which sheds light on the complex interplay between structural constraints and individual agency.

Another important aspect of the analysis is understanding how social institutions, conventions, and practices influence organisational behaviour and decision-making processes. This is made easier with the help of institutional theory. This theory sheds light on the underlying institutional structures that control social interactions and influence

organisational outcomes within the framework of critical realism. When we methodologically work with institutional theory, we investigate how institutional logics influence the processes of data collection, interpretation, and dissemination. This involves conducting qualitative interviews, ethnographic studies, and document analysis to uncover how institutional norms and practices shape organisational behaviour. Institutional theory highlights the dialectical relationship between structure and agency, emphasising the need for both change and stability in forming institutional contexts. By incorporating institutional theory into data analysis, we achieve a more nuanced understanding of the socio-cultural contexts and the ways in which these contexts influence organisational practices and outcomes.

Critical realism promotes methodological pluralism in the context of data analysis methodologies that take into account the complexity of comprehending social processes and the multidimensional character of reality. Researchers can improve our understanding of complicated social processes by adopting this paradigm to create more nuanced studies that reflect the interaction between observable events and underlying structures (Roberts, 2014).

2.4 Research Design

In this study, we conduct a thorough investigation into the creative ways in which Astralis as a company, integrates social sustainability into its operations. The main research concern that guides our investigation into the complex nature of organisational practices and their effects on societal well-being is "How does Astralis work innovatively to accommodate social sustainability?"

Our commitment to the critical realist philosophy of science is the foundation of our work. This philosophical foundation emphasises how we understand the fundamental mechanisms and structures that form social phenomena in organisations (Egholm, 2016), such as Astralis, and how agency and context also play a part in shaping these events. It challenges us to go past the obvious and discover the more profound ontological and epistemological aspects of organisational processes.

We use a multifaceted data collection methodology in order to shed light on the intricacies of Astralis' approach to social sustainability. As a starting point for our investigation, desk research enables us to extract information from previously published books, articles, and records about Astralis's social responsibility programmes. Interviews with important Astralis stakeholders provide priceless firsthand insights into the company's social sustainability initiatives and tactics. Furthermore, examining Astralis' social media presence through analysis gives us a new perspective on how the company informs the public and outside stakeholders about its social sustainability initiatives.

We use the diffusion of innovation theory and institutional theory, two well-known theoretical frameworks, to contextualise our findings and give them a theoretical foundation. Through an examination of Astralis's adoption and use of creative practices in the field of social sustainability, the diffusion of innovation theory sheds light on the methods by which new concepts are presented, accepted, and institutionalised inside the company (Rogers, 2003). Institutional theory, on the other hand, clarifies the outside forces and standards that influence Astralis's social sustainability practices and provides insights into the larger socio-cultural and institutional environments in which it functions. Using an in-depth investigation guided by critical realism, we aim to reveal the fundamental mechanisms and frameworks that propel Astralis' inventive strategy for social sustainability. Our goal is to advance knowledge of organisational practices and how they affect societal sustainability by fusing theoretical frameworks, empirical data, and philosophical ideas. In the end, our research aims to shed light on avenues for social impact and organisational innovation in the quest for social sustainability.

In this study, the real layer is addressed by examining the fundamental mechanisms shaping Astralis' social sustainability practices. Through critical realism, researchers discover and analyse the underlying forces beyond surface-level observations. The actual layer is explored through multifaceted data collection methods, including desk research, stakeholder interviews, and social media analysis. These approaches reveal observable manifestations of Astralis' social sustainability initiatives. The transitive level is approached through theoretical frameworks such as diffusion of innovation theory and institutional theory. These lenses

contextualise Astralis' practices within broader socio-cultural and institutional contexts, enriching the understanding of its innovative approach to social sustainability.

3. Theoretical framework

This research employs a variety of approaches to analyse the innovative practices of organisations within the esports industry, particularly focusing on how they accommodate social sustainability. The study integrates two prominent theoretical frameworks: Diffusion of Innovations Theory and Institutional Theory. This combination allows for a comprehensive examination of the adoption, spread, and institutionalisation of innovative practices related to social sustainability within organisations like Astralis.

3.1 Diffusion of Innovations Theory

Diffusion of Innovations Theory, developed by Everett Rogers - renowned in the field of communication studies for his innovative research on the spread of innovations. His seminal work, "Diffusion of Innovations," revolutionised the comprehension of the social diffusion of ideas, influencing disciplines including public health, sociology, and marketing (DRI, 2024), and offers a comprehensive framework for understanding how new ideas, practices, and technologies spread within social systems. At its core, the theory identifies key elements that influence the adoption and diffusion processes, giving us an insightful understanding of the processes of innovation diffusion (Rogers, 2003).

Diffusion of Innovations Theory highlights the importance of various attributes of innovation in shaping its adoption and spread. These attributes include relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability. For instance, innovations perceived as offering significant advantages over existing practices or technologies are more likely to be adopted by individuals or organisations (Rogers, 2003). By utilising this aspect of the theory, we can analyse how the perceived attributes of innovative practices related to social sustainability influence their adoption within organisations like Astralis. The theory also emphasises the role of communication channels in facilitating the spread of innovations. Different channels, such as interpersonal networks, mass media, and social media platforms, play distinct roles in disseminating information about innovations and influencing adoption

decisions (Rogers, 2003). We can investigate how Astralis utilises various communication channels to promote innovative practices related to social sustainability, examining the effectiveness of different strategies in reaching target audiences and encouraging adoption. Diffusion of Innovations Theory recognises the importance of social networks in the diffusion process. Individuals within social networks influence each other's adoption decisions through interpersonal communication, social influence, and social norms (Rogers, 2003). It can help us explore how social networks within organisations like Astralis facilitate or hinder the spread of innovative practices related to social sustainability. This involves analysing the structure of social networks, identifying key opinion leaders and influencers, and understanding the mechanisms through which information flows within the organisation.

The theory categorises individuals into different adopter categories based on their willingness to adopt new innovations. These categories include innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards (Rogers, 2003). We can examine how these adopter categories manifest within organisations like Astralis and how they influence the diffusion of innovative practices related to social sustainability. This involves identifying early adopters and opinion leaders within the organisation, understanding their motivations and characteristics, and exploring strategies for engaging different adopter categories effectively.

3.2 Institutional Theory

Institutional Theory offers a comprehensive framework for understanding how institutions and organisational structures shape behaviour and practices within society. At its core, the theory emphasises the role of institutional norms, values, and structures in influencing organisational behaviour and decision-making processes (Lammers, 2017). Researchers can utilise Institutional Theory to examine how broader institutional contexts influence the adoption, diffusion, and institutionalisation of innovative practices related to social sustainability within organisations like Astralis.

Institutional Theory highlights the importance of institutional norms and values in shaping organisational behaviour (Scott, 2014). Organisations like Astralis operate within institutional environments characterised by industry norms, regulatory frameworks, and societal

expectations. We can analyse how these institutional norms and values influence the adoption and implementation of innovative practices related to social sustainability within the esports industry. This involves examining how organisations navigate institutional pressures and conform to or diverge from prevailing norms and values. The theory also emphasises the role of institutional structures in shaping organisational behaviour and practices. Institutions such as industry associations, regulatory bodies, and professional standards organisations establish formal rules, procedures, and practices that govern organisational conduct. We can investigate how institutional structures within the esports industry influence the adoption and diffusion of innovative practices related to social sustainability (Scott, 2014). This includes analysing the impact of industry regulations, governance mechanisms, and industry standards on organisational behaviour and decision-making.

Institutional Theory introduces concepts such as organisational legitimacy and isomorphism to explain how organisations conform to institutional pressures. Legitimacy refers to the perception of an organisation's actions as socially acceptable and desirable within its institutional environment. Isomorphism refers to the process through which organisations adopt similar structures, practices, and behaviours to gain legitimacy and ensure survival within their institutional contexts (Cardona 2020). We can discover how organisations like Astralis seek to gain legitimacy by adopting innovative practices related to social sustainability and how they navigate pressures for conformity and differentiation within the esports industry.

The processes of institutional innovation and change are also taken into account by institutional theory. Institutions evolve in response to changing social, economic, and technological conditions. It can be analysed how organisations like Astralis contribute to institutional change by introducing innovative practices related to social sustainability within the esports industry. This involves examining how organisations challenge existing institutional norms, advocate for new industry standards, and shape the trajectory of institutional development within esports (Scott, 2014).

3.3 Relevance and Connection

In this research, integrating the Diffusion of Innovations Theory and Institutional Theory offers an analytical framework for comprehensively examining how organisations, exemplified by Astralis within the esports industry, innovate to accommodate social sustainability. Here, we delineate the rationale behind the validity of employing both theories in tandem, highlighting the synergies between them and their collective contributions to our understanding of organisational innovation processes.

The synthesis of Diffusion of Innovations Theory and Institutional Theory allows us to understand the strengths of each approach while compensating for their respective limitations. While the Diffusion of Innovations Theory provides insight into the micro-level intricacies of how innovations are adopted and disseminated within organisations (Rogers, 2003), Institutional Theory offers a broader lens, elucidating the influence of institutional contexts and structures on organisational behaviour. By synthesising these perspectives, we aim to capture the holistic nature of innovation processes within organisations like Astralis, encompassing both the micro and macro dimensions.

Our approach seeks to bridge the gap between micro-level processes of innovation adoption and macro-level institutional processes, recognising the intricate interplay between individual behaviours and broader institutional contexts. By elucidating how institutional norms, values, and structures shape the adoption and diffusion of innovative practices within organisations (Scott, 2014), we endeavour to uncover the underlying mechanisms driving organisational change and adaptation. This integrated analysis enables us to discern how innovation processes unfold within the esports industry, shedding light on the interdependencies between individual actions and institutional forces.

Integrating Diffusion of Innovations Theory and Institutional Theory enhances the analytical depth of our research, allowing for a nuanced examination of innovation processes within organisations like Astralis. Taking into account both the institutional frameworks at the macro and micro levels and the changing patterns of innovation contexts, we aspire to unravel the complexities inherent in organisational innovation efforts (Redmond, 2003). This

comprehensive analysis not only elucidates the drivers of innovation within the esports industry but also provides valuable insights into the mechanisms underlying organisational change and adaptation.

Beyond theoretical contributions, our integrated approach holds practical implications for organisations striving to promote social sustainability, such as Astralis. Through an in-depth understanding of the adoption characteristics at the micro level and the structure of institutions at the macro level, organisations can develop improved approaches for implementing socially sustainable practices. (Scott, 2014). This entails leveraging key influencers within the organisation, optimising communication channels, and navigating institutional pressures adeptly. By elucidating the interplay between individual actions, institutional contexts, and organisational outcomes, our research aims to inform evidence-based interventions aimed at fostering social sustainability within the esports industry. Integrating the Diffusion of Innovations Theory and Institutional Theory offers a comprehensive and nuanced framework for examining organisational innovation processes within the esports industry. By showing the synergies between these theories, we aspire to advance our understanding of how organisations like Astralis innovate to accommodate social sustainability, thus contributing to both theoretical advancements and practical interventions in the field.

While relationships and stakeholder interactions are important, theories like Stakeholder Theory and Social Network Theory might overlook the larger institutional effects influencing organisational behaviour. Stakeholder Theory focuses on the interconnected relationships between various stakeholders and how their interests influence organisational decision-making (Freeman, 1984), but it may not fully account for the institutional frameworks and regulatory environments within which organisations operate. Similarly, Social Network Theory examines the patterns of connections and interactions among individuals or entities within a network (Granovetter, 1973), yet it may not sufficiently address how institutional norms and structures shape these networks or how they influence organisational behaviour at a macro level. Therefore, even though these theories offer insightful explanations of the relational components of organisational factors, they may leave out the larger institutional framework that shapes organisational behaviours. Our

research aims to close the gap between macro-level institutional influences and micro-level stakeholder patterns by incorporating the Diffusion of Innovations Theory and Institutional Theory alongside these relational perspectives. This approach provides a more thorough understanding of organisational innovation processes within the esports industry. Diffusion of Innovations Theory allows us to explore how novel ideas or practices are introduced, adopted, and integrated within organisations like Astralis. This theory offers a structured approach to understanding the diffusion process, including the role of innovators, early adopters, and laggards (Rogers, 2003), which is particularly relevant in the rapidly evolving landscape of esports.

On the other hand, Institutional Theory enables us to examine the external pressures and norms that influence organisational behaviour and practices (Lammers, 2007). By analysing how Astralis conforms to or diverges from institutional expectations within the esports industry, we gain insights into the broader socio-cultural and institutional contexts shaping their innovation processes. Although these ideas provide insightful viewpoints, it's critical to recognise their limitations. While Institutional Theory may not adequately capture the processes of innovation and transformation within organisations, Diffusion of Innovations Theory may ignore the complexity of the balance of power and institutional restrictions. However, we seek to offer an in-depth analysis of how Astralis innovates to support social sustainability by combining these ideas and firmly establishing our study in critical realism.

3.4 Connection to Philosophy of Science

A guiding philosophy that provides deep insights into the processes of organisational transformation and sustainability, critical realism emerges in the quickly changing esports business, where innovation is both a necessity and a competitive advantage. Fundamentally, critical realism emphasises the existence of an objective outside reality that transcends our subjective perceptions, which invites serious contemplation on the nature of reality (Egholm, 2016). This ontological viewpoint emphasises the concrete effects of innovations and institutional frameworks on organisational behaviour and practices, which makes it especially relevant to our research on innovative practices within companies like Astralis. Critical realism emphasises how human knowledge is inherently limited and how interpretations are inherently unreliable. This epistemological stance encourages

researchers to look beyond the obvious and explore the causal processes behind organisational behaviour and institutional changes. (Egholm, 2016). We are inspired to carry out research that goes beyond cursory evaluations by accepting this epistemic humility (Kirby 2024), exploring the complex network of social structures and processes that influence the uptake, dissemination, and institutionalisation of new methods.

Methodologically, critical realism advocates for a comprehensive approach that synthesises qualitative depth with quantitative precision. Researchers can harness the strengths of qualitative insights and quantitative data analysis by employing mixed methods (Egholm, 2016), thus gaining a nuanced understanding of how innovations permeate and take root within organisational settings. By leveraging a combination of interviews, desk research, and articles, we can look into the multifaceted aspects of innovation processes. This methodological flexibility enables us to investigate adoption rates along with the nature of institutions and underlying social reasons that shape these processes, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of innovation in the esports sector. Research on creative practices within the esports sector for social sustainability benefits from the merging of Diffusion of Innovations Theory and Institutional Theory, which is enhanced by the philosophical and methodological framework that critical realism offers.

The philosophical framework of critical realism strengthens the integration of Diffusion of Innovations Theory and Institutional Theory into research on social sustainability in the esports sector. We used a variety of data collection methods for our study on Astralis' social sustainability initiatives, including social media analysis, interviews, and desk research. We can investigate the actual, transitive, and real levels of organisational phenomena with the aid of these techniques. Our goal is to uncover the fundamental mechanisms that underpin Astralis' creative approaches to social sustainability through the integration of theoretical frameworks. Critical realism, which is based on the recognition that there is an outside world that exists independently of human perception, pushes academics to look past the obvious and find the underlying causes of institutional dynamics and organisational behaviour (Brunson et.al 2023).

4. Astralis: An Overview

4.1 History and Background

Astralis, a pioneer in the competitive gaming space, was founded in 2016 when five players and one coach set out to create a top-tier esports organisation with financial support. Notably, Astralis, Heroic, and GODSENT were owned by RFRSH Entertainment in 2016. However, the League of Legends and CS:GO teams were acquired and formally relaunched under Astralis three years later, in 2019, with the teams, the players, and the management making identical moves. Driven by a tireless pursuit of innovation, strategic proficiency, and steadfast dedication to success, Astralis quickly emerged as the standard of excellence in the rapidly developing CS:GO environment. Astralis was founded on a blend of organisational culture and strategic vision, with a focus on values like teamwork, discipline, and continuous improvement. Based on their combined background in corporate management and esports, the founders carefully developed a strategy for success, laying the foundation for Astralis' rise to recognition. Early on in its development, Astralis faced several obstacles, many of which are typical of the competitive esports scene. Roster changes, tactical adjustments, and intense training regimes became characteristics of Astralis' style of operation as the organisation worked to carve out a niche among strong competitors. Despite the challenges, Astralis achieved early victories and breakthrough moments that fuelled its meteoric development. (Liquipedia, 2024)

A succession of historic achievements and tournament victories have marked Astralis' rise to the top of the CS:GO scene. Astralis' trophy cabinet is a tribute to their outstanding excellence and constant devotion to greatness, being the only team to win three majors in a row as well as being the only team to win four majors in total. Each victory cemented Astralis' place in the esports hall of fame and motivated a new generation of players to strive for greatness, both nationally and internationally. Astralis' success story revolves around effective partnerships and collaborations with prominent brands, sponsors, and stakeholders in the esports ecosystem. Astralis strengthened its competitive infrastructure, expanded its global reach, and diversified its revenue streams by using advantages with companies such as Jack & Jones (Cooke, 2017), Audi (Wolf, 2017), and Turtle Beach Gaming (Garren, 2017), among others. These agreements demonstrated Astralis' strategic expertise and proactive

attitude towards ensuring long-term success in a rapidly changing industry context. They were also greatly aided by the support of RFRSH Entertainment's founders (Astralis, 2016), Nikolaj Nyholm and Jakob Lund Kristensen, as well as Sunstone Capital, which invested €7.2 million in 2017 (Ohr, 2017).

Astralis' journey has not been without difficulties and turning points that put the organisation's determination and tenacity to the test. Despite roster changes, internal conflict, outside expectations, and changes to the business, Astralis overcame difficulties with resilience and agility. Particularly notable issues include players burning out due to the intense schedule throughout the season and the industry's lack of transparency in player contracts. Astralis was forced to reflect, innovate, and change in response to the esports ecosystem's shifting patterns.

According to award-winning British esports journalist Richard Lewis (Dexerto, 2019), in 2019, Astralis played and finished five tournaments within 43 consecutive days across four continents. Because of their success in each tournament, they had no time off between the tournaments, which ultimately backfired on the players. The first example of burnout was on May 19, 2019, from the In-Game leader, Lukas 'gla1ve' Rossander, who actually had suffered a collapsed lung twice around the time of joining the team in 2016 and, after getting diagnosed with symptoms of burnout and stress by a doctor, decided to step down from the active roster. A week later, it was announced that Andreas 'Xyp9x' Højsleth would be taking the same route as Gla1ve for the exact same reasons, burnout and stress (Dexerto, 2019). This was the first instance of Astralis dealing with mental health within their main roster, and according to Richard Lewis, they failed to look out for the players' well-being and mental health (Dexerto, 2019).

4.2 Context in the Esports Industry

The esports industry has undergone rapid expansion in recent years, driven by factors such as increased internet connectivity, the rise of streaming platforms, and the growing mainstream acceptance of competitive gaming as a legitimate form of entertainment (Yahoo, 2024). With a global audience projected to surpass half a billion by 2024, esports has

become a lucrative and highly competitive market, encompassing a wide range of game genres and attracting investment from leading brands and sponsors (Market.Us, 2024).

The Astralis management team was the first esports team to prioritise long-term sustainability and player wellbeing, incorporating programmes such as fitness routines, diet planning, and mindfulness training to improve player well-being and performance (Hvidt, Interview, Lines 10-14). This all-encompassing approach to team management has set new norms for professionalism and responsibility in esports, motivating other businesses to promote player welfare and mental health (Astralis, 2022).

Astralis' success is built on a supportive environment of Danish esports culture, which includes a strong heritage of excellence and the infrastructure for talent development and competition. The organisation has used local resources and knowledge to establish a competitive advantage on the international stage, forming partnerships with top brands and sponsors to improve its financial stability and brand visibility. Astralis encourages technological innovation to improve player performance and fan engagement through data analytics (David, 2022) and sports science (Hartikainen, 2017). By leveraging technology and data, Astralis continues to push the limits of what is possible in esports, motivating future generations of players and organisations to strive for greatness and innovation.

4.3 Astralis and Social Sustainability

In examining Astralis' influence on social sustainability, it's essential to look into various aspects of the organisation's history, actions, and broader impact within the esports industry. Astralis' approach to social sustainability is deeply intertwined with its history and background. As one of the pioneering organisations in professional esports, Astralis has played a significant role in shaping industry norms and standards. Through its journey from inception to becoming a powerhouse in competitive gaming, Astralis has demonstrated a commitment to ethical conduct, fair play, and fostering a positive gaming community.

While acknowledging their contributions to the esports industry, we must critically assess their approach to social sustainability, considering both strengths and weaknesses. This analysis is crucial for understanding the organisation's impact on societal well-being and

identifying areas for improvement. By providing a balanced assessment, we can offer insights that support informed decision-making and contribute to the advancement of social sustainability within the esports sector. This reflective approach has awakened our curiosity, prompting us to explore the complexities of social sustainability in esports and explore potential avenues for positive change.

Astralis has also actively used its reputation and resources to promote social causes and engage with stakeholders. Initiatives aimed at promoting diversity and inclusion within esports, supporting mental health awareness among gamers (URK.dk, 2023), and advocating for integrity and fair play in competitive gaming showcase Astralis' dedication to social responsibility. Astralis has shown a true dedication to making a beneficial influence outside of the gaming industry by participating in community outreach projects, collaborating with non-profit organisations (URK.dk, 2023), and putting together charity events (Astralis, 2021).

Astralis' legacy in the esports market establishes them as a vital influencer capable of pushing significant change in social sustainability. As a known and admired company, Astralis establishes standards, encourages other teams and players, and drives industry-wide initiatives to promote social good (Hvidt, Interview, Lines 40-44). By setting a good example and pushing for ethical and responsible gaming behaviours, Astralis helps to ensure the esports ecosystem's long-term viability and growth (Bynge, Interview, line 10).

Astralis illustrates how esports organisations may play an important role in promoting social sustainability and creating a more diverse and responsible gaming community (Bynge, Interview, Lines 10-20). Astralis' history, deeds, and overall impact highlight the potential for esports to be a constructive force in society.

4.4 Controversies in Recent time

As the golden age of Astralis CS drew to an end, there were more controversies surrounding Astralis. In recent years, Astralis has shattered its public image by hiring convicted cheaters, signing a sponsorship agreement with an illegal crypto-gambling site, and pressing players to accept 30% wage cuts during COVID-19. COVID-19 spread around the world, and most competitive sports, including esports, came to a halt for a while before becoming totally

online. This meant minimal travel and no crowds because every tournament would be held online, allowing athletes to compete from their bedrooms and occasionally in boot camps together. For most organisations, it also meant less profit and, therefore, ultimately a downsizing in operational costs, with staff and player's salaries being pinpointed. This was also the case for Astralis Group, which announced that key personnel and players had voluntarily agreed to take a 30% pay cut (with lower-level employees not being affected) (Seck, 2020). The argument for this pay cut was that it would help all employees in Astralis Group keep their jobs without sending anyone home on governmental support from the Danish government, which was offered during COVID-19. All of this seemed to be fine and without any internal issues, but Richard Lewis and Dexerto (2020) claim that the voluntary component was anything but voluntary. There were numerous internal disputes among players on Astralis' FIFA, League of Legends, and CS:GO teams, with many seeking legal advice and representation to prevent Astralis from enacting the 30% wage cut. It is worth noting that their contracts did not include a clause that allowed Astralis to implement it without their approval, but the players were strongly encouraged to accept the wage decrease (Lewis, 2020).

The coercive atmosphere produced by forcing players to accept wage cuts despite the lack of contractual grounds most certainly increased stress and anxiety among team members. This event could have exacerbated existing tensions and damaged relationships inside the organisation, threatening team cohesion. Such acts jeopardised not just the players' well-being but also their trust in Astralis Group's leadership, potentially having long-term ramifications for team morale and performance. This emphasises the necessity of ethical decision-making and creating a supportive atmosphere within esports organisations to promote players' overall well-being and positive team relations.

Around August 2022, Astralis announced that they had signed Nicolai 'HUNDEN' Petersen to their CS:GO team staff, which caused great outrage in the online CS scene, which mostly lives on X. HUNDEN was one of the 37 CS:GO coaches (Patterson, 2020) identified as employing a "coach bug" that provided team coaches with an illegal map overview. HUNDEN was first sentenced to an 8-month ban, but he eventually served a 2-year ban for his involvement in the "coach bug" affair (HLTV.org, 2022). Aside from the bug use, HUNDEN

was accused of using a player with ADHD and Asperger's syndrome by manipulating the player to bolster his position in the cheating case (Lewis, 2023). Despite this, Astralis continued to seek to employ HUNDEN as an analyst while he was still banned, as well as having him "secretly" act as the team's head coach (Lewis, 2023). HUNDEN was a member of Astralis from January 5th, 2023, until June 21st, 2023, when they announced the departure of both HUNDEN and Kasper Hvidt (Burazin, 2023), much to the delight of the CS community.

The third critical action Astralis took to tarnish its public image was to negotiate a two-year partnership with Roobet in May 2022 (Ritzau, 2022). One of the largest esports organisations signing a deal with Roobet, an unregulated and offshore crypto gambling website (Luongo, 2022), was undoubtedly the single most controversial issue in the scene for 24 hours. The deal was, in fact, only up and alive for 24 hours before they came out with a statement saying:

"We have today advised Roobet that, with immediate effect, we wish to terminate the contract we presented on Thursday. In this instance, we did not perform our due diligence well enough around local legal matters, and when you make a mistake, you must correct it. This is what we do now.

With good reason, Astralis is an icon in Danish and international esports, and we must always be aware of our responsibility. There can never be any doubt about our actions, but in this case, we have not met our own standards, which we regret towards all parties implicated."

- Anders Hørsholt, CEO at the time (Astralis, 2022)

Astralis openly apologised for not doing their due diligence while conducting background checks on their upcoming partner (Koutsafti, 2022), but some may wonder why they didn't know about it earlier and whether they tried to let it slip by their supporters because of the good financial implications the deal might have had.

When you look closer at this deal, there are a lot of warning signs right away. For example, their terms and conditions state that Roobet is not legal for users in Denmark (Roobet, 2024), their gambling licence is from Curacao (D'Anastasio, 2021), and their game operators have been accused of manipulating the outcomes for the platform's users (Green, 2018). Finally, they spend millions of dollars on streamers to market their site to their viewers; these streamers have a sizable audience of underage viewers, with an estimated 21% being 13-17-year-olds (D'Anastasio, 2021). This incident damages Astralis' credibility as a socially responsible organisation and goes against its efforts to promote positive values in esports. It emphasises the need for thorough vetting processes and the need for organisations to prioritise ethical issues in their partnerships and commercial decisions.

Organisational Structure

Jakob Hansen CFO	**Jakob Lund Kristensen** Founder & CCO	**Steen Laursen** VP Communications & Brands	**Samantha Yu** CMO
Alexander H. Jensen Art Director	**Christian Sørensen** Director of Strategy and Business Development	**Jan Ø. Jørgensen** Head Of Performance	**Anicha C.** Location Manager
Ann Malou Heide Head Of Retail & Marketing - Astralis Nexus			
Christian Mourier Board member	**Claus Zibrandtsen** Board member	**Anders Hørsholt** Board member and Strategic Advisor	**Pernille Nørkær** Board Member

Astralis' organisational structure reflects the complexity of its operations within the esports industry. At the helm of the organisation is its management team, which consists of seasoned professionals with expertise in various aspects of esports management, marketing,

finance, and operations. Led by Founder & CEO Nikolaj Nyholm, the management team is responsible for setting strategic direction, overseeing day-to-day operations, and ensuring the organisation's long-term sustainability.

Decision-making within Astralis is characterised by a combination of centralised authority and collaborative input from key stakeholders. While the management team plays a central role in setting overall strategy and direction, decisions are often informed by input from players, coaches, sponsors, and other stakeholders. Regular communication channels, such as team meetings, player feedback sessions, and sponsor consultations, facilitate collaboration and ensure that decisions are aligned with the organisation's goals and values (Bynge, Interview, lines 1-5). A unique feature of Astralis' organisational structure is its emphasis on player empowerment and autonomy. Unlike traditional sports organisations, where players may have limited influence over team decisions, Astralis places a high value on player input and involvement in strategic planning. This approach not only fosters a sense of ownership and commitment among players but also ensures that team decisions are informed by the insights and perspectives of those directly involved in competitive gaming.

Overall, Astralis' organisational structure is designed to promote agility, innovation, and inclusivity, thereby enhancing its ability to address social sustainability concerns. By fostering open communication, collaboration, and empowerment at all levels of the organisation, Astralis creates an environment where social responsibility and ethical conduct are prioritised.

4.5 Impact on Social Sustainability

Astralis' organisational structure plays a crucial role in shaping its approach to social sustainability and its ability to integrate sustainability principles into its operations. The structure fosters a collaborative environment where decision-making is not limited to top management but involves input from various internal and external stakeholders. This inclusive approach ensures that social sustainability considerations are taken into account at every level of the organisation. (Šimić, 2023)

Leadership is also important in promoting social sustainability projects inside Astralis. The management team establishes the tone for the organisation by emphasising social responsibility and ethical behaviour (Hvidt, Interview, Lines 20-24). By highlighting the relevance of sustainability in strategic planning and decision-making, leaders foster a culture of accountability in which employees feel empowered to contribute to social sustainability efforts (Hvidt, Interview, Lines 108-114). Astralis' organisational structure is flexible and adaptable, allowing them to respond swiftly to developing social sustainability issues and possibilities. This agility is critical in an ever-changing landscape where new challenges may appear and fresh solutions are required to address them effectively (Bynge, Interview, Lines 5-10). Astralis may encounter societal limitations that limit its potential to innovate in the area of social sustainability. These hurdles may include limited resources, competing priorities, and external pressures from sponsors or partners. Overcoming these difficulties would necessitate a collaborative effort from leaders and stakeholders to prioritise social sustainability and distribute resources accordingly. Astralis' organisational structure establishes a solid framework for incorporating social sustainability into its operations. By encouraging cooperation, empowering people, and cultivating a culture of accountability (Bynge, Interview, Lines 10-15), Astralis is well-positioned to make substantial changes in the esports industry and beyond.

4.6 Key Initiatives and Values

Astralis has launched numerous significant efforts to promote social sustainability in the esports industry and beyond. One significant endeavour is its community outreach activities, such as its work with the Danish Youth Red Cross (URK.dk, 2024) or attending LANs throughout Denmark (Astralis, 2022), which aim to connect with fans and supporters at the grassroots level. These programmes frequently include events, workshops, and online activities aimed at connecting with fans, promoting positive values, and fostering a sense of community among esports fans.

Astralis has demonstrated a dedication to diversity and inclusivity (Hvidt, Interview, Lines 50-51, Lines 78-81), using several programmes designed to foster diversity both inside the company and in the larger esports community. This involves attempting to boost the number of underrepresented groups (Astralis, 2023)—like women and minorities—on player rosters

and in staff roles (Netcompany, 2024). Astralis hopes to make esports a more inviting and inclusive place for everyone involved by putting diversity and inclusion first (Gwynn, 2024).

Astralis's social sustainability programmes, taken as a whole, strongly correspond with its declared principles of honesty, creativity, and inclusivity. With a focus on environmental sustainability, diversity and inclusion, and community participation, Astralis shows that it is dedicated to having a positive influence on the esports community as well as the larger society. With these programmes, Astralis hopes to encourage people to adopt social sustainability as a fundamental value while simultaneously promoting good change within the esports sector (Bynge, Interview, Lines 15-25, 30).

Core Values

Astralis upholds several fundamental principles that direct its business practices and relationships with the gaming community. Official papers like mission and vision statements (Astralis, 2024) and rules of conduct frequently state these values.

One of Astralis' core values is performance excellence, which is demonstrated by its commitment to winning competitive games while upholding moral standards. This characteristic highlights the team's dedication to professionalism, fair play, and honesty in both virtual and real-world settings. Astralis sees esports as both a serious sport that demands work and discipline and a form of pleasure. They give constant advancement, teamwork, and skill development a lot of attention (Astralis 2024).

Astralis places a high value on innovation and flexibility since it understands how quickly the esports industry is changing. To preserve its competitive advantage and stay ahead of the curve, this value motivates the team and management to investigate new tactics, collaborations, and technologies. Astralis has been able to maintain success in an industry that is always disrupting and innovating because of its openness to welcome change and experiment. Astralis prioritises inclusion and community involvement (Bynge, Interview, Lines 15-20), in addition to excellence and innovation. The group recognises how important it is to create a friendly and accepting atmosphere for players of all sexes, ethnicities, and ability levels. Astralis is committed to fostering diversity, equity, and inclusion in the gaming

industry and actively engages in community outreach projects, educational initiatives, and charitable activities (Bynge, Interview, Lines 15-20).

Astralis is committed to fostering an equitable and sustainable esports ecosystem that benefits players, spectators, and stakeholders by placing a high value on innovation and diversity. Astralis' ideals and the practicalities of working in the esports industry, such as striking a balance between business and social responsibility or handling disputes between players and sponsors, could nevertheless present challenges or trade-offs. Through a blend of inventive thought, community involvement, and competitive superiority, Astralis endeavours to uphold its fundamental values and contribute positively to the wider gaming scene.

4.7 Data Presentation

Qualitative research approaches were employed to obtain extensive data. Our objective was to acquire knowledge about Astralis's social sustainability activities, values, and organisational structure in the esports sector.

We spoke to key Astralis personnel through interviews to gather qualitative data. Rich, contextualised insights into the organisation's values, difficulties, and approach to social sustainability were gathered from these interviews, which also gave historical background. To verify Astralis's statements regarding its beliefs and goals and to provide historical background, we also carried out desk research by studying official papers and press releases. We respected ethical standards during the data collection process by asking interviewees for their informed consent, preserving their anonymity and confidentiality, and, in the end, getting permission to publish their names.

Transcripts of interviews with Astralis's current and former management, showcasing their opinions on social sustainability initiatives, organisational ideals, and difficulties experienced, are a sample of the data gathered. To illustrate Astralis' effect and influence in the esports sector, we also examined past tournament results and accomplishments.

An examination of papers that are accessible to the public, including mission statements, partnership agreements, and codes of conduct, provided a valuable understanding of Astralis' declared principles and obligations. Our goal was to improve the validity and dependability of our results so that Astralis' social sustainability strategy could be correctly assessed.

4.7.1 Informants

As mentioned earlier, we had the chance to speak with two key personnel from Astralis. There is one present member as well as one previous member, with the latter being instrumental in Astralis' growth and the organisation's transition to a more formalised structure. We would like to start by introducing Kasper Hvidt, a legend in the Danish national handball scene and a former professional handball player. Kasper held several management positions following his retirement before joining Astralis in 2017. With his more than two decades of expertise in the professional sports industry, Kasper was brought in to help Astralis establish a professional framework. Astralis' greatest investment at the time, the CS:GO team, was the emphasis of Kasper's role as Director of Sports, but over time, his responsibilities grew. He assembled a crucial group of medical professionals, therapists, dieticians, physical trainers, and physiotherapists to assist with the players' mental and physical well-being, treating them more like professional athletes than "just" gamers. He would not be able to personally assist the players with playing; therefore, the idea was to establish a framework akin to a regular sports team to support them with everything else.

We also had the opportunity to interview Sofus Bynge (Appendix 2), who is presently employed by Astralis as a "special consultant" in the areas of social economic activities, job creation, and education. Outside of that, he holds a Cand.ling.merc. in Intercultural Market Studies with a specialisation in esports from CBS and serves on the board of AOF Danmark (The Workers' Information Association). Since gamers require the same level of assistance as those who play traditional sports, Sofus' work is primarily focused on providing mental and physical support to both the current and upcoming generations of gamers.

4.7.2 Social Media Observation

In today's digital age, social media is crucial for communication and interaction, influencing business, entertainment, and culture (Alenezi, 2020). Analysing social media provides valuable insights into Astralis' efforts to promote social sustainability in esports (Appendix 4)

Social media is vital for esports organisations like Astralis to build their digital presence and influence. By studying their actions on platforms like X, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube, we can understand their audience reach, engagement techniques, and digital impact. This analysis reveals how Astralis promotes its brand identity and engages with its target audience compared to industry standards (Alenezi, 2020).

Community engagement is a key aspect of esports, and social media facilitates these interactions. By examining Astralis' fan interactions, we can assess their community-building success and engagement depth (Alenezi, 2020). Metrics like post engagement, audience demographics, and content performance help evaluate the impact of Astralis' initiatives on driving conversations, building brand loyalty, and achieving organisational goals (Alenezi, 2020).

Social media analysis offers a unique perspective on Astralis' social sustainability efforts within esports. By examining how they use social media to promote sustainability goals and drive positive behaviour change, we can uncover valuable lessons for advancing social responsibility in the esports ecosystem.

Astralis maintains a strong presence on popular platforms, including Instagram, X, Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn, TikTok, and Twitch, where they broadcast games and events (Juul, LinkedIn, 2024). Each platform serves different content purposes, from informative videos to meme content. The CS community predominantly uses X, where Astralis posts significant announcements and engages in partnerships to combat online issues like sexism and misogyny (Ritzau, 2023; X, 2024).

For instance, Astralis' partnership with the Institute for Human Rights and the Centre for Digital Learning to address online sexism and misogyny received significant engagement on X (X, 2024). Another notable collaboration with Amnesty International involved creating a unique CS2 workshop map, highlighting their innovative approach to capturing player attention (X, 2023; Astralis, 2023; Steam, 2024).

Comments on social media posts sometimes reflect broader ethical concerns. For example, Astralis' participation in ESL tournaments, indirectly linked to the Saudi government through the Public Investment Fund, raises questions about human rights and ethical standards in esports (Šimić, 2022; Šimić, 2023; Humandignitytrust.org, 2024). This highlights the complex ethical landscape that esports organisations must navigate, balancing financial relationships with maintaining core values and principles.

4.7.3 Stakeholder Perspectives

Understanding Astralis' social sustainability initiatives and their larger effects within the esports sector requires an appreciation of stakeholder perspectives. Through public document research, tournament results, and interviews with key personnel (including past and present management), we were able to gather important information about how different stakeholders see Astralis' efforts and contributions.

Workers at Astralis provide firsthand accounts of the company's social sustainability efforts and how these have affected their careers. These viewpoints clarify the practical advantages and difficulties that Astralis' emphasis on player health, creativity, and diversity translates into within the team dynamic. Gaining insight into the viewpoints of employees enables one to comprehend Astralis' internal culture and how it fits with more general social sustainability objectives. Supporters of Astralis also offer insightful viewpoints on the company's social sustainability initiatives. By being present in fan groups, online discussion boards, and social media, we were able to obtain information about how Astralis' actions are perceived by its audience and how they benefit the larger esports community. Views from fans emphasise how crucial honesty, morality, and community involvement are to establishing Astralis' standing and power in the sector. Another important stakeholder group with a stake in Astralis' social sustainability endeavours is sponsors and partnerships.

Through the examination of news releases, partnership agreements, and public statements, we were able to gather an understanding of how sponsors view the brand values, image, and influence of Astralis. Sponsor stakeholder viewpoints provide important insights into the driving forces behind business alliances and how they contribute to the advancement of social sustainability objectives in the esports industry. Governmental organisations may also have opinions about Astralis' social responsibility efforts, especially when it comes to laws, rules, and programmes that have an impact on the esports sector. Astralis' relationships with regulatory authorities, compliance needs, and advocacy activities to promote industry standards and ethical gaming practices are contextualised when one understands government perspectives. Additional stakeholders whose opinions help our understanding of Astralis' social sustainability efforts are parents of gamers and educational institutions. Parents may know the educational value of esports, player welfare issues, and views towards professional gaming as a career. Perspectives on esports programmes, academic partnerships, and the integration of gaming into the curriculum and extracurricular activities can be obtained from educational institutions, such as schools and universities. Overall, these stakeholder viewpoints provide important insights into the effectiveness, difficulties, and effects of Astralis' social sustainability projects.

4.8 Limitations

A limitation is the sample size of key informants that were interviewed. Although the sample consisted of two members of Astralis management, it might not accurately reflect the range of viewpoints present in the company or the esports sector as a whole. To provide a more thorough picture, we made an effort to triangulate data from a variety of sources, including data that is available to the public and tournament results. Furthermore, the possibility of selection bias in our choice of informants is another thing to take into account since the people we spoke with might have certain viewpoints or experiences that don't necessarily represent those of all the stakeholders in Astralis or the esports industry. Lastly, we might not have had as much access to sponsors or governmental organisations as we would have had, which could have had an impact on the variety of viewpoints we included in our research.

5. Analysis

The esports industry, characterised by its rapid growth and technological advancements, has gained significant attention in recent years. The focus on social sustainability within esports has emerged as a crucial area of study. This analysis examines Astralis and its various initiatives to prioritise player well-being, promote inclusion, and advance social sustainability in competitive gaming. Astralis' dedication to player welfare and diversity is a core aspect of its organisational culture, reflecting a proactive strategy to address the complex demands of esports training and competition. Through interviews with key figures like Sofus and Kasper, we explore Astralis' comprehensive approach to player care, which includes access to top-tier physical trainers, dieticians, and mental health professionals. This commitment aligns with the broader academic discussion advocating for extensive support systems to enhance player performance and longevity in esports. Astralis also champions gender diversity and inclusivity within the gaming community by fostering a welcoming environment for all and actively encouraging female participation. By promoting equal opportunities and cultivating an inclusive atmosphere, Astralis contributes to a fairer and more diverse gaming landscape, supporting the broader goals of social sustainability in esports. Beyond internal initiatives, Astralis leverages social media to engage with its audience, bolster its digital presence, and advocate for social sustainability efforts. However, challenges and conflicts occasionally arise, highlighting the importance of transparency, accountability, and ethical conduct in navigating the digital world. This study examines Astralis' efforts to achieve social sustainability through the frameworks of Diffusion of Innovations Theory and Institutional Theory, providing a nuanced perspective on innovation adoption and organisational behaviour within the esports ecosystem. Astralis shows itself as a responsible leader in the esports business, promoting positive change and transformation within the larger gaming community, by sustaining existing institutional norms, making use of institutional frameworks, and improving legitimacy. The study highlights the crucial role that esports groups such as Astralis play in promoting social sustainability within the sector, demonstrating the complex connection that exists between organisations, institutional contexts, and cultural standards. As esports develop, Astralis' projects provide insights that open doors for a more socially conscious, fair, and inclusive gaming environment for all players.

5.1 Prioritising Player Well-being and Fostering Inclusivity

Astralis, renowned in the esports realm, exemplifies a strong commitment to prioritising player well-being and fostering inclusivity within the competitive gaming landscape. Insights gleaned from interviews with key figures such as Sofus and Kasper shed light on the organisation's holistic approach to player care. Sofus clearly explains the philosophy of the company, highlighting the necessity of giving players access to elite personal trainers, health professionals, and mental health specialists (Bynge, Interview, Line 5). Jacobs (2021) asserts that his statement is consistent with more extensive study on the subject, which highlights the vital function of all-encompassing support systems in maximising player performance and longevity. Astralis' proactive strategy is, in fact, in line with academic discourse that supports comprehensive player care techniques that address the complex needs of esports competition and training (Fuglsang, 2021). Astralis, as discovered through interviews, actively advocates for gender diversity and inclusivity within the gaming community. Sofus and Kasper, in their respective interviews, underscore the organisation's dedication to creating an environment that embraces everyone, actively encouraging female participation, and offering support to women aiming for careers in gaming. Their commitment mirrors broader calls within literature for the promotion of gender equality and the dismantling of systemic barriers to female participation in esports (Peng et al., 2020) (Bynge, Interview, Lines 10-15). By advocating for equal opportunities and fostering a culture of inclusivity, Astralis contributes to a more equitable and diverse gaming landscape, aligning with the overarching goals of social sustainability within esports (Sherry et al., 2015). (Bynge, Interview, Lines 10, 25)

Social media platforms serve as crucial conduits for Astralis to engage with their audience, amplify their digital presence, and advocate for social sustainability initiatives. Analysis of their social media activity provides valuable insights into audience reach, engagement strategies, and overall impact on the esports scene. Astralis strategically uses platforms like Facebook, Instagram, X, and YouTube to interact with fans, share updates, and champion their initiatives. Their engagement reflects a commitment to community-building, with interactions ranging from responding to comments to (X, 2024) organising fan-centric events. However, it's important to acknowledge that controversies and ethical dilemmas

have occasionally surfaced, posing challenges to the organisation's reputation and commitment to social responsibility. (X, 2023) In examining Astralis' social media presence, it's evident that they use various platforms to disseminate their message effectively and connect with their audience. Across platforms like Facebook, Instagram, X, and YouTube, Astralis shares diverse content ranging from match highlights to behind-the-scenes glimpses into players' lives. However, as observed in the controversies surrounding partnerships and player relations, Astralis' social media presence is not immune to criticism. Such instances highlight the importance of transparency, accountability, and ethical conduct in navigating the digital landscape. The literature review underscores the broader context of social sustainability within esports, providing valuable insights into the industry's complexities and opportunities. The synthesis of key research contributions emphasises the multifaceted nature of social transformation within esports, highlighting the importance of clear goals, effective strategies, and collaborative efforts for meaningful progress. While organisations like Astralis showcase commendable efforts in promoting diversity, inclusion, and ethical leadership, ongoing research and collaboration are essential to address persistent challenges and advance the industry towards a more inclusive and socially sustainable future.

Astralis' commitment to prioritising player well-being, fostering inclusivity, and promoting social sustainability within the esports industry is evident through various channels, including interviews, social media engagement, and scholarly discourse. While the organisation has made significant strides in these areas, challenges and controversies serve as important reminders of the ongoing work required to uphold ethical standards and drive positive social change within the esports ecosystem. Through continued dialogue, collaboration, and critical reflection, stakeholders can collectively navigate the complexities of the esports landscape and build a more inclusive and socially responsible gaming environment for all.

5.1.1 Diffusion of Innovation Theory

Applying the paradigm of the Diffusion of Innovations Theory to Astralis' multifaceted efforts towards social sustainability reveals a nuanced understanding of innovation adoption within the esports ecosystem. Everett Rogers' seminal work emphasises the significance of attributes such as relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability

in shaping the diffusion process. These qualities are reflected in Astralis' proactive efforts, which are summed up in their offering of broad player support systems that include physical treatment, mental health resources, and nutrition counselling. For instance, Astralis' commitment to player well-being, as evidenced by their provision of access to physical trainers, dieticians, and mental health professionals, underscores the relative advantage of their initiatives over conventional industry practices (Bynge, Interview, Line 5 and Hvidt, Interview, Line 10). This commitment aligns with the findings of Rogers (2003), who posits that innovations perceived as offering significant advantages are more likely to be adopted by individuals or organisations.

Astralis uses social media platforms such as X, Facebook, Instagram, Twitch, YouTube, and TikTok to amplify its message and engender engagement with its social sustainability initiatives. By strategically disseminating content and fostering interactive engagement, Astralis capitalises on these communication channels to reach diverse audiences, fostering awareness and advocacy for their innovative practices (Appendix 4). This aligns with Rogers' assertion regarding the importance of communication channels in facilitating the spread of innovations, as different channels play distinct roles in disseminating information about innovations and influencing adoption decisions (Rogers, 2003).

Social networks within the organisation serve as channels for new practices to spread in addition to being used for communication. People in these networks use social influence, interpersonal communication, and societal standards to influence each other's adoption decisions. The outreach process can be accelerated, for example, by locating key opinion leaders and significant nodes within Astralis' social network, such as team captains or management staff who actively support social sustainability projects. This is consistent with Rogers' claim that social networks are crucial for the transmission of innovation because powerful people in these networks can influence adoption through their advocacy and actions (Rogers, 2003). By discerning the characteristics and motivations of individuals within each adopter category, Astralis can tailor their strategies and interventions to effectively engage diverse segments of their workforce. Astralis, for example, can coordinate focused interventions to promote an innovative and socially responsible culture throughout the organisation by identifying early adopters and opinion leaders who demonstrate a

tendency to embrace new methods. This is consistent with Rogers' classification of people into adopter groups according to their willingness to accept innovations, as diffusing tactics must be guided by knowledge of the traits and motivations of various adopter groups (Rogers, 2003).

The integration of insights garnered from the Diffusion of Innovations Theory with empirical data on player engagement, social media metrics, and organisational dynamics enables Astralis to refine its strategies, optimise its communication channels, and harness the power of social networks to foster a socially responsible gaming environment. Through these concerted efforts, Astralis not only spearheads innovation within the esports industry but also champions the cause of social sustainability, catalysing positive change and transformation within the broader gaming community.

5.1.2 Institutional Theory

Institutional Theory offers valuable insights into understanding how organisations like Astralis navigate institutional contexts and adopt innovative practices related to social sustainability. Examining Astralis' initiatives through this theoretical lens provides a nuanced understanding of the interplay between institutional factors and organisational behaviour within the esports industry. Considering the role of institutional norms and values, Astralis operates within an industry characterised by evolving norms and expectations regarding player well-being and inclusivity. By prioritising player well-being and fostering inclusivity, Astralis aligns with the prevailing institutional norms advocating for a healthier and more inclusive esports ecosystem. The interviews with Sofus and Kasper highlight Astralis' commitment to providing comprehensive support systems for players and promoting gender diversity within the gaming community (Bynge, Interview, Lines 10-15). This aligns with the institutional imperative for organisations to address societal concerns and align their practices with prevailing norms (Scott, 2014).

Examining institutional structures sheds light on how Astralis navigates regulatory frameworks and industry standards. Through their engagement on social media platforms and collaborations with organisations like Amnesty International, Astralis uses institutional structures to amplify their social sustainability initiatives. This strategic positioning within

institutional frameworks enhances Astralis' legitimacy and reinforces its role as a responsible actor within the esports industry. Partnerships with reputable organisations and adherence to industry standards contribute to Astralis' credibility and legitimacy within the institutional landscape (Cardona, 2020). Concepts such as organisational legitimacy and isomorphism are pertinent to understanding Astralis' adoption of innovative social sustainability practices. Astralis strengthens its reputation as a socially conscious company and improves its validity by supporting activities that align with industry norms and societal expectations. The termination of the partnership with Roobet exemplifies Astralis' commitment to upholding ethical standards and maintaining legitimacy within the institutional environment. This strategic decision aligns with institutional pressures for organisations to conform to ethical norms and uphold their reputation (Scott, 2014).

Astralis contributes to institutional change within the esports industry by advocating for new industry standards and challenging entrenched norms. The collaboration with Amnesty International to develop a CS:GO workshop map promotes awareness of social issues within the gaming community and signals Astralis' role in driving institutional change. Through such initiatives, Astralis shapes the trajectory of institutional development within the esports ecosystem, influencing industry practices and norms (Scott, 2014).

Applying Institutional Theory to analyse Astralis' social sustainability initiatives reveals how the organisation navigates institutional contexts, adheres to regulatory frameworks, and shapes industry norms. Astralis positions itself as a responsible leader in the esports sector by using institutional structures, improving credibility, and harmonising with established standards within the industry. Astralis highlights the relationship between organisations and their institutional contexts and contributes to the ongoing evolution of social sustainability practices within esports through strategic involvement and support for institutional change.

5.1.3 Combined Theories

Combining insights from both the Diffusion of Innovations Theory and Institutional Theory provides a comprehensive understanding of how Astralis navigates the adoption and diffusion of innovative social sustainability practices within the esports industry. These

theories shed light on different aspects of Astralis' approach, from the dissemination of innovative practices to the organisation's strategic positioning within institutional contexts.

Diffusion of Innovations Theory emphasises the attributes of innovation and communication channels as key drivers of adoption and diffusion. Astralis' initiatives, such as prioritising player well-being and fostering inclusivity, exemplify innovations perceived as offering significant advantages over existing practices within the esports industry. The organisation utilises various communication channels, including social media and collaborations with reputable organisations like Amnesty International, to disseminate information about these innovative practices and promote their adoption among stakeholders (Rogers, 2003). This theory underscores Astralis' proactive approach to promoting social sustainability and driving change within the esports ecosystem.

On the other hand, Institutional Theory highlights the role of institutional norms, values, and structures in shaping organisational behaviour and practices. Astralis operates within an institutional environment characterised by industry norms, regulatory frameworks, and societal expectations. By aligning with prevailing institutional norms advocating for player well-being and inclusivity, Astralis enhances its legitimacy and reinforces its position as a responsible leader within the esports industry (Scott, 2014). To preserve its credibility and reputation, the organisation carefully negotiates institutional frameworks, makes use of partnerships, and follows industry norms.

When combined, these theories offer a nuanced perspective on Astralis' social sustainability initiatives. Diffusion of Innovations Theory elucidates the mechanisms through which innovative practices are adopted and disseminated, highlighting Astralis' proactive efforts to drive change within the esports industry. Meanwhile, Institutional Theory contextualises Astralis' initiatives within broader institutional frameworks, emphasising the organisation's strategic positioning and adherence to industry norms and values. The integration of Diffusion of Innovations Theory and institutional Theory provides a holistic framework for understanding Astralis' approach to social sustainability. By examining both the attributes of innovation and the institutional context in which Astralis operates, researchers gain valuable

insights into the dynamics of innovation adoption, dissemination, and institutionalisation within the esports industry.

5.1.4 Integrated understanding

The introductory section establishes the context by underscoring Astralis' esteemed status in the esports community and its commitment to player well-being and inclusivity. It integrates insights from interviews, scholarly literature, and industry discourse to provide a comprehensive overview of Astralis' social sustainability initiatives.

Throughout the analysis, concrete examples drawn from interviews, social media observations, and industry controversies serve to illustrate Astralis' proactive stance on social sustainability. These examples offer tangible evidence of the organisation's efforts to prioritise player welfare, foster inclusivity, and navigate the complexities of the esports landscape. The integration of insights from relevant literature enriches the discussion by situating Astralis' initiatives within broader theoretical frameworks. References to the research on player well-being, gender diversity, and social sustainability within esports deepen our understanding of Astralis' practices and underscore their significance within the industry. The analysis also acknowledges the challenges and nuances inherent in Astralis' social sustainability efforts, presenting a balanced view of the organisation's successes and obstacles. By presenting a nuanced portrayal, the analysis avoids oversimplification and fosters a deeper appreciation of Astralis' strategies and their implications for the esports ecosystem.

The analysis provides a cohesive narrative that synthesises Astralis' social sustainability initiatives through the lenses of Diffusion of Innovations Theory and Institutional Theory. By drawing connections between empirical evidence, theoretical insights, and industry context, the analysis offers valuable insights into Astralis' approach and its broader implications for the esports community.

Throughout the analysis, Critical Realism offers a lens through which to understand Astralis' approach to social sustainability within the esports industry across three layers: empirical, actual, and real. At the empirical layer, insights gleaned from interviews, social media

observations, industry controversies, and scholarly literature provide tangible evidence of Astralis' practices and behaviours. For instance, data from interviews with key figures like Sofus and Kasper offers empirical insights into Astralis' commitment to player well-being and inclusivity. Social media observations and analyses of industry controversies further contribute to this empirical layer by providing context and evidence of Astralis' engagement strategies, audience reach, and impact on the gaming community. Moving to the actual layer, the analysis explores the underlying mechanisms and structures that influence Astralis' behaviour within the esports industry. This includes an examination of institutional norms, values, and structures, as well as social networks and communication channels that facilitate the diffusion of innovative practices. Furthermore, discussions of organisational legitimacy, isomorphism, and institutional change shed light on the actual realities that shape Astralis' adoption of social sustainability initiatives. Finally, at the real layer, critical realism helps uncover the ontological foundations that underpin Astralis' behaviour and practices within the esports industry. This involves recognising broader institutional contexts, industry norms, and underlying social relations as ontological realities that influence Astralis' decision-making processes and role within the industry. Through the application of critical realism, the analysis provides a holistic understanding of Astralis' approach to social sustainability, revealing the interplay between empirical evidence, underlying mechanisms, and ontological realities within the esports ecosystem.

5.2 Nurturing Community Engagement and Facilitating Collaborative Partnerships

Nurturing community engagement and fostering collaborative partnerships are vital pillars in cultivating a sustainable esports ecosystem, as highlighted in interviews with industry leaders such as Sofus Bynge and Kasper Hvidt. Bynge underscores the importance of community interaction, stating that Astralis organises fan events and engages with our community through social media to build a strong connection. The fans are at the heart of everything we do, and their support drives us to continue growing and evolving (Bynge, Interview, Lines 20-30). Similarly, Hvidt emphasises the value of partnerships, noting that collaborating with industry partners is essential for driving positive change and promoting the growth of esports. By working together, we can innovate and create opportunities that benefit players, fans, and stakeholders alike (Hvidt, Interview, Lines 40-50). These insights

illuminate the pivotal role of community engagement and strategic alliances in advancing the esports landscape.

In examining Astralis' influence on social sustainability, it is essential to consider both its strengths and weaknesses. Initiatives such as collaborations with non-profit organisations and community outreach projects demonstrate a commitment to social responsibility (URK.dk, 2023). However, controversies surrounding partnerships, such as the alliance with Roobet, raise questions about ethical conduct (Ritzau, 2022). As highlighted in social media observations, Astralis' digital presence plays a significant role in community engagement and social impact (Juul, LinkedIn, 2024). Collaborations with organisations like Amnesty International showcase a commitment to using digital channels for social good (X, 2023). Nevertheless, criticism and backlash on social media underscore the importance of transparency and authenticity in digital communication.

Despite the strides made in community engagement and collaboration, challenges persist. Controversies surrounding partnerships, such as the alliance with Roobet, and disputes over wage cuts during the COVID-19 pandemic have raised concerns about the industry's commitment to social responsibility (Seck, 2020). Nevertheless, Bynge acknowledges that Astralis faces challenges such as resistance to change, but they are constantly seeking solutions to overcome them. By staying adaptable and open-minded, the company can navigate obstacles and continue pushing the boundaries of what esports can achieve (Bynge, Interview, Lines 20, 25, and 30). This resilience underscores the industry's determination to address hurdles and foster positive growth.

Social media serves as a powerful tool for communication, interaction, and community building within the esports industry. Astralis, like many other esports organisations, leverages various platforms to engage with its audience, promote its brand, and advocate for social sustainability initiatives. A comprehensive social media observation reveals the depth of Astralis' digital involvement and its impact on social sustainability in esports. By analysing Astralis' activity across platforms such as X, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok, insights into the organisation's digital strategies and their effectiveness in fostering community engagement and promoting social responsibility emerge. On platforms like X,

Astralis maintains a significant presence, recognising it as a hub for the esports community. Through regular updates, announcements, and interactions with fans, Astralis utilises X to keep its audience informed and engaged. For example, the organisation's collaboration with Amnesty International to create a CS2 workshop map aimed at promoting social awareness garnered significant attention and sparked discussions within the community (X, 2023).

Astralis' engagement on other platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter allows the organisation to reach a broader audience and showcase its commitment to social sustainability. Posts highlighting partnerships with organisations like the Institute for Human Rights and the Centre for Digital Learning demonstrate Astralis' efforts to address important social issues such as online sexism and misogyny (X, 2024). However, such initiatives also invite scrutiny and criticism, as seen in the comments section, where concerns about the organisation's associations and ethical considerations are raised. Astralis' presence on platforms like YouTube provides a platform for diverse content, ranging from entertaining CS2 videos to behind-the-scenes documentaries, offering fans a deeper insight into the organisation's operations and values. Meanwhile, platforms like TikTok offer an opportunity for Astralis to connect with a younger audience through engaging and meme-worthy content, further expanding its reach and impact.

By analysing metrics such as post engagement, audience demographics, and content performance across these platforms, we can assess the effectiveness of Astralis' social media strategies in driving conversations, developing brand loyalty, and accomplishing organisational goals. Additionally, social media analysis offers a unique vantage point to explore the impact of Astralis' initiatives on social sustainability within the esports industry, providing valuable lessons and recommendations for advancing social responsibility practices across the ecosystem. In conjunction with its social media initiatives, Astralis actively participates in community outreach programmes, collaborates with like-minded partners, and advocates for diversity and inclusivity within the esports industry. However, recent controversies surrounding the organisation, such as the hiring of convicted cheaters and the partnership with an illegal crypto-gambling site, have tarnished its public image and raised questions about its commitment to social responsibility (Ritzau, 2022).

Despite these challenges, Astralis' legacy as a pioneer in the esports industry and its contributions to social sustainability cannot be overlooked. Through a balanced assessment of its actions and impact, we recognise the organisation's potential to drive positive change and foster a more inclusive and socially responsible gaming community. By continuously evaluating and adapting its strategies, Astralis and other esports organisations can navigate the complexities of the digital landscape, address ethical considerations, and uphold their commitment to social sustainability.

5.2.1 Diffusion of Innovation Theory

Astralis' initiatives, such as its collaboration with Amnesty International to create a CS2 workshop map promoting social awareness, exemplify the principles of the Diffusion of Innovations Theory (Rogers, 2003). This initiative can be seen as possessing attributes of relative advantage and compatibility. Relative advantage refers to the perceived benefits of adopting an innovation over existing practices. In this case, Astralis' partnership with Amnesty International offers the advantage of aligning the organisation with a respected human rights organisation, enhancing its reputation and social impact (X, 2023). Compatibility refers to the degree to which an innovation is consistent with existing values, norms, and needs. By addressing social issues through its collaboration with Amnesty International, Astralis demonstrates compatibility with the values of social responsibility and activism, making the initiative more appealing to its audience.

Astralis' use of various communication channels, including X, Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, reflects the theory's emphasis on the role of communication channels in innovation diffusion (Rogers, 2003). For example, by using X as a hub for the esports community, Astralis can reach a highly engaged audience interested in social sustainability initiatives (X, 2024). This aligns with the theory's concept of using communication channels to disseminate information about innovations effectively. Astralis' posts on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter highlighting partnerships with organisations like the Institute for Human Rights and the Centre for Digital Learning demonstrate its commitment to addressing social issues and promoting inclusivity within the esports industry (X, 2024).

Within the organisation, social networks play a critical role in the diffusion of innovative practices related to social sustainability, as emphasised by the theory (Rogers, 2003). By analysing the structure of social networks within Astralis, we can identify key opinion leaders and influencers who can facilitate the spread of social sustainability initiatives. For instance, identifying early adopters within Astralis who are passionate about social sustainability can help drive adoption among their peers. These early adopters may include players, coaches, or staff members who actively support and champion social responsibility initiatives within the organisation.

Understanding the adopter categories within Astralis can inform strategies for promoting the adoption of social sustainability practices (Rogers, 2003). For example, early adopters within the organisation may serve as role models and advocates for social responsibility, influencing their peers to embrace similar values and behaviours. By recognising and leveraging the different adopter categories present within Astralis, the organisation can tailor its communication and engagement strategies to effectively reach various segments of its audience and maximise the impact of its social sustainability efforts (X, 2023). We discover many things about the nature of innovation diffusion in the esports sector by analysing Astralis' social sustainability projects and practices through the lens of the Diffusion of Innovations Theory. Key ideas of the theory are reflected in Astralis' partnerships, communication tactics, and internal dynamics, underscoring the company's dedication to promoting good change and a more diverse and socially conscious gaming community.

5.2.2 Institutional Theory

Institutional Theory offers a lens through which to analyse the adoption, diffusion, and institutionalisation of innovative practices related to social sustainability within organisations such as Astralis. This theory emphasises the influence of institutional norms, values, and structures on organisational behaviour and decision-making processes (Scott, 2014). Within the esports industry, Astralis operates within institutional environments characterised by industry norms, regulatory frameworks, and societal expectations, all of which shape its approach to social sustainability initiatives (Lammers, 2017).

Examining the role of institutional norms and values reveals how Astralis navigates pressures to conform to prevailing standards while also innovating in the realm of social responsibility (Scott, 2014). By adhering to industry norms related to competitive gaming while simultaneously introducing initiatives promoting social sustainability, Astralis demonstrates an understanding of the institutional context in which it operates. For example, Astralis' collaborations with organisations like Amnesty International align with broader societal expectations regarding corporate social responsibility, enhancing the organisation's legitimacy within the industry (X, 2023). Institutional structures within the esports industry, such as industry associations and regulatory bodies, also influence Astralis' behaviour and practices regarding social sustainability (Scott, 2014). These structures establish formal rules, procedures, and practices that govern organisational conduct. Astralis must navigate these institutional structures while introducing organisational structures related to social sustainability. For instance, the organisation may face regulatory challenges or industry standards regarding its partnerships with non-profit organisations or its involvement in social impact initiatives (Cardona, 2020).

Organisational legitimacy and isomorphism are key concepts within Institutional Theory that shed light on Astralis' efforts to gain acceptance and ensure survival within its institutional context (Cardona, 2020). By adopting innovative practices related to social sustainability, Astralis seeks to enhance its legitimacy and align with societal expectations regarding corporate responsibility. However, the organisation must also navigate pressures for conformity and differentiation within the esports industry. For example, Astralis may face scrutiny or resistance from competitors or industry stakeholders regarding its social sustainability initiatives, requiring strategic communication and engagement to maintain legitimacy (X, 2024). Astralis' role in driving institutional change and innovation within the esports industry reflects the nature of institutional development (Scott, 2014). As a prominent organisation within the industry, Astralis has the opportunity to shape industry norms and standards through its social sustainability initiatives. By challenging existing institutional norms and advocating for new industry standards, Astralis contributes to the ongoing evolution of the esports industry towards greater social responsibility (X, 2023).

Institutional Theory provides a valuable framework for understanding how organisations like Astralis navigate institutional environments and introduce innovative practices related to social sustainability within the esports industry. By examining the influence of institutional norms, values, and structures, as well as concepts such as legitimacy and isomorphism, researchers can gain insights into Astralis' approach to social responsibility and its impact on the broader institutional landscape of esports.

5.2.3 Combined theories

Astralis' collaboration with Amnesty International to create a CS2 workshop map promoting social awareness exemplifies the synergy between Diffusion of Innovations Theory and Institutional Theory in fostering social sustainability within the esports industry. By leveraging the relative advantage of aligning with a respected human rights organisation, Astralis enhances its reputation and social impact, demonstrating compatibility with values of social responsibility and activism (Rogers, 2003; X, 2023). The strategic use of communication channels like X, Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter effectively disseminates information about this initiative, reaching a broad and engaged audience (Rogers, 2003; X, 2024). Within Astralis, social networks play a critical role in the diffusion process, with key opinion leaders and early adopters driving adoption among peers. Recognising different adopter categories allows Astralis to tailor its strategies to maximise impact (Rogers, 2003). Simultaneously, Institutional Theory reveals how Astralis navigates industry norms, regulatory frameworks, and societal expectations, enhancing its legitimacy and aligning with corporate social responsibility standards (Scott, 2014; Lammers, 2017). By conforming to these norms while introducing innovative practices, Astralis balances pressures for conformity and differentiation, ensuring organisational legitimacy and survival (Cardona, 2020). As a prominent entity, Astralis influences and reshapes industry standards, contributing to the institutional evolution towards greater social responsibility (Scott, 2014).

This integrated approach underscores Astralis' dedication to promoting a more diverse and socially conscious gaming community, reflecting both the mechanisms of innovation diffusion and the significance of institutional contexts. The relevance of this analysis extends beyond Astralis, providing a model for other organisations within the esports industry and beyond. By demonstrating how to effectively combine innovative practices with adherence

to institutional norms, Astralis sets a precedent for leveraging corporate social responsibility to enhance both brand value and social impact. This dual-theoretical perspective not only enhances our understanding of innovation diffusion in the esports sector but also illustrates the significant role that institutional environments play in shaping organisational behaviour and promoting positive change.

5.2.4 Integrated understanding

Diffusion of Innovations Theory, pioneered by Everett Rogers, provides a lens through which to understand how new ideas, practices, and technologies spread within social systems. Astralis' initiatives, such as collaborations with non-profit organisations and community outreach projects, reflect attempts to introduce innovative practices related to social sustainability. By analysing attributes of innovation, communication channels, social networks, and adopter categories within the organisation, we gain a deeper understanding of Astralis' approach to promoting social responsibility. Institutional Theory, on the other hand, emphasises the influence of institutional norms, values, and structures on organisational behaviour and decision-making processes. Within the esports industry, Astralis operates within institutional environments characterised by industry norms, regulatory frameworks, and societal expectations. By adhering to industry norms while also introducing innovative practices related to social sustainability, Astralis seeks to enhance its legitimacy and navigate pressures for conformity and differentiation within the industry. Additionally, Astralis' role in driving institutional change and innovation reflects the nature of institutional development within esports.

Combining insights from both theoretical frameworks provides a comprehensive understanding of Astralis' approach to social sustainability and its impact on the broader institutional landscape of esports. By examining the organisation's initiatives, strategies, and challenges through these lenses, researchers can identify opportunities for advancing social responsibility practices within the esports industry and beyond. In conducting the analysis, the critical realism framework is applied through three layers: empirical, actual, and real. The empirical layer corresponds to the observable phenomena and data gathered from empirical observations, such as interviews, social media observations, and data analysis. This layer is engaged through the examination of concrete evidence, such as statements from

interviews with industry leaders like Sofus Bynge and Kasper Hvidt, as well as observations of Astralis' social media activities and partnerships with organisations like Amnesty International and Roobet. These empirical observations provide the initial data points and observations that form the basis of the analysis.

Moving beyond surface-level observations, the actual layer examines the underlying mechanisms and structures that produce the observable phenomena. Here, we uncover the institutional norms, communication channels, and social networks that influence Astralis' behaviour and decision-making processes. For instance, in the Institutional Theory analysis, we explore how broader institutional contexts shape Astralis' approach to social sustainability, highlighting the role of industry norms, regulatory frameworks, and societal expectations. This layer seeks to understand the contextual factors that underpin Astralis' actions, providing a more nuanced understanding of its behaviour.

At the deepest level of analysis, the real layer focuses on the underlying causal mechanisms and structures that produce both empirical observations and the actual manifestations of phenomena. Here, we theorise about the fundamental drivers of Astralis' behaviour and practices related to social sustainability within the esports industry. Drawing on concepts such as institutional norms, communication channels, and social networks, we seek to uncover the fundamental mechanisms that drive the adoption and diffusion of innovative practices within Astralis and the broader institutional landscape of the esports industry. By engaging with these three layers of critical realism, the analysis moves beyond surface-level descriptions of phenomena to uncover the deeper causal mechanisms and structures that shape Astralis' approach to social sustainability within the esports industry.

6. Discussion

6.1 Gender Representation and Inclusion

Gender representation and inclusion in the esports sector continue to be a serious difficulty, reflecting larger social patterns of gender inequity. This master's thesis contributes to the conversation by looking at the underrepresentation of women in esports and drawing connections with gender gaps in traditional sports. Darvin et al. (2021) highlight the need to

implement gender equality measures inside esports companies to build more inclusive and friendly gaming settings. Esports, like traditional sports, have long been dominated by male players, resulting in a gender disparity that can be seen at all levels, from casual play to professional competition. This gender disparity is not limited to the lack of female players; it also extends to other professions in the industry, such as coaching, management, and broadcasting. Persistent gender preconceptions and biases can create an unwelcoming climate for women, inhibiting their involvement and advancement in the area. To solve these difficulties, esports companies must establish specific gender inclusion methods. Initiatives can include launching women-only competitions like ESL Impact, developing mentorship programmes, and actively recruiting women for various roles within businesses. It is crucial to foster a culture of respect and inclusivity, which involves training and educating all members of the community on gender sensitivity and the importance of diversity. There is a need for comprehensive policies and frameworks that support gender equality in esports. These policies should be designed to eliminate discriminatory practices and provide equal opportunities for all genders. By setting clear guidelines and holding stakeholders accountable, esports organisations can create a more balanced and equitable environment. The presence of female esports participants not only broadens the community's diversity but also adds unique viewpoints and skill sets that enhance the entire experience. Astralis and other organisations take the lead in advancing gender equality, and others in the sector are compelled to follow suit. In addition to helping the people directly involved, this inclusiveness movement improves how esports are perceived generally and makes it more approachable and appealing to a larger audience.

6.2 Social Impact of Online Gaming Communities

The social features of online gaming communities and their impact on offline social support networks are crucial areas of research for understanding the broader societal implications of esports. Trepte et al. (2012) explore how these communities can foster meaningful social connections, demonstrating their potential to deliver significant social benefits. Online gaming communities provide a unique space where individuals can connect based on shared interests and passions, often transcending geographical boundaries. This connectivity allows players from diverse backgrounds to interact, collaborate, and form friendships. The sense of belonging and camaraderie developed within these communities can significantly impact

players' social lives, providing emotional support and reducing feelings of isolation. The social interactions within online gaming communities often extend beyond the virtual world, influencing offline relationships and support networks. For many players, the friendships formed in online gaming environments become an essential part of their social lives, offering companionship and support that may be lacking in their offline interactions. This phenomenon is particularly evident among individuals who may struggle with social integration in traditional settings, such as those with social anxiety or other barriers to social interaction. These online communities offer a platform where such individuals can connect more comfortably, helping them to develop social skills and confidence that can be transferred to offline interactions.

Online gaming communities also serve as platforms for social learning and development. Players often engage in collaborative problem-solving, strategic planning, and team-based activities, which can enhance their communication and interpersonal skills. These skills are transferable to offline contexts, contributing to personal growth and social competence. The teamwork and leadership skills developed in gaming environments can be particularly valuable in professional and educational settings. Esports organisations can play a pivotal role in nurturing these positive social impacts by fostering inclusive and supportive online communities. By creating safe and welcoming spaces, organisations like Astralis can enhance the social benefits of esports participation. This involves implementing community guidelines that promote respectful behaviour, actively moderating interactions to prevent toxicity and harassment, and encouraging positive social interactions. These efforts help create a supportive environment where players feel valued and respected, fostering a sense of community and belonging.

Esports events and tournaments provide opportunities for community members to meet in person, further strengthening their bonds. These events serve as social hubs where players can celebrate their shared passion, build friendships, and participate in a vibrant community. The social impact of such gatherings extends beyond the individual, contributing to the overall health and cohesion of the esports community. Meeting in person allows players to solidify online friendships, creating deeper and more meaningful connections. The collaborative nature of online gaming can promote cultural exchange and understanding.

Players from different cultural backgrounds can interact with and learn from each other, fostering a more inclusive and empathetic global community. This cultural exchange can help break down stereotypes and prejudices, promoting a more inclusive and diverse society. Online gaming communities have the potential to significantly enhance social connections and support networks, both online and offline. By promoting inclusive and respectful environments, esports organisations can maximise these benefits, fostering personal growth and stronger community bonds. This comprehensive approach underscores the importance of considering the social dimensions of online gaming in the broader context of esports' societal impact. The positive social interactions facilitated by online gaming communities can contribute to the overall well-being and social cohesion of players, making them an important aspect of the esports ecosystem.

7. Conclusion

In examining Astralis' innovative approach to accommodating social sustainability within the esports industry, this study reveals a comprehensive landscape of achievements and proactive efforts. Addressing the research question, "How does Astralis work innovatively to accommodate social sustainability?" highlights the organisation's commendable efforts, its commitment to continuous improvement, and the positive impacts it has made within the industry. Astralis' commitment to player well-being stands out as a cornerstone of its innovative approach. Through comprehensive player care programmes and initiatives aimed at prioritising the physical and mental health of its athletes, Astralis sets a high standard for player welfare within the esports ecosystem. These efforts underscore Astralis' dedication to creating a supportive environment that promotes both professional success and personal well-being. While there have been complexities in balancing player welfare with organisational sustainability, Astralis' proactive stance on addressing these issues demonstrates its commitment to refining its practices for the betterment of its players.

Varius Astralis' initiatives to foster inclusivity and diversity represent another dimension of its innovative practices. By actively promoting gender diversity and advocating for inclusivity, Astralis endeavours to create a more equitable gaming environment. These efforts demonstrate Astralis' commitment to fostering a culture of respect and equality, ensuring that all players and fans feel welcome and valued. While there have been challenges, such as

navigating partnerships and ethical considerations, Astralis' dedication to transparency and accountability shines through its continuous efforts to improve and set higher standards. In the realm of community engagement and collaborative partnerships, Astralis showcases innovation through its strategic use of social media platforms and alliances with reputable organisations. By leveraging these channels, Astralis not only enhances its brand presence but also engages in meaningful dialogue with its community. Collaborations with organisations like Amnesty International highlight Astralis' commitment to using its platform for social good, sparking important conversations, and driving positive change within the esports community. Although occasional criticisms on social media highlight the complexities of digital communication, these experiences underscore Astralis' resolve to maintain authenticity and ethical standards.

Analysing Astralis' approach through theoretical frameworks like Diffusion of Innovations Theory and Institutional Theory provides additional insights into the underlying mechanisms driving its innovative practices. Astralis adeptly navigates institutional norms and leverages communication channels to drive positive change, showcasing its ability to influence industry standards and inspire others to adopt similar practices. While the organisation faces pressures within the esports industry, its resilience and adaptability reinforce its role as a leader in social sustainability. However, it's important to recognise areas where Astralis faces challenges. One notable issue is the criticism surrounding certain partnerships that have sparked ethical concerns. For instance, alliances with controversial entities like Roobet have raised questions about the organisation's commitment to ethical conduct. These partnerships highlight the need for Astralis to be more discerning in its collaborative efforts to maintain its integrity and reputation. Another area of concern is the backlash over player contract disputes and wage cuts during the COVID-19 pandemic. These incidents have highlighted the tension between financial sustainability and player welfare. Addressing these challenges transparently and fairly is crucial for Astralis to uphold its commitment to social sustainability and ensure the well-being of its players.

Astralis' innovative approach to social sustainability reflects a dynamic interplay of successes and proactive efforts to address challenges. The organisation demonstrates commendable efforts in prioritising player well-being, fostering inclusivity, and engaging with the

community. By acknowledging achievements and embracing opportunities for improvement, Astralis and other esports organisations can chart a course towards a more sustainable and socially responsible future. Guided by lessons learned and a commitment to continuous improvement, Astralis is poised to inspire broader industry-wide transformations that foster inclusivity, transparency, and accountability. Through collaborative efforts and a shared commitment to positive change, Astralis is shaping a more sustainable and socially responsible gaming ecosystem for future generations.

8. Perspectives

Macro-Social: A Comprehensive Analysis of Social Dimensions

Our study enhances the understanding of social sustainability in esports by synthesising key research areas such as health, gender equality, diversity, and community well-being. By integrating these themes, we offer a holistic perspective that highlights the interconnected nature of these social dimensions, revealing how initiatives in one area can positively influence others. Our analysis indicates that promoting gender equality in esports environments significantly impacts community well-being. Creating inclusive gaming spaces not only supports gender diversity but also fosters a sense of belonging, leading to enhanced community engagement and improved mental health. Efforts to address player health, including physical and mental well-being, are intrinsically linked to fostering diversity. Ensuring comprehensive health support makes esports more accessible and appealing to a diverse range of participants, thereby promoting inclusivity. By looking at social sustainability through a multifaceted lens, our study provides insights into how different aspects interact and reinforce each other. For example, policies aimed at improving gender equality often led to a more engaged and mentally healthy community, demonstrating the ripple effect of targeted initiatives. Our findings underscore the necessity of considering multiple social factors simultaneously when developing policies and practices in the esports industry. This integrated approach ensures that initiatives are more effective and sustainable in the long term. The interconnected approach to social sustainability is relatively underexplored in existing esports literature. Most studies tend to focus on isolated aspects, such as player health or gender, without examining their interdependencies. By integrating various social dimensions, our study broadens the scope of research on social sustainability in esports. This comprehensive perspective encourages further exploration into how different social factors

influence each other and contribute to a more sustainable and inclusive esports environment.

Critical Reflection and Ethical Considerations

Our critical reflection on the ethical considerations of financial partnerships and organisational practices within the esports industry provides new insights into the complexities of maintaining social responsibility. By examining cases like Astralis' indirect ties to the Saudi government through ESL, we bring attention to the ethical dilemmas that arise from financial collaborations. This analysis highlights the tension between pursuing financial growth and adhering to ethical standards, suggesting that esports organisations must navigate these challenges carefully. The ethical implications of such relationships prompt a need for ethical guidelines and standards in the industry. Our discussion advocates for greater transparency and accountability, encouraging stakeholders to critically evaluate their partnerships and organisational practices. This reflection not only contributes to the ethical discourse in esports but also provides practical recommendations for fostering a more responsible and sustainable industry.

Bringing New Light to the Field

Our study broadens the scope of research in esports by examining various social dimensions beyond traditional performance and economic measures. By considering factors like health, diversity, and community well-being, we gain a more comprehensive understanding of how esports influence society. In addition to exploring social aspects, we delve into ethical considerations within esports organisations. By addressing financial partnerships and ethical responsibilities, we advocate for a more ethical and socially responsible industry, promoting transparency and accountability. Our study not only fills gaps in the current literature but also provides practical recommendations for future research. By offering insights and suggesting areas for further exploration, we empower future studies to build upon our findings and continue advancing knowledge in the field of esports and social sustainability. Our research takes a proactive approach, analysing existing paradigms while also providing actionable methods and recommendations for the future direction of social sustainability efforts in the esports business. By focusing on real solutions and areas for further

investigation, we want to catalyse meaningful development and innovation in this quickly changing industry.

Theoretical Implications

In this thesis, we look into the theoretical advances in the field of esports studies by analysing Astralis´ social sustainability initiatives through the lens of the Diffusion of Innovation and Institutional theories. One of the initiatives analysed in the previous segment—a partnership with Amnesty International to develop a Counter-Strike workshop map that encourages social consciousness—allowed us to learn more about how new ideas spread throughout the esports industry. This relates to the Diffusion of Innovations Theory, which emphasises how innovation features like relative advantage and compatibility assist in adoption. Examining Astralis' strategy in the light of institutional theory reveals how organisational behaviour is influenced by institutional norms, values, and structures. Astralis's industry validity is strengthened by its partnerships with respectable groups such as Amnesty International, which are aligned with wider society's expectations of corporate social responsibility. This highlights how useful it is to match organisational procedures with institutional norms to promote meaningful change.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study offer practical insights for esports organisations, industry stakeholders, and policymakers looking to promote social sustainability within the esports ecosystem. For instance, organisations can learn from Astralis' strategies for leveraging effective communication channels, such as X and social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok, to disseminate information about their social sustainability initiatives. By targeting key adopter categories within their communities, organisations can enhance the diffusion and adoption of innovative practices. Industry stakeholders, including sponsors and tournament organisers, can collaborate with organisations like Astralis to promote initiatives that benefit players and fans. For example, partnerships with non-profit organisations like Amnesty International can facilitate the development of initiatives aimed at addressing social issues within the gaming community. This highlights the practical implications of industry collaboration for driving positive change. Similarly, policymakers can use the insights from this study to inform regulatory frameworks and industry standards that

promote social responsibility within the esports ecosystem. By aligning regulatory incentives with social sustainability goals, policymakers can create an environment that encourages organisations to prioritise social responsibility and drive positive change within the industry. This underscores the importance of regulatory support in fostering a more inclusive and socially responsible gaming community.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

While this study provides valuable insights into Astralis' social sustainability initiatives, it is not without limitations. One limitation is the focus on a single organisation, which may limit the generalisability of the findings to the broader esports industry. Future research could explore social sustainability practices across multiple esports organisations to provide a more comprehensive understanding of industry trends and dynamics. Additionally, the reliance on secondary data sources, such as interviews and social media observations, may introduce biases or limitations in data availability. Future studies could employ mixed-method approaches, including primary data collection methods such as surveys and interviews, to enhance the findings. Furthermore, longitudinal studies could investigate the long-term impact of social sustainability initiatives on organisational performance and industry development.

Implementation Challenges

Implementing social sustainability initiatives within the esports industry may face several challenges. One challenge is the dynamic and rapidly evolving nature of the industry, which may require organisations to adapt their strategies continuously. For example, controversies surrounding partnerships or player relations can pose reputational risks and undermine the effectiveness of social sustainability initiatives. Organisations may also face resistance from internal stakeholders or external actors who are resistant to change or sceptical of the value of social responsibility. Addressing these challenges requires strong leadership, effective communication, and a commitment to transparency and accountability. Additionally, resource constraints, such as budget limitations or competing priorities, may hinder organisations' ability to invest in social sustainability initiatives. Overcoming these challenges requires a strategic approach, collaboration with industry stakeholders, and a long-term commitment to social responsibility.

Opportunities for Improvement

Despite the challenges, there are numerous opportunities for organisations to improve their social sustainability practices within the esports industry. One opportunity is leveraging digital technologies and social media platforms to amplify the reach and impact of social sustainability initiatives. For example, organisations can use immersive technologies such as virtual reality to create engaging experiences that raise awareness of social issues and promote inclusivity within the gaming community. Collaborating with influencers, content creators, and community leaders can also enhance the effectiveness of social sustainability initiatives by tapping into existing networks and fostering grassroots support. Additionally, organisations can explore partnerships with non-profit organisations, educational institutions, and government agencies to develop innovative programs and initiatives that address systemic issues such as online harassment, mental health support, and diversity and inclusion. By embracing these opportunities and continuously refining their strategies, organisations can play a leading role in advancing social sustainability within the esports industry and driving positive change for players, fans, and stakeholders alike.

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10. Appendices

10.1 Appendix 1: Interview with Kasper Hvidt

Conducted on Friday, March 8, 2024

1. Berat: I just want to ask before we start if it's okay if I record our interview so I can take notes after we're done.

Kasper: Yes, I would definitely recommend that; otherwise, you need to write really fast.

B: Exactly, otherwise, I would seem very rude while we're talking.

K: Yes, you just have to do that.

5. B: Well, again, I'd like to thank you for taking the time for this interview.

K: I think it's somehow the responsibility of all of us to try to help others move forward, to start, and to inspire, so it's a pleasure from my side.

B: We're actually trying to start with completely new research in this field, so we hope that we can come up with something good at least.

B: Well, you just have to answer what you can, and what you can't, you can just say "next.". Then we'll get through it all.

K: Okay, damn good!

10. B: The first question is: "Can you give an insight into the actions and initiatives that Astralis took during your time, with a focus on supporting the overall health and wellbeing of the players?"

K: Yes, when I was hired—I mean, seven years ago now, I was hired for a task that was quite simple, and that was to create a performance framework for the three teams I was employed for; Astralis, Heroic, and Godsent. And the first thing I did, or we did, in the beginning, was actually to create a mini version of Team Denmark from our team.

So, I put together a team of physical trainers, physiotherapists, doctors, therapists, and dieticians. They already had a psychologist on staff before I arrived, but it was a sports

psychologist who could support the players in everything that wasn't playing computer games.

B: Okay. So, you actually came in with a bit of the mindset you had from your professional handball career, you could say?

K: Yes, because when I was asked about the job, I was kind of at a loss as I didn't really know what esports was. I had heard about the football game FIFA and their world championships before, but other than that, I didn't know much more about it.

15. B: Yeah, it wasn't very widespread and popular back then, you could say.

K: Yes, exactly. It wasn't very well publicised in Denmark anyway.

K: Once I had mulled it over for a bit and then accepted the task and then figured out what it was exactly: and that was creating better opportunities for performance, I just thought, if I were the manager of a handball team, which was my previous career, how would I have approached it?

K: Then I thought that it's the same way to approach it here. Whether you play handball or e-sports, it's pretty much the same foundation that needs to be in place.

K: Of course, the players need to be helped in different ways, but it's the same support unit that I have assembled; it's what I would have done for a handball team.

20. B: Okay, thank you! Well, let's just move on to the next one; that was a good answer.

B: The next question is, "How has Astralis approached promoting gender diversity and equality within the organisation when it comes to aspects such as the playing squad and staff positions?"

K: Well, I have a daughter myself, and my wife is quite ambitious in the university world. She is an associate professor at SDU. And there, you see more women starting out in the humanities, and when you see how many end up as professors, it's about 20 per cent. So I had just thought that both genders should have equal conditions and the same salary, and so on and so on and so on and so on.

K: I thought that it simply couldn't be right, so I had to help work towards that.

K: So, the first thing we did in this area was to get one of the best female FIFA players in the world, Stephanie "Teca" Luana da Silva Santos (goes by Teca). She's Brazilian. And then you think, but what is it that makes it such a difficult situation for Teca to be able to play properly?

25. K: It's that no one wants to play against her because she's not good enough.

K: And she's not good enough because she's never had the same opportunities as the boys. Because the boys started playing when they were little, when they got a little older, they had a huge advantage over the girls.

K: That's one of the problems with female gaming in general, because it was something that people wanted, but they ended up not giving the same relationship to them. So we made a decision around that and decided to give them the same support that we gave to the men's teams. So, it was really to try to create professional conditions on an equal footing with the others.

K: We first started with Teca. We gave her some serious sparing and training so that she wasn't just a fan playing but that she actually got a professional approach to her game.

K: In FIFA, it was very much about the physicality and all the other things, like the tactical aspect of the game. Firstly, give her some money so she can buy good players like the others. So Fatih, our best FIFA player, invested about 5,000 euros in players. She spent about the same—not quite as much, but about enough—so she had the chance to build a fair team.

30. K: I don't know how much you're into FIFA, but it's a lot about buying players right when the new game comes out. And with them, you build the team better and better. And there was also something about giving her coaching help so she could follow the meta of the game.

K: Throughout my time at Astralis, we have actually supported women in the same way as we supported men.

K: And then later on, we went in and created a female Counter-Strike team.

B: Yes, it was one of the first. At least the first in Denmark, I think.

K: Yes, which was also professional.

35. B: Yes, exactly.

K: They indeed earned less than the boys, but the thing about it is that the women's earnings were much smaller. So, they probably earned the same percentage as the boys in relation to the income they received. But it was something you could make a living from, so it wasn't just something you had to do in your spare time. And then there were actually expectations that they could deliver the same as the boys. When a professional setup was set up, it was so that all they had to do was play computer games.

B: Yes, so they were allowed to only think about gaming and not school or work?

K: Yes, so now you asked about focus. So, it was so that the girls could also put their 100 per cent focus into this. They didn't have to come home tired after school or work. You also have to eat a quick meal, be ready on the server, and then fall asleep after an hour of training with the team.

B: Okay. Let's move on to the next one. The next question is, "How has Astralis sought to interact with and engage the wider gaming community while promoting inclusivity and diversity?"

40. K: Well, I would say we've always been very open to meeting people in Nexus. We had this gaming centre inside Nexus, where there were fan zones and autograph signings, and we've always tried to interact as much as possible with fans online.

K: A lot of it was in the communications department, so it didn't have much to do with me, but we tried to be as open as we possibly could about the things that were going on.

B: Okay. Is that also something you talked to the player about? It can be tiring, you could say, as a player who has been training all day.

K: It's tiring, but you could say that some of it, if I have to put it into words, "what was it that I came with?", and now I've gone into detail about it before, but I came with the mindset of being a professional athlete, and what is that?

K: Part of it is being available as much as you can stand and be committed to your fans, even when things are going badly. Sometimes it's annoying as hell because you're tired and angry and feel like you should be doing something else, but a professional athlete also understands that it's part of the job.

45. B: Yes, that's right. Okay, so let's move on.

B: The next question is, "How has Astralis worked with external partners, such as health organisations or interest groups, to address social sustainability issues (CSR) within the esports industry?"

K: I think we have been involved in a lot of initiatives in relation to sustainability. I would probably say "mental sustainability", i.e. anti-bullying campaigns, etc.

K: Well, we haven't talked about sustainability, such as green transition and such, if that's what you're thinking of.

B: No, we think more about the social aspect.

50. K: Yes, but it's been both inclusion, making, having, and supporting the best female FIFA player in the world. She ended up being the first verified female FIFA player. And the 1000 or so players worldwide that were verified were all boys until she actually became one. So, she was 1 in 1000.

K: So, this whole gaming thing is for girls, for boys, and for whoever. Fat, thin, tall, short—all kinds of people who want to join in. They must also have a complete platform. And that's one of the reasons why we created the female jump in Counter-Strike.

B: Yes. Okay, so the next question is a bit similar to what you're talking about now.

B: It's kind of like, how have you tackled it, i.e., have you encountered any problems? As you say, Teca was the first female FIFA player, and you had the first professional Danish women's team in Counter-Strike. Have there been any problems, and how have you dealt with them?

K: Well, I actually don't think there have been any problems. There has only been goodwill while I've been there. The women's team got a partner; that's what happened just before I left. The partner is called "Netcompany.". Their chairwoman, Le Gammeltoft, has been very good at supporting and including. So, they have been a very active partner for the women's team.

55. B: You could say that if you only see problems, they'll probably happen.

K: Well, you could say that when you're in the process of either introducing a culture or changing a culture, not everyone stands with their hands up and claps. A lot of people are a bit anxious about new initiatives or changes, so they'd almost rather avoid them.

B: Yes, exactly. You still see that today.

K: Yes, but you could say that sometimes when you're in a senior position as a manager, you make decisions whether they're unpopular or not. But maybe you think those are the ones that need to be made. You have to make them.

B: Yes, and that also characterises Astralis in their position, you could say. At least during the time you've been there. It's not the same team that came out of the period you were there as the team you left behind after you left Astralis.

60. K: No, exactly. At least the two female initiatives, Teca and the women's team in Counter-Strike, I created.

B: Yes, exactly. Well, that's also why we thought it would be really cool to get you in here because we already had our own knowledge about Astralis and the position you have had in the creation of the Astralis we know today. So, we thought it would be a shame to bring in so much new information without talking to the person who helped create it.

K: Yes. I really appreciate that.

B: Well, great, let's move on to the next question. The question is; "If you look at Social sustainability initiatives in esports and then put yourself in that role as an expert and if you were to give some advice on how to shape this in the future, let's say you're not in Astralis now, but let's say you were still there, what initiative would you come up with?"

K: I don't know if it's an initiative or just a fact, but if it's going to be socially sustainable, you should look at the players' habits and things like sleep. A lot of this takes place at night, but if you're only awake at night, you start swapping meals around because you sleep through some meals. So, your brain gets confused, and when you're confused, you're more likely to be affected by things that wouldn't normally have much of an effect on you. If you don't take care of yourself physically, and physically is not just lying down and doing bench presses or going for a run, it's also sleeping and eating in a sensible way. So that's probably where I would say you should start.

65. K: And then you could say, but does it have anything to do with the mental side? It does because if your body isn't ready to be the best version of itself, your mind and brain are under pressure. When you're under pressure, you start talking like an idiot to your teammates or to others on the server.

K: We also have a League of Legends team where players have to solo Q to train and practice their individual skills, where professionals have to wait in a queue together with players who don't play professionally on a team (but still have an extremely high individual level). There were often examples of professional players being provoked by amateurs on the server, as this was sometimes their only goal when they finally got into a match against professional players. Players would get annoyed and then be influenced enough to write abuse in the game chat, but this was quickly cracked down on by the game developer, Riot Games, and the players were then banned.

K: I thought it's incredible that you're not just happy to be allowed to play with a professional, but you actually get into some kind of bickering in there with a professional who actually has his entire career to play for. If you say something wrong there, it will be recorded, and then you can receive warnings, and eventually, you can be banned from the game.

K: That's why it's so incredibly important that you have energy - mental energy is what you get to start with, among other things, by having physical energy.

K: That was the first thing I would say, proper habits in terms of what you eat, how long you play for, and how much you sleep. And then you could say that most of us live in a different setting where we can't decide our everyday lives. We have to go to school, we have to go to

university, and we have to go to work. If you sit and play until two, three, or four o'clock, you can work out how many hours of sleep you get. And if you're constantly sleep-deprived, you'll end up feeling a bit weird on top of your head. And when you're weird in the head, you become more easily flammable and aggressive, and it doesn't take much for you to get angry and start calling people the most stupid things. Then people end up going home upset because they've been called offensive things. And if we're talking about inclusion and some girls are playing, and you hear the girl's voice, then she's also given various glosses.

70. K: Then you could say that we're really in a toxic environment, and I think the basis for avoiding that is, of course, some education about how to talk to each other. But before we even start there, we have to be the best version of ourselves, and that starts with physics, diet (diet at the right time), and sleep (the right amount of sleep at the right time).

B: Okay, so it's also about some balance in their life?

K: It's actually about a life balance.

B: Thinking about the next step, do you have any ideas on how the things you mentioned can be changed? Is it something educational? Is it the government or?

K: Well, I would say that back in the day, at one of the Blast tournaments, we had Lars Løkke come out and open the show, and he said, "You are true athletes.". Literally. It's not that easy to get Lars Løkke out there. It had kind of started many months before, when I went out for a run with him when he was prime minister. So, every once in a while, the prime minister would invite different people out for a run. He would run five kilometres with different people while he heard about different things in society. One of those times, I was there, and I thought that if he might be interested in gaming, we would really like to invite him to Blast. And he ended up coming along and opening Blast, which was really cool.

75. K: Based on his speech, there was a lot of work from a whole lot of people, i.e. broad-based work, and also the good work of continuation schools, i.e. the fact that you can go to e-sports programmes, etc. E-sports, which we talked about earlier, was quite unknown when I came in, but now it's known to everyone in Denmark, at least Counter-Strike. Many people don't realise that e-sports is much, much more than Counter-Strike. But at least with

this gaming, which is so often associated with Counter-Strike, you can now be trained in it all the way down to the secondary school level. And as you can say, the more organisation we get, where these messages about eating properly, sleeping properly, talking properly to each other, and getting a proper balance in life can get out to young people as soon as possible in their careers or in their lives, the better it goes. It's such a big mechanism that is set in motion, and it takes a long time before we get there. You never reach the goal, but we're not really off to a good start in Denmark, partly because Lars Løkke said that.

B: Okay. As you say, it's difficult to achieve the goal when it's such a big change you're trying to implement, but it's definitely a mechanism that is "always changing," you could say. So there are new things happening.

K: Yes, but you can say that it's being brought up and discussed at all, and in Denmark, because so much attention was paid to Astralis, it has become something that would never have happened without Astralis. It's also because I know that without Blast, that is, without RFRSH, the company I was employed by, which was Blast, Astralis, Heroic, and Godsent, but without that organisation, e-sports in Denmark would never have been where it is today. Without it, we would never have had you calling me and asking me questions; we would never have had people from the university researching all sorts of fun parameters within this field. We would never have had continuation schools that started offering e-sports programmes. So I think e-sports in Denmark is a really, really good place.

B: Yes, that's absolutely correct. Moving on to the next question, "How do you perceive the responsibility of esports organisations to promote equality and diversity, and what strategies do you think they can use to create meaningful change in the industry?"

K: I actually think that with Riot and Valorant, they've made a pretty professional Valorant league, so when the Valorant league was created, Valve somehow had to get on the bandwagon in terms of providing a serious alternative in this ESL Impact League. They actually went to their partner teams and asked them if they wanted to join this, and we all joined.

80. K: But I actually think that initiatives have been taken to promote it, and I think that in principle, at some point, we should see girls who can compete against boys on an equal footing. It's probably not the generation we see now, because many boys have a head start. But if you assume that a 12-year-old girl and a 12-year-old boy are given the same conditions and the same levels to train at, then there's nothing to say that the boy is more talented than the girl. But you could say that it might also start with creating a safe environment, so it might be easier, but it might be easier in the beginning to create all-girl teams because they have one way of talking to each other, and all-boy teams. After all, they probably also have one way of talking to each other. But you should probably just educate everyone that this is how you talk to each other when you're gaming. Of course, it's difficult because people are different, and what we bring to a team is also different in our personal baggage.

K: I think that initiatives have been put in place that allow you to see more inclusive environments over time.

B: Okay, so you could say that seeds have been planted now and you wouldn't be able to see them for a couple of generations?

K: Not quite, because e-sports is going faster than that, but it takes a while, that's for sure.

B: Okay, that makes sense.

85. K: Well, you could also say that there might also be something to do with the types of games, i.e., what content the games have. So, it may well be (and here you probably need to do some research; this is just my gut feeling), but it may well be a shooting game, 5 versus 5, that there are some boys aged 10-12 who find it attractive to play compared to girls. And girls still come in for some other games, like FIFA, for example.

B: Or Valorant you could say now?

K: Yes, or Valorant...

B: Yes, okay. Well, let me try to move on; you've already talked about all the questions. The next question is, "What advice or recommendations would you give to other esports

organisations that want to pave the way for innovation in social sustainability and promote constructive impact in their communities?"

B: So, you could say, if it were another organisation, someone other than Astralis, what advice would you give them?

90. K: I would definitely say that they should support the development that has already started. More girls' teams, more women's teams, or mixed teams. There can easily be, so no one is saying that it has to be boys and girls teams. In a way, it's also a stereotype we're used to seeing in elite sports. Why do women and men play separately? But it has a lot to do with physics. Men shoot harder in handball; they are bigger and faster. But that's the great thing about e-sports; it shouldn't be like that. You can create mixed teams as easily as anything else. Maybe that's what we need to do to achieve more inclusion. Also to provide opportunities for socialising and fun across genders.

K: It is perhaps best to get mixed teams at a more broad level. Maybe not at the top, I don't know. So, something like that could be fun. So, think outside the box a bit in terms of why it should be girls' teams and boys' teams; why can't it be mixed teams?

B: Yes, it's also innovative, you could say.

K: Yes, exactly. Otherwise, it's just a matter of continuing the good work that's going on in the organisations.

K: I'm sure there are plenty of studies that have looked into it, for example, finding or developing games that are more attractive to girls. So that you don't just have a lot of Counter-Strike teams without much else to offer.

95. B: We look at teams that are only men or only women, and why shouldn't you be allowed to play with men or with women? We do it ourselves when we play at home on our own computers.

K: Well, we also had a Rainbow Six team over in the American League. And one of our competitors had a female player on their team. I mean, a professional female player. So there were four men and one woman on their team.

B: Okay. And there weren't any rules that put a stop to this?

K: There are no rules for that.

B: Okay, and Counter-Strike doesn't have that either?

100. K: It's just our stereotype that that's the way it should be, and boys don't want to play with girls, etc. I think most people just want to play on the best team with the best players. So, if the next generation has gotten used to the idea that you can just play together, then it's also possible that the 10-12-year-olds will now play on mixed teams because this stereotype is no longer there.

K: And it could actually be fun to think about whether women, in terms of being leaders, lead teams in a different way. So, a girl in the in-game leader role might be better at facilitating, i.e., playing her teammates well. It could also be fun to ask a sociologist if there might sometimes be more of a need for female intuition and a female leadership style.

K: A female leadership style may be easier for some types of people to be led by than a man. And when you enter such macho environments, there can be several things that come into play. Where ego plays a big part for many, "I'm the one who should be in charge!" or "Why is it always me who has to run first?" (If you play Counter-Strike yourself, you probably recognise this problem.). And maybe a female leader can make it a little smoother and less patronising.

K: That could be an interesting problem, so think about it. Could you actually imagine that there are some roles for girls where they are at least as good and are better at performing?

B: Yes, that's a very interesting point.

105. K: But all of this requires a level playing field from the start of their career. Equal coaches train them, and they play against equal opponents. Obviously, if you have someone who wants to be in the Superliga but is only allowed to train against the Denmark series, you won't get very far. All the boys get to play against each other, sprint against each other, and compete against each other.

K: But then you'd probably immediately say, but girls don't run as fast as boys. But in e-sports, there's nothing to suggest that boys can do better than girls. Regardless of having a better education right from the start, they face tougher opposition faster, they start playing much earlier, etc.

K: There has been a tendency for girls to be left out, and this can happen for many reasons. There is a tendency for girls to listen to a lot of things, why should they listen to that? Why should they have to listen to whether they are beautiful, tall, thin, or fat when they are playing a game on an equal footing with others? So, of course, all of that had to go straight away.

B: Yes. It makes a lot of sense. It's a culture change, for sure. The last two questions are more reflective of your time at Astralis. "Thinking back to your time as Sports Director at Astralis, what achievements or initiatives do you consider important in promoting social sustainability and prioritising the wellbeing of players and staff?"

K: It's definitely the inclusion of these elements in e-sports. Now, seven years later, not many people realise where we were when I started at Astralis. No one thought about how much travelling time the players had and how much strain it put on them. They were travelling for around 180 days and living under constant stress. Until I started saying we were going to stop playing so many tournaments in a season. That's when we really started winning because we reduced the amount of travel. Then we could train more, and we could take breaks.

110. K: Whenever someone had a problem, we always had someone close by who could help us, such as a doctor or a physiotherapist. Nicolai "dev1ce" Reedtz also had problems very early on in my programme. It was actually a dietician who helped him with his problem. In general, they were physically tested so you could see what baseline they had and what training programme to give to the individual players.

K: Everything I just mentioned is something that all the teams, especially in Counter-Strike, have implemented now. So, the whole focus on these things was because of us at Astralis, and to a large extent, because of all the really talented people that were brought in from day one.

K: When I quit, there was also one of our biggest competitors who just said, "Kasper, thank you so much for being here because there was a before and an after, and maybe not many people will recognise that. But he did, and that was probably the thing that made me the

happiest. He simply wrote, "Congratulations on all the titles, your legacy, and what you brought to Esport. You did a great job and were a true game changer.".

K: That's just where I say, "Well, someone has actually noticed my hard work and realised that I've made a difference, and that makes me proud, and that we dared to come up with something completely different, despite the fact that there was a lot of resistance from all sorts of fronts.".

K: I didn't always think that there was a tailwind on the cycle path with these initiatives. There were many times when there were a lot of headwinds as well.

115. B: That's also why we're here, because we've also realised that there was an Astralis before, and another Astralis came out after your time.

K: Thank you so much; it makes me really proud and happy.

B: It's a bit of a shame that people like you go off and do their thing, or don't really get recognised for what they've actually changed and improved in the industry

K: Yes, but you know what? When I came in, I also had one goal. It was that the players should not be dependent on me. But it had to be so that after a while, they couldn't remember where they started, what I was offering, and what tools we had trained with them, and that's how it turned out in the end. I was just happy about that. I don't need anyone standing up and applauding what I came up with, because we were also a great team inside Astralis that kind of brought this forward. But I'm well aware of what a game it was, but I don't really care because I just wanted to go in and make the change that was needed, and the players were fantastic in accepting me and my ideas.

B: Yes, it was a big change, but as you say, now that change is just an everyday thing for players and for the Counter-Strike industry in general.

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120. B: So, let's move on to the last question, which is "During your time at Astralis, have you noticed any changes related to social innovation?" That's what you were talking about at the end, right, with the initiatives you've taken?

K: In terms of changes, I would say, among other things, in addition to everything we've talked about today. I would say, among other things, that women began to play a more prominent role in this industry, so that was new, and it's still new.

B: Well, it didn't exist back then; you could say that. It's certainly not on the same scale as it is today.

K: No, definitely not.

B: Well, that was the last question.

125. K: Then I wish you all the best of luck with it. Can't you write when you finish and tell us what grade you got and if you were satisfied with everything?

B: Yes, of course! I'll follow up with you on that.

B: Finally, is it okay with you if we use your name?

K: Yes, no problem! You are welcome to do so.

10.2 Appendix 2: Interview with Sofus Bynge

Conducted on Friday, March 8, 2024

1. Adam: OK, I can hear you now. I have started the recording, and I hope that the recording doesn't malfunction again like yesterday.

Adam: Firstly, I want to start by asking you about **the initiatives that Astralis is currently doing with a focus on supporting health well-being and gender equality**.

Sofus: I think that there are a lot of questions in that single question that you just asked. I would like to split it up and say that in health and well-being, we focus on various aspects:

S: We focus on the fact that being physically active comes naturally; it is something that we, of course, do, but it's an agenda that is less needed now than it was a few years ago because the health aspect is more of a social aspect, so instead of adults thinking that it's only youth that play video games that need to be physically active, there is a general notion that everyone needs to be physically active, so it's no longer only the gamers. It is now everyone, which means that it matters less specifically for the gamers, so for us at the moment, it's a very natural thing that we, of course, focus on this kind of thing, daily life, and routines in the physical aspect.

5. S: The mental aspect is that we try to make sure that the lives of talented or dedicated video gamers are not diminished to be just what's happening in their bedroom or by the computer. We are trying to focus on the importance of talking with friends, meeting up with your friends physically, being a part of local communities instead of just online communities, and making sure that people realise that it's not a choice between school and education but that you should find time for both. Knowing that we're getting an education is equally as important for gamers as it is for every other sport. So, in general, the mental aspect for us is trying to help the youth realise that they need other content and relationships in their lives than just those that they find/have online.

S: Briefly, about the health aspect, social health is the one that matters the most for my department, at least like I said in the old interview as well (just to make it clear, I have no

responsibilities within the main team or the talents), so my responsibilities and my area of expertise are not related to the performance team; they're related to the general responsibilities that come with being a role model for the youth.

A: **How is Astralis trying to educate people and the culture, and how does it make progress in the culture of gaming and within that community?**

S: In general, what has happened for the past 20 years in Denmark and a lot of other countries as well is that already from kindergarten, the kids are being taught that if they make a drawing, their parents and adults around them would say, *"Nice job, you're trying to colour within the lines. I can see you are making an effort."* They will accommodate their physical products, but as soon as the kids try to invite adults, parents, etc. into their digital lives by trying to show a screen and say, "Hey, *do you want to watch this kid Netflix show, do you want to watch this on YouTube, or do you want to play Minecraft?*" then normally what they're met with is *"right now I need to cook or not right now I need to make something or can you just sit alone for a bit."*

S: So, what they're being told from a very young age is that the adults around them are only interested in the physical world; they are not interested in their digital world. So, what we are trying (and focusing a lot on) is that we try to reinstate the relevance of adults in youth and kids' digital lives because, for the past many years, they have been taught that their digital lives don't matter.

10. S: So, in broad terms, that's one of the biggest issues for me and my department regarding education because one of the things that we need is to speak with adults, parents, teachers, pedagogues, etc. Everyone who works with kids or with youth needs to educate themselves about how they should start recognising their kids or their digital lives because, if we don't, they won't have anyone to turn to, anyone to talk to, or anyone to relate to whenever they witness the hardship in the digital part of their lives. After all, they have an established idea that this is not something that adults care about.

A: **Are there any actions that Astralis is taking regarding gender equality?**

S: It's something that matters a lot to us. One example is our current campaign with Netcomapny, where the female team (Astralis W) has written an open letter to Valve (the creator of Counter-Strike 2) stating that we need to address the issue that you can only see male agents in Counter-Strike unless you pay to play as a female agent within the game. That creates a problem within virtual space, as players are not being confronted with female characters when playing the game. They are only being confronted with male characters, which is one of the many things that keep insisting on girls or females being kind of "*an alien object*" within the gaming world. So, at the moment, we're trying to campaign on that issue, those are cultural aspects that we need to change to make sure that girls and women feel welcome in the digital space, both when they interact with other people and when they look at other playable avatars, characters, etc.

S: We have another campaign that is funded by the Danish Ministry for Digitalisation and Equality, and that is a campaign we are doing with the Centre for Digital Pedagogy and the Institute for Human Rights and in that campaign we have some interviews, where one of the players from our talent team (Astralis Talent) and one of the players from the women's team (Astralis W) they are kind of being confronted with some of the statements or comments that female players encounter when they play video games. It makes it very clear that we as males are very well guarded that we don't have to listen to as much bullshit when we're online as girls/females do.

S: One example is that a lot of the female players they've witnessed being kicked from a competitive counterstrike game as soon as they speak because the other players in the team don't want to play with a girl. So we're trying to kind of address the issue that it actually isn't a common ground and we've also done a lot of desk research on the topic actually, and we found studies showing that whenever you sign up for a competitive game in League of Legends or Counter-Strike game (like A 5 versus 5 player match) then the statistics are that there will be a 50/50% win chance, if you are better than the others you might be able to kind of influx the win rate in a positive way, but in general it's always 50% win change whenever you enter a game, however, if there is a team with 1 girl and 4 boys and the other team has 5 boys then the team with a girl will have a lower per cent win chance not because

she's playing worse but because her mere presence in the digital space somehow influences the team and skills of the boys, so even though they statistically have a 50/50win rate, as soon as a girl is introduced they have a lower win rate than boys.

15. S: Another issue is that there have been studies where the same play-through is being voiced by a guy and being voiced by a girl. The people watching the playthrough judge the playthrough voiced by a girl worse than that of a boy, so even though it's the same gameplay, as soon as there's a female voice connected with it, they judge it way harsher than they do with the boy. So we're trying to focus on the misconception that it's *even* between boys and girls in the virtual space because there's a physical option that is completely even; there is nothing physically making it so that girls are worse than boys at video games it's only cultural, and we can see that the cultural aspect is influencing it in such a way that this is scientifically significant. In Denmark, it is normal when there is something that has scientific significance solely based on the cultural aspect; it is something that we need to fix with culture, and that culture cannot be fixed by the girls; it has to be fixed by the boys.

A: **Do you think that it is one of the main challenges that Astralis is trying to resolve or try to have some influence on in the cultural matter?**

S: I think that's a very hard question to answer because this is one of the many main areas; in general, there are two parts of it related to female players. One is that we know from research that there is a lot of positive potential in playing team-based video games and we also know that boys are more likely to play team-based video games, so since there is positive potential connected to team games and there are more negative aspects associated with individual games, social media, etc., it's a general quality issue that girls have less and/or worse access to those positive potentials, so one of the things is that it is a gender inequality issue

S: Another aspect is the wording and the harsh communication online, because that is influencing girls more severely than boys as well, and they're being more targeted by it. So one thing is related to the aspect that limits girls from having the same positive associations

and relationships through team-based video games, and the other is the harsh comments and speech.

A: I think it is a big problem, and it has a correlation with being mostly anonymous when playing online, and there is a huge problem with toxicity, which we talked about yesterday in the sadly corrupted interview.

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20. A: **Do you think there are any actions (like events or presentations) that can acknowledge these problems and try to solve them made by Astralis?** (For example, I remember there was something like "Girls Night" at Astralis Nexus that was created to get more girls into playing video games, etc.)

S: We need to do a lot of different stuff, and one of the things is events, and I think it was November 24th. We had an event with the Centre for Digital Pedagogy and the Institute for Human Rights, and at that specific event, we had five hours of streaming on our main channel, where we had almost 8.000 unique viewers, and we had an average of 200 viewers throughout the entire stream. Where we discussed the inequality in digital spaces and comments in digital communities, etc.

S: So we are trying a lot of different things. We could see that speaking with the boys on our channel or the gamers through our channel and speaking about human rights and sexism with them was something that they wanted to discuss, but when it's something that, for example, the Institute for Human Rights is trying to discuss in schools, it's a very hard time for them to maintain the attention of the kids. So since we have the attention of a lot of youth who are involved in gaming, we have an opportunity to speak with them about some of these issues, and we can see that they're open to discussing these things with us.

S: It is not something that can be fixed by a single event or a single promotion campaign; it's something that's going to be a very long and very hard road for us. One of the reasons why it is that way is that we have the legislative tools to neither punish nor structure hate speech online because all the legislation that we have been built upon is built upon what's happening in a public space, so by default everything that's happening online is private, so

we don't have the tools to make consequences for people's negative actions in the digital space. So in general, this is not an issue that we can fix with law; it's only something we can fix with culture, and because it's a cultural issue and it's something that we can only fix through culture, it's not something that can be done overnight because cultural changes take a long time and it takes "*a village*" to change and address.

A: **Could you tell me what the biggest challenge is in Astralis' work towards changing the mindset towards social change, such as gender equality, mental health, education, etc.?**

25. S: That's a good question because I think the main goal for us is to find ways to reintroduce the relevance of adults in the digital space because, right now, children feel like everything is on their shoulders, and that is because the adults, the parents, the teachers, etc. have not been a part of the digital space for the past several years.

S: So, we have quite a big challenge ahead of reintroducing the idea of adults caring about what's happening online, and I think that's what almost every single one of our initiatives boils down to. It's trust and relationships between kids, youth, and adults around them.

A: I agree, and that is something that I think needs to change also for the different and upcoming generations so that there is the needed support to make this a realistic career path for aspiring gamers. Last time we talked a little bit about *the social bridge*, **could you tell us more about the opportunity that Astralis is providing?**

S: It's part of the Danish "social intervention" or social peers of the Danish municipality. What they are doing is trying to bridge those who are on the very edge of society back into some kind of meaningful activity, and the people who are on the very edge are people who suffer very severely from anxiety, depression, mental health issues, diagnoses, and some of them are even suicidal. So actually, just getting out of bed and getting out of the house is one of the biggest issues for this group of people, so this is in some way the very last intervention before they are categorised as kind of "early retirement," so it's the very last

step before we as a society tell them that we don't expect them to participate in society at any point in their life.

S: Their peak success rate in getting them out of the house and participating in physical events has been between 50 and 60%, but what we have done is that we have offered them to use our rooms and video game space at Astralis Nexus, which is located next to the central station in Copenhagen. So, they just book a room, show up, and have a talk with the citizens there instead of being in an employment facility or whatever. What we have seen so far is that they have booked 30 meetings there, and the citizens have shown up for all 30 meetings. They also had one group session with 10 youths invited, and all 10 showed up. So, so far, there's been 100% participation success by people who normally have problems getting out of the house, and for us at Astralis to see how *just* offering our facilities for this "project" and helping this group of people has been very overwhelming.

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30. A: **Do you have any questions before we finish the interview, or would you like to say something here in the end, or just finish it up with a summary of your thoughts or even some valuable data you want to share with us?**

S: In general, over the past 20 years, we have seen a change in cultural creation. It has been kind of democratised by the people but commercialised by tech giants, and this is some kind of change in currency. So the primary currency in Denmark is no longer money, it is now time and/or trust, so making something that people will spend time on or building something that helped establish trust is becoming more and more valuable, and right now the trust between citizen and government between youth and adults is at an all-time low, and we are trying to use the trust that we have been shown from youths to rebuild the trust between youth and adults because it has been suffering extremely hard, especially since the "corona times.".

S: We had a report this fall that was done by UNICEF and the Institute for Human Rights, which showed that in Denmark, the percentage of kids in public schools or in the ground school who felt like the adults never listened increased from 7% in 2021 to 12% in 2023, so in just two years, the number of kids who felt like the adults never listened almost doubled.

We can see that some underlying issues are related to how kids feel like they're being heard and taken seriously by adults. We can see that we are being used by kids and adults as a common ground to rebuild some of these relationships, and that's one of the main areas where we try to build meaningful relationships.
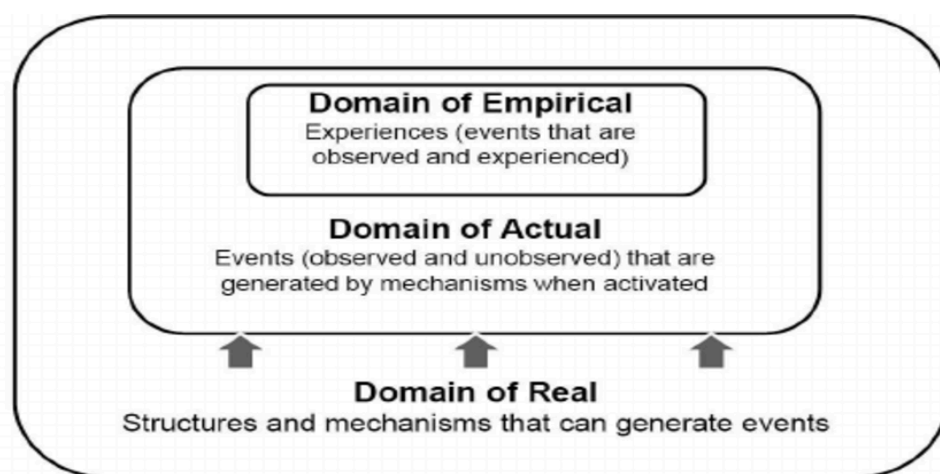
Keynote: Sofus: "We are proud that we are not done by any means."

10.3 Appendix 3: Interview Questions table

Research Questions	Interview Questions
How do Astralis' initiatives for player health and well-being reflect broader social dynamics in esports? Type of Domain: Actual and/or Real	Could you share insights into the actions and initiatives undertaken by Astralis during your time there, focusing on supporting the overall health and well-being of players?
To what extent has Astralis implemented gender diversity and equality initiatives in player rosters and staff positions? Type of Domain: Actual and/or Real	How has Astralis approached the promotion of gender diversity and equality within the organisation, considering aspects such as player rosters and staff positions?
What strategies did Astralis employ to engage with the gaming community and promote inclusivity and diversity within their interactions? Type of Domain: Actual and/or Empirical	How did Astralis seek to interact with and involve the wider gaming community while aiming to foster inclusivity and diversity?
In what ways has Astralis partnered with external organisations, to address social sustainability issues within the esports industry? Type of Domain: Actual and/or Empirical	How has Astralis worked with external partners, such as health organisations or advocacy groups, to tackle social sustainability concerns within the esports industry?
What specific challenges did Astralis encounter	Could you discuss the challenges Astralis

Research Questions	Interview Questions
in their efforts to advance social sustainability within the organisation? Type of Domain: Real	encountered in advancing social sustainability within the organisation, and shed light on how they were approached and managed?
In what ways can we foresee social sustainability initiatives in esports evolving, and how can organisations like Astralis contribute to this evolution? Type of Domain: Real	How do you envision the evolution of social sustainability initiatives in esports, and what role do you think organisations like Astralis can play in shaping this future?
What strategies or measures can the esports industry implement to better address health concerns and promote a lifestyle that prioritises balance and sustainability for players? Type of Domain: Real	What steps do you believe the esports industry can take to more effectively address health concerns and advocate for a lifestyle that prioritises balance and sustainability for players?
What role should esports organisations play in promoting gender equality and diversity, and how can they effectively implement strategies for change? Type of Domain: Real	How do you perceive the responsibility of esports organisations in championing gender equality and diversity, and what strategies do you believe they can employ to enact meaningful change within the industry?
What guidance can be provided to esports	What insights or recommendations

Research Questions	Interview Questions
organisations seeking to innovate in social sustainability and make significant contributions to their communities? Type of Domain: Actual and/or Real	would you offer to fellow esports organisations seeking to pioneer innovation in social sustainability and foster constructive impact within their communities?
What significant achievements or initiatives at Astralis advanced social sustainability and prioritised the well-being of players and staff? Type of Domain: Empirical	Reflecting on your tenure as Sports Director of Astralis, what achievements or initiatives do you consider significant in advancing social sustainability and prioritising the well-being of players and staff?
What are identifiable shifts in Astralis' organisational structure or operational activities that could be linked to efforts towards social innovation and change? Type of Domain: Actual and/or Empirical	During your time in Astralis, have you noticed changes related to social innovation?

Domain of Empirical
Experiences (events that are observed and experienced)

Domain of Actual
Events (observed and unobserved) that are generated by mechanisms when activated

Domain of Real
Structures and mechanisms that can generate events

10.4 Appendix 4: Social Media Observation

In today's digital age, social media has become essential to communication and interaction, influencing many parts of society such as business, entertainment, and culture (Alenezi, 2020). Conducting a social media analysis provides various strong grounds for investigating Astralis' initiatives to promote social sustainability in the esports industry:

For starters, social media is the primary means for esports organisations like Astralis to build and grow their digital presence and influence. By researching Astralis' actions on platforms such as X, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube, we can learn about their audience reach, engagement techniques, and overall digital effect in the esports scene. Social media offers insight into Astralis' brand identity and impression. We can determine how the organisation promotes itself online, how it resonates with its target audience, and how it is perceived compared to industry standards using content analysis and sentiment tracking (Alenezi, 2020). Community involvement and interaction are critical components of the esports ecosystem, and social media platforms play a key role in promoting these relationships. We can evaluate the success of Astralis' community-building activities and the depth of their engagement in the esports community by examining their interactions with fans (Alenezi, 2020).

We may evaluate the impact of Astralis' content activities on driving conversations, developing brand loyalty, and accomplishing organisational goals by looking at indicators like post engagement, audience demographics, and content performance (Alenezi, 2020). Lastly, social media analysis offers a unique vantage point to explore the impact of Astralis' initiatives on social sustainability within the esports industry. By studying how Astralis leverages social media to promote sustainability goals, raise awareness, and drive positive behaviour change, we can uncover valuable lessons and recommendations for advancing social responsibility practices across the esports ecosystem.

Astralis has accounts on the majority of popular platforms, including Instagram, X, Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn, and TikTok, in addition to a website with an email newsletter. This year, they have set up a Twitch profile to broadcast their counter-strike games from their main

squad, women's team, and talent team. They've also used this Twitch channel to conduct events like the one they did with Digital Respect at Astralis Nexus (Juul, LinkedIn, 2024).

Traceable data from their Social Media platforms

X	Facebook	Instagram	Twitch	Youtube	Tiktok
684.000 followers	211.000 followers	418.000 followers	45.200 followers	216.000 subscribers	180.000 followers
150 average likes pr. post	196.000 likes	5.039 posts	349 average viewers	35.932.278 views	4.5 million likes
10 average retweets pr. post			8.661 peak viewers	44.015 video views from 01.04.24-01.05-24	

Astralis uses their Facebook and Instagram accounts mostly to cover their CS2 team; they do not post the same posts, but they rotate them between X, Facebook, and Instagram. On YouTube, they provide a variety of videos, ranging from entertaining and informative CS2 videos to professionally produced behind-the-scenes documentaries of their CS2 team, but they haven't posted a video in three months. Lastly, Astralis uses TikTok to share funny and clickable content, which is best described as meme content.

As previously stated in the text, the CS community lives on X; this is the most popular platform for players, coaches, casters, influencers, and organisations within the CS community, as evidenced by the abundance of available content to examine from all of these segments. Information about CS-related news is usually posted on X first before being shared on other channels such as Facebook or Instagram. Astralis has one primary account for the entire organisation, as well as X accounts for each of the games in which its teams compete, such as CS, LoL, FIFA, and Fortnite. They did depart LoL after selling their team in October 2023 (Ritzau, 2023), but it appears that the account is still up but no longer active. Astralis, most known for their CS team, has a large global following, with 405,000 followers

on their CS account alone, which is close to their main account's 684,000 followers. Their main X account mostly retweets posts from their other accounts while also posting bigger announcements such as roster changes, upcoming events, or new partnerships. On February 19, 2024, they tweeted about their new partnership with the Institute for Human Rights and the Centre for Digital Learning to combat online sexism and misogyny (X, 2024).

The two images below show the post and fan reactions to the announcement, and the reactions serve to highlight the necessity of organisations bringing these issues into public debate. One of the comments says, *"Focus on playing instead of indifferences around the game. I think that will help,"* which is a tough remark to make given the topic at hand. In the tweet, Astralis cites personnel from their "educational" team, which we believe could be Sofus Bynge, who we connected with for this study and saw on the Danish television show "Go' Aften Live" for similar topics. This post was read by 15.400 people and received 122 likes and 25 retweets (X, 2024).
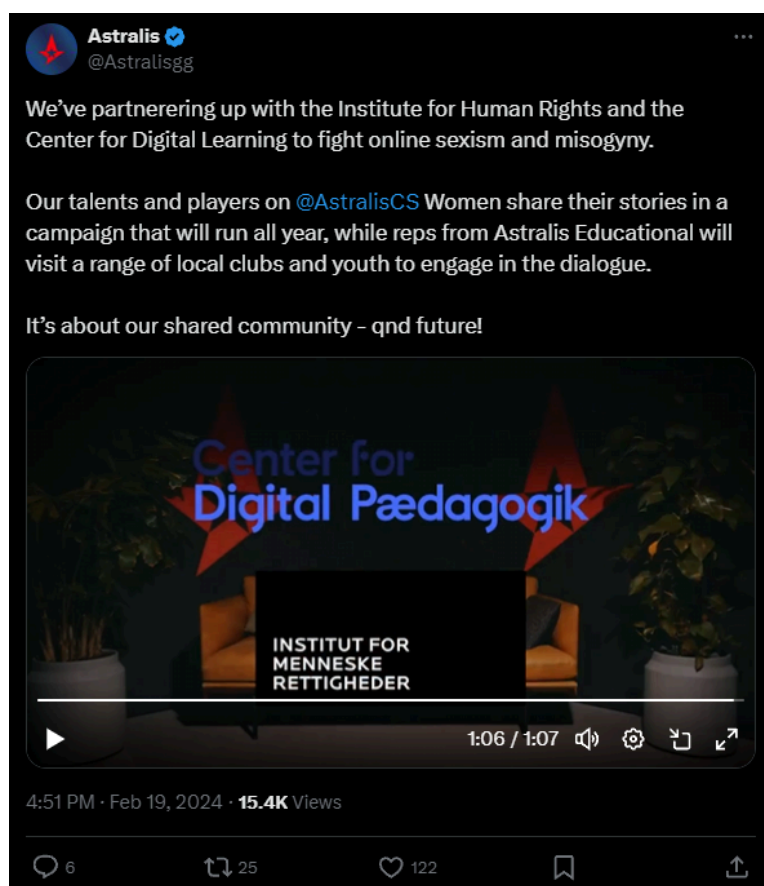
The next post we'd like to highlight dates from September 5, 2023, and is a collaboration with Amnesty International (X, 2023). Astralis and Amnesty have collaborated to build a CS2 workshop map for players to complete four different challenges as quickly as possible (Astralis, 2023). The first objective is to delete words with negative connotations; the second is to locate all LGBTQ flags on the map; the third is to remove the tape off taped-up faces that "can't speak," and the fourth is to identify and mark fake news on the map (X, 2023). A workshop map like this is not something players would usually see in CS2, so the innovative approach to capturing the player's attention is fascinating to see. We don't know how many players have played the map, but we do know how many have subscribed to it and how many have visited it. The map has 15 subscribers and 34 unique visitors (Steam, 2024).

The comments on this post, which had 18.000 views, 79 likes, and 38 retweets, primarily challenge Astralis' relationship with the Saudi government. It is worth noting that Astralis has no direct partnerships or collaborations with the Saudi state; however, the Public Investment Fund ("PIF")-owned "Savvy Gaming Group" recently acquired the German esports organiser and production company ESL and FACEIT (Šimić, 2022), which is the most popular platform for players when playing online matches against and with players from their region. Astralis, like all other Counter-Strike teams (Šimić, 2023), competes in ESL-organised tournaments because they are a key component of the Counter-Strike tournament organisers sanctioned by Valve, the game's creator and owner.

One of the comments states, "Sell your souls and get that Saudi money; they execute those people, btw. Hypocrisy at its finest" is a clear reference to LGBTQ rights in Saudi Arabia, or the lack thereof (Humandignitytrust.org, 2024). Reflecting upon the comment emphasising Astralis' potential association with 'Saudi money' prompted a more in-depth examination of the ethical problems in the esports business. By playing in ESL competitions, Astralis unintentionally becomes involved in issues regarding the ethics of financial collaborations. While Astralis has no direct relationship with the Saudi government, the broader connection through ESL raises concerns about esports organisations and event organisers' commitment to maintaining human rights standards. This raises issues regarding Valve's endorsement and sanctioning of tournament organisers such as ESL. By enabling competitions to be organised by organisations affiliated with bodies such as the PIF, Valve unintentionally becomes complicit in the larger ethical debates concerning 'blood money' and human rights violations. This comment serves as a devastating reminder of the complicated ethical setting that esports organisations must negotiate, where financial relationships may be at the expense of compromising ideals and principles. It calls into question not only Astralis' decisions but also the larger industry dynamics and the role of stakeholders such as ESL and Valve in creating the moral compass of esports.
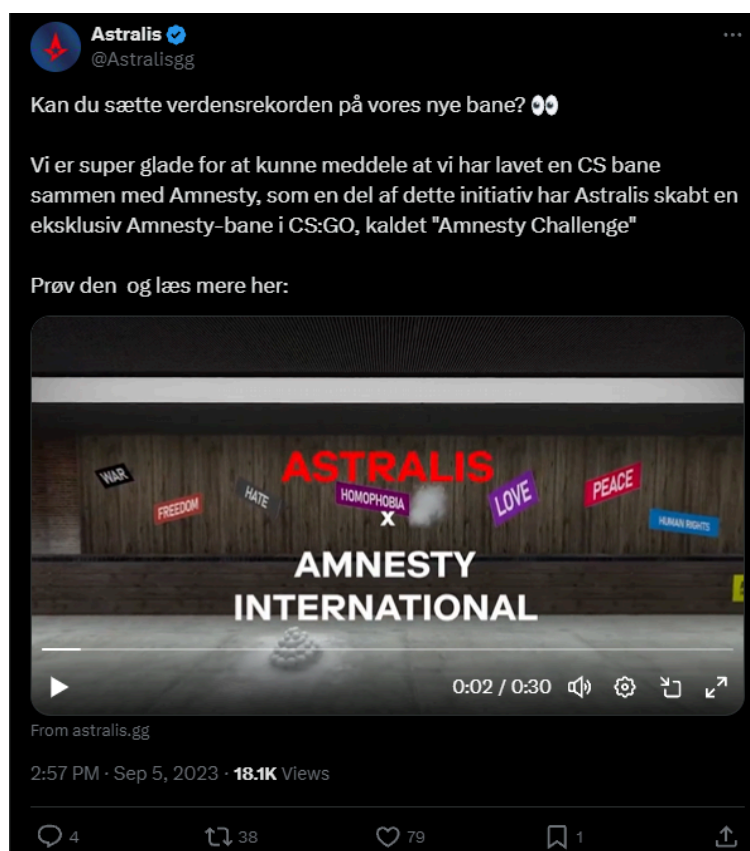
The social media observation provides valuable information into Astralis' digital involvement and its impact on social sustainability in esports. By analysing Astralis' activity across several platforms, we better understood their plans and problems in exploiting digital channels for social impact. In the digital age, social media plays a critical role in shaping narratives and driving organisational activities, which led us to prioritise it. Through this observation, we hoped to discover the dynamics of Astralis' efforts to promote social sustainability, revealing both admirable activities, such as connections with Amnesty International, and issues of ethics, such as ties to Saudi Arabia. Overall, this raises questions about the broader role of esports organisations and industry stakeholders in pushing social responsibility agendas. As the esports scene changes, our findings highlight the significance of critically analysing digital strategies and supporting initiatives contributing to a more socially responsible gaming environment.