



REVIEW

A Strategic HRM Framework for Esports: Proactive Strategies and Practices for Inclusion and Employee Safeguarding

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ABSTRACT

The global esports industry faces a profound human resource management crisis, characterised by a pervasive external culture of toxicity and a stark internal lack of diversity. This paper addresses the strategic Human Resources (HR) problem of how organisations can proactively safeguard employees and foster genuine inclusion within this uniquely hostile and digitally mediated environment. The study’s novelty lies in the introduction of a comprehensive, theoretically grounded tripartite framework designed specifically to transform HR from a reactive support function into a core strategic driver of sustainable growth in esports. The aim is to introduce a comprehensive, theoretically grounded framework designed to transform HR from a reactive support function into a core strategic driver of sustainable growth. To achieve this, the paper integrates key theoretical perspectives, strategic Human Resources Management (HRM), psychological safety, inclusion climate theory, and boundary theory to construct a novel tripartite model. This model organises proactive HR strategies across three interconnected layers: the Structural layer [policies and systems], the Cultural layer [leadership and values], and the Relational layer [support and team processes]. The main findings detail how these layers work synergistically to build a “buffered inclusion climate”, creating an internal organisational sanctuary that protects talent and enables high performance. The paper concludes by outlining the framework’s theoretical contributions to HR literature and providing actionable recommendations for practitioners in esports and analogous high-velocity, digital industries.

Keywords: Esports; Strategic Human Resource Management; Inclusion; Psychological Safety; Organisational Sanctuary; Employee Safeguarding

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1. Introduction

The global esports industry stands as one of the most dynamic and rapidly evolving sectors of the 21st-century entertainment landscape. Characterised by its convergence of competitive gaming, digital media production, and global youth culture, esports have transcended their niche origins to command stadium-sized audiences, multi-million dollar prize pools, and lucrative sponsorship deals from mainstream brands^[1]. This meteoric rise, however, has been shadowed by a persistent and systemic contradiction. While the industry projects an image of cutting-edge modernity, its social foundations are often undermined by a deeply ingrained culture of toxicity, harassment, and a stark lack of diversity^[2]. This environment presents not merely a public relations challenge or a social ill, but a profound and strategic crisis in human resource management. Esports organisations, the entities that employ players, coaches, content creators, analysts, and support staff, operate within this paradox^[3]. Their primary assets, their human capital, are their product; their performance, personality, and public appeal directly drive revenue and brand value^[4]. Yet, these very individuals, particularly those from underrepresented groups such as women, racial and ethnic minorities, and members of the LGBTQ+ community, are frequently subjected to a hostile ecosystem that can erode their well-being, performance, and career longevity^[5].

The challenge extends far beyond the infamous toxicity found in anonymous online game chats. It is a multifaceted issue encompassing structural barriers in talent identification and development^[6], coordinated harassment campaigns on social media platforms, and implicit and explicit bias in scouting and hiring practices^[7], and a historical subculture that has often celebrated hyper-competitiveness to the point of normalising abusive communication and exclusionary behaviour^[6]. For human resource management (HRM), this context creates a unique and urgent dual mandate: to proactively protect employees from external threats and psychological harm while simultaneously engineering an internal organisational climate that is intentionally inclusive, psychologically safe, and optimally conducive to high performance under intense scrutiny^[8]. This context transforms esports into a critical test case for the strategic potential of HR. It raises the question: Can deliberate, systemic HRM practices create an effective protective and inclusive “sanctuary” within a broadly hostile environment? Furthermore,

can these practices systematically alter deep-seated talent pipelines and reshape organisational cultures in an industry where traditional norms are resistant to change? This paper argues that they can and must position strategic HRM not as a support function, but as the core engine for sustainable and ethical growth in the esports ecosystem.

Research Aim and Objectives

This paper aims to introduce a comprehensive, theoretically grounded framework for proactive HRM strategies specifically designed to foster genuine diversity and robustly safeguard employees within professional esports organisations. It moves decisively beyond merely diagnosing the well-documented problems of the industry to theorise the specific interventions, systems, and cultural levers available to HR practitioners and organisational leaders. The goal is to provide a conceptual blueprint for turning a defensive, reactive posture into a source of resilient competitive advantage and ethical employer branding.

To achieve this overarching aim, the paper pursues four objectives:

- To synthesise and articulate the unique constellation of HR challenges inherent to the esports context, with a particular focus on the dangerous intersection between a toxic external ecosystem and internal organisational deficits in diversity and inclusion.
- To integrate relevant theoretical perspectives from strategic human resource management, psychological safety, inclusion climate theory, and boundary management into a cohesive conceptual model tailored to the digital-native, high-velocity reality of esports.
- To theorise and delineate a tripartite framework of proactive HR strategies, organised across structural, cultural, and relational domains, detailing their interconnections and implementation logic.
- To discuss the broader implications of this esports-derived model for HR theory and practice, generally, particularly its relevance for managing digital workplaces, protecting public-facing employees, and leading complex organisational culture change in the modern era, and provide actionable, evidence-based recommendations for esports practitioners.

The paper seeks to make a compelling case for re-

envisioning the role of HR in knowledge-intensive, digitally mediated industries. It positions strategic, proactive HRM as the indispensable lever for building organisations that are not only successful in terms of win-loss records but are also resilient, ethical, and attractive to the diverse global talent pool that will define the future of esports and analogous sectors.

2. Research Background

To formulate effective human resource strategies for esports, it is essential first to understand the industry's unique operational context and its systemic challenges. This chapter outlines the distinctive landscape of esports organisations, the dual threats of external toxicity and internal exclusion, and the theoretical foundations that inform the proposed HRM framework.

2.1. The Esports Landscape: A Unique HR Context

To understand the requisite HR strategies, one must first appreciate the distinct operational reality of an esports organisation. These entities are hybrid creatures, blending elements of a traditional sports franchise, a media and content production studio, and a fast-moving tech startup^[9]. This hybridity generates a set of HR challenges that are amplified versions of those found in more conventional industries.

First, the concept of a career is radically compressed. For players, peak competitive performance is typically confined to a narrow window, often between the ages of 18 and 25. This “micro-career” phenomenon intensifies every aspect of the talent lifecycle^[10]. Recruitment is high-stakes and urgent, performance management must yield immediate results, and the pressure to monetise one's brand is acute. Concurrently, organisations must plan for post-career transitions almost from the moment of signing, a stark contrast to industries with 40-year career arcs^[11]. Second, the employee relationship is uniquely multifaceted. A professional player is simultaneously an athlete, a brand ambassador, a content creator, and a public figure. Their success is inextricably linked to their personal brand, which they often cultivate on social platforms^[3]. This blurs the traditional boundaries between work and personal life, creating complex questions about intellectual property [who owns the audience built on a personal stream?], conduct [is off-hour behaviour on a

personal account reflective of the organisation?], and well-being [when does the “always-on” content creation end?]. Third, the workplace is inherently digital-native and public. Work, whether it involves training, competition, or community engagement, largely occurs online and is often in full or partial view of the public. This creates a 24/7 workplace with extraordinarily porous boundaries^[12]. Harassment from fans or detractors can move seamlessly from a tournament broadcast chat into a player's direct messages and social media feeds, effectively invading both their professional and personal digital spaces without respite^[6].

Finally, performance pressure is immense and multifaceted. Success is notoriously volatile, dependent on fleeting game “metas”, the fragile chemistry of a team of young adults, and the constant, often brutal, scrutiny of millions of online fans^[13]. This environment prioritises short-term results, potentially at the expense of long-term player development and mental health, challenging HR to advocate for sustainable performance models.

2.2. The Dual Challenge: Ecosystem Toxicity and Internal Exclusion

The external environment in which these organisations operate is frequently hostile^[6]. A substantial body of reportage and academic scholarship consistently documents widespread and normalised sexism^[14], racism, homophobia^[2], and general aggression within online gaming communities and esports fandoms. This toxicity is not a passive backdrop; it is an active force that directly impacts employees^[15]. Female players, casters, and journalists routinely report receiving rape threats, doxxing, and targeted hate campaigns. Players of colour face racist abuse and stereotyping^[16]. This external barrage has a direct psychological and professional cost, increasing anxiety, reducing performance focus, and driving talented individuals away from the industry entirely^[5].

Internally, the industry reflects a profound diversity deficit, creating a vicious cycle. Professional player rosters, coaching staff, and organisational leadership are overwhelmingly male and, depending on the region, predominantly white or East Asian. This homogeneity is not an accident but the result of a self-reinforcing feedback loop^[17]. The hostile external environment actively deters participation from underrepresented groups at the amateur and semi-professional

levels, dramatically shrinking the available talent pipeline^[5]. Furthermore, traditional talent scouting often relies on existing insider networks and rankings on public ladder systems, the same spaces where toxicity is most rampant^[3]. A promising female or minority player may be discouraged from pursuing a top ranking due to harassment, or their performance may be discounted by scouts steeped in unconscious bias^[18]. The result is a reproduction of the existing demographic profile, reinforcing a dominant culture that can be unconsciously exclusionary. The internal culture of many teams has historically valorised a specific type of communication, often abrasive, hyper-critical, and rooted in a “banter” that can cross into bullying, which can further alienate those who do not conform to this narrow norm^[19].

Thus, the HR challenge is dual in nature: it must defend against an external onslaught while simultaneously dismantling internal barriers to inclusion and reshaping entrenched cultural norms^[3].

2.3. Theoretical Perspectives from Strategic HRM Tailored to the Reality of Esports

This paper integrates four robust theoretical strands from the existing literature, adapted to the esports context. The synthesis of strategic human resource management, psychological safety, inclusion climate theory, and boundary theory provides a multi-faceted lens through which to analyse and address the industry’s unique HR challenges (**Figure 1**).



Figure 1. Strategic HR tailored to the digital-native, high-velocity reality of esports.

Source: Developed by the author.

The figure demonstrates how these four theoretical perspectives are not isolated but function as interconnected components of a holistic system. Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) provides the foundational intent, which cultivates the essential internal states of psychological safety

and inclusion, while boundary theory actively protects these states from external disruption, collectively driving sustainable competitive advantage. Together, these perspectives form the conceptual backbone of the proposed proactive framework.

At its core, SHRM posits that human resource practices should be systematically aligned with an organisation's overarching strategy to create sustained competitive advantage. The rationale is that while technology and strategy can be copied, a highly skilled, motivated, and uniquely configured workforce cannot be easily replicated^[20]. In the esports context, the organisational strategy is ultimately to win championships and build a valuable, enduring brand. This paper argues that in an industry plagued by reputational risk and talent attrition, a critical strategic priority must be building a resilient, innovative, and ethically reputable organisation^[21]. Therefore, inclusive and protective HR practices are not merely "nice to have" or about compliance; they are strategic investments in human capital. They directly enhance performance by fostering psychological safety and better decision-making, attract sponsors who are increasingly sensitive to social responsibility, and secure a long-term pipeline of diverse talent, creating a competitive moat.

Psychological safety is defined as a shared belief held by team members that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking^[22]. It is the sense that one can speak up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes without fear of punishment or humiliation^[23]. In esports, where in-game communication, rapid tactical innovation, and post-loss analysis are critical, psychological safety is a direct performance imperative^[24]. A team where players are afraid to suggest a new strategy or admit a mistake for fear of ridicule will be tactically stagnant and unable to learn from failure^[25]. However, external harassment and internal cliques or exclusionary behaviours actively destroy this safety. HR's role, therefore, is to create the structural and cultural conditions that allow psychological safety to flourish internally, effectively building a buffer against the external forces that seek to undermine it^[26].

Inclusion climate theory moves beyond simple representation [diversity] to focus on the experiences of employees once they are in the organisation^[27]. An inclusion climate exists when employees feel valued, respected, and able to fully participate and bring their authentic selves to work^[28]. Scholars often distinguish between feelings of belonging [being accepted as part of the group] and feelings of uniqueness [being valued for one's individual characteristics and perspectives]^[29]. Effective HR systems in esports must cultivate both^[3]. Players from underrepresented backgrounds

need to feel they belong to the team [belonging], but also that their unique perspective, perhaps informed by their different life experiences, is seen as an asset to strategy or content creation [uniqueness]. An inclusion climate is the antidote to the feeling of being merely a "token" hire^[30].

Boundary theory explores how individuals create, maintain, and cross the lines between different life domains, such as work and home^[31]. For esports employees, these boundaries are exceptionally permeable, if they exist at all. The same computer is used for work [tournaments] and leisure [personal gaming, social media]. The same online platforms host both professional and personal interactions. HR strategies can help employees and the organisation collectively construct and defend "inclusion boundaries". This means creating clear, respected separations between the hostile external digital world and the safe, regulated internal space of the organisation^[32]. This could involve rules about when work communication ends, providing social media management support, and having a clear, organisational-level protocol for responding to external attacks, thereby collectively managing the boundary for the employee^[33].

The synthesis of theoretical perspectives reveals a coherent strategic logic for HRM in esports. When applied to the hostile, high-velocity industry context, these theories cease to be abstract constructs and instead function as interlocking components of a proactive performance system^[34]. SHRM provides the foundational imperative: to align HR practices with the core strategic goal of building a sustainable competitive advantage. The direct strategic outcomes of the other three elements operationalise this mandate. Psychological safety fosters the adaptive learning and internal risk-taking necessary for tactical innovation^[35]. Inclusion climate theory cultivates the cognitive diversity and sense of belonging that enhances problem-solving and brand authenticity^[2]. Boundary theory, in turn, constructs the protective architecture that shields these fragile internal states from the corrosive external environment. It is this active buffering and collective boundary management that enables a resilient, high-performing organisational core to flourish^[32]. Crucially, it is the synergistic combination of these outcomes, innovation, a cognitive moat, and an operational shield that creates the unique and non-replicable human capital system, or "competitive moat", central to SHRM. Having established this conceptual foundation, the subsequent discussion trans-

lates this theoretical logic into actionable practice. The paper now proposes a tripartite model of proactive HR strategies, structural, cultural, and relational, designed to systematically engineer the very psychological safety, inclusion climate, and protective boundaries theorised here as the drivers of sustained success.

3. Methodology

This paper is based on a comprehensive conceptual synthesis and theoretical framework development. The research adopts a systematic, literature-driven approach to construct a novel model for proactive human resource management within the professional esports industry. The process began with a targeted review and synthesis of existing scholarly and industry literature across three interconnected domains: strategic human resource management, organisational psychology, and esports industry studies. Scholarly databases were systematically queried using a focused set of keywords of HRM, esports, toxicity, inclusion, psychological safety, and boundary theory. The identified literature was subjected to critical analysis to map the landscape of challenges and to extract relevant theoretical constructs and empirical insights. Primary emphasis was placed on integrating four core theoretical perspectives, strategic HRM, psychological safety, inclusion climate theory, and boundary theory, due to their combined explanatory power for the dual challenges of external hostility and internal exclusion in esports. The synthesis involved identifying conceptual linkages and tensions between these theories and the documented realities of the esports ecosystem. This conceptual synthesis was then rigorously contextualised to the unique operational parameters of esports organisations, considering factors such as digital-native workplaces, compressed career arcs, public-facing roles, and porous work-life boundaries. The analytical process culminated in the deliberate construction of a tripartite theoretical framework. This framework organises proactive HR strategies across structural, cultural, and relational domains, proposing a coherent system of interventions. The resulting model is presented as a structured, actionable blueprint designed to guide both scholarly inquiry and practical application in fostering inclusive and safeguarded work environments within high-velocity, digitally mediated industries like esports.

4. Results and Discussion

The synthesis of theory and context yields a proactive HR framework composed of three interconnected and mutually reinforcing layers: Structural, Cultural, and Relational. This tripartite model provides a comprehensive blueprint for action, moving from the foundational rules of the organisation to the daily lived experience of its employees.

4.1. The Tripartite Model of Proactive HR Strategies in Esports

The proactive HR framework for esports comprises three interconnected and mutually reinforcing layers: Structural, Cultural, and Relational. This tripartite model provides a comprehensive blueprint for action, moving from foundational policies and systems to daily interpersonal practices, all designed to foster a buffered inclusion (**Figure 2**).

The Structural Layer establishes formal policies and systems, the Cultural Layer shapes shared values and leadership behaviours, and the Relational Layer fosters psychological safety and support in daily practice.

4.1.1. The Structural Layer: Building the Foundation of Safety and Equity

The structural layer constitutes the formal backbone of inclusion. It encompasses the written policies, systems, and governance mechanisms that establish non-negotiable standards and create predictable processes for accountability and support. Without a robust structural foundation, initiatives at other layers will lack authority and consistency. First and foremost is the development and enforcement of a Hyper-Explicit Code of Conduct. Esports organisations must move far beyond generic, public-relations statements about “respect”. Effective codes must be detailed, behavioural, and comprehensive^[36]. They should explicitly prohibit not only overt harassment and discrimination but also subtler forms of exclusionary behaviour, both offline and in all digital spaces relevant to work. These codes must define multiple, clear, and accessible reporting pathways, including options for anonymous reporting to a third-party or a designated internal officer insulated from team performance pressure^[37]. Crucially, the codes must outline specific, graduated consequences for violations that are applied consistently, regardless of the perpetrator’s status as a star player or senior executive. Transparency

in enforcement, communicating that action has been taken while respecting privacy where necessary, is vital to building organisational trust^[38]. Second, organisations need a formal *Integrated “Duty of Care” Policy*. This policy formally acknowledges the unique occupational hazards of the digital esports workplace. It should mandate proactive organizational responsibilities, such as providing cybersecurity and personal privacy training to all employees, ensuring access to licensed mental health professionals familiar with gamer/athlete stress, instituting mandatory rest periods and genuine off-seasons free from content creation demands, and establishing clear, HR-led crisis intervention protocols for when an employee is subjected to severe external harassment like doxxing or violent threats^[25]. This policy transforms the duty of care from an abstract ethical concept into a documented operational procedure^[8]. Third, HR must overhaul Talent Management Systems to be structurally inclusive. This involves designing processes that mitigate unconscious bias at entry points. Strategies could include “blind” audition pro-

cesses for certain support roles, using structured interview panels with diverse members, and forming formal partnerships with community leagues, educational programs, and initiatives specifically dedicated to developing underrepresented talent. Furthermore, creating formalised internship and apprenticeship pathways into coaching, analysis, content production, and management can help build a more diverse future leadership pipeline from within. Finally, Compensation and Contractual Equity must be addressed structurally. HR should conduct regular, anonymised audits of pay across comparable roles and demographic groups to identify and rectify disparities^[18]. Player and talent contracts can include innovative clauses that protect the employee’s intellectual property related to their personal brand and explicitly stipulate the organisation’s responsibility to provide legal, PR, and psychological support in cases of targeted public harassment^[39]. These structural elements in contracts signal that the organisation is a partner in the employee’s holistic career and well-being, not just a purchaser of their in-game performance.

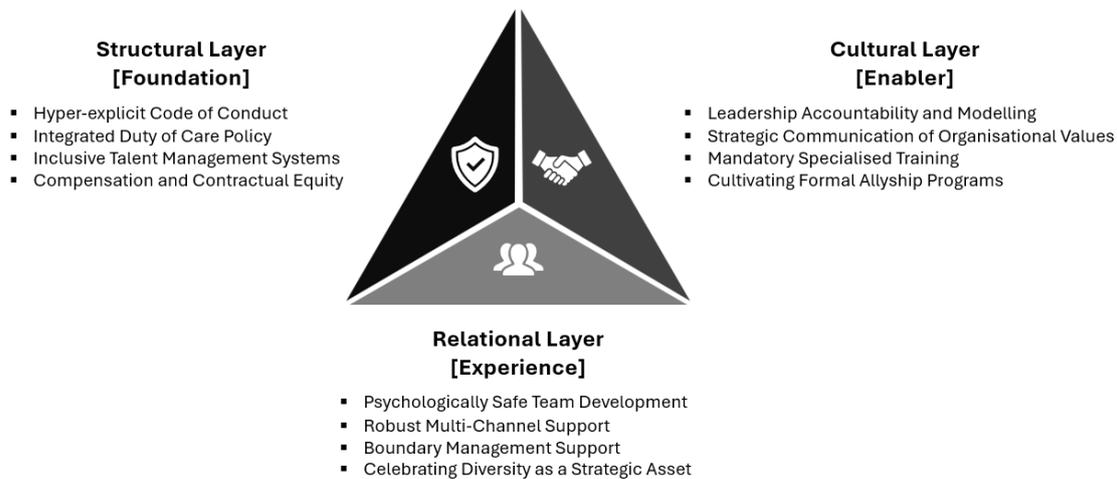


Figure 2. The tripartite model of proactive HR strategies in esports.

Source: Developed by the author.

4.1.2. The Cultural Layer: Leading and Embedding Inclusive Values

The cultural layer is about shaping the intangible yet powerful shared values, beliefs, and behavioural norms of the organisation. Structures enable culture, but culture gives life and meaning to structures. This layer focuses on leadership, communication, and deep learning. The single most critical factor is Leadership Accountability and Modelling. Inclusion must be visibly championed, embodied,

and demanded by the organisation’s founders, owners, and senior executives^[40]. Their commitment must be more than verbal; it should be reflected in their performance metrics and compensation. Leaders must be the first to call out toxic behaviour, the most vocal supporters of underrepresented employees, and the most consistent adherents to the codes of conduct. When a star player transgresses, a leader’s decision to uphold policy despite competitive pressure is the ultimate test of cultural commitment. Leadership mod-

elling makes inclusion a strategic priority, not an HR sidebar. Closely tied to this is the Strategic Communication of Organisational Values. The commitment to inclusion must be woven into the core identity of the brand, communicated consistently both internally to staff and externally to fans, sponsors, and the media^[20]. This aligns employer branding with consumer branding. An organisation known for its positive, inclusive culture becomes more attractive to top talent who seek a healthy work environment and to sponsors who wish to associate with socially responsible properties^[41]. This communication must be authentic and backed by action, or it will be dismissed as “virtue signalling”. Mandatory, Specialised Training is a key cultural intervention that moves beyond check-the-box exercises. Training should be tailored to the esports context. This includes bystander intervention training, teaching all employees how to safely and effectively respond when they witness harassment or exclusion^[42]. It includes cultural competency workshops for coaches and managers leading transnational teams with players from diverse national backgrounds. It also involves sophisticated media and public communication training for all players, focusing not only on traditional interview skills but also on how to handle hostile questions, promote allyship, and use their platform to support inclusivity^[15]. Finally, HR can play a pivotal role in Cultivating Formal Allyship Programs. Privileged majority-group members, particularly established star players with large followings, possess significant social capital^[43]. Structured allyship programs can educate these individuals on the challenges faced by their underrepresented colleagues and equip them with strategies to act. This could involve creating formal platforms for them to amplify marginalised voices, actively recruiting them to participate in diversity initiatives, and recognising and rewarding allyship behaviour as a valued component of performance and contribution to the organisation. This transforms potential passive bystanders into active advocates, utilising existing cultural influencers to shift norms.

4.1.3. The Relational Layer: Fostering Safety and Belonging in Daily Practice

The relational layer is where inclusion becomes a lived, daily reality. It focuses on the quality of interpersonal interactions, the support systems available in moments of need, and the micro-climates within teams. This layer ensures

that the structural and cultural efforts translate into genuine feelings of safety and belonging for each employee. A primary focus must be on Psychologically Safe Team Development. HR and coaching staff should collaborate on team building that goes beyond game mechanics^[23]. Facilitated workshops can help teams establish their own communication norms, develop healthy conflict resolution protocols, and create a “failure-friendly” environment where post-loss analysis is focused on learning rather than blame. Coaches should be trained in techniques to foster psychological safety, understanding that their criticism style can either build up or destroy a player’s willingness to contribute ideas^[15]. Robust, Multi-Channel Support Systems must be easily accessible and destigmatised. This network should include dedicated HR business partners who are trained to understand the unique pressures of esports, on-call access to mental health professionals, and optionally, formal peer mentorship programs that connect new or underrepresented hires with more established employees^[34]. The key is providing multiple points of support entry, recognising that an employee might be more comfortable speaking to a peer, an HR representative, or an external counsellor, depending on the issue. HR can also provide practical Boundary Management Support to help employees navigate the endlessly porous digital work-life divide^[31]. This could involve offering social media management services or advice, helping teams establish collective agreements on “digital curfews” for work-related communications, and providing training on how to effectively use platform tools for blocking, muting, and filtering abusive content. Helping employees construct these boundaries, the organisation actively defends their mental space^[12]. Lastly, organisations must Actively Celebrate Diversity as a Strategic Asset. This goes beyond token gestures during cultural heritage months. It means, in team meetings, explicitly highlighting how a diverse range of perspectives led to a better in-game strategy^[16]. It involves showcasing the unique content and community connections created by employees from different backgrounds. It means telling the stories of underrepresented employees not as tales of adversity alone, but as narratives of unique contribution that have made the team stronger, more creative, and more connected to a global fanbase^[25]. This relational celebration turns diversity from a demographic fact into a palpable source of competitive and creative strength.

4.2. Theoretical Contributions and Practical Recommendations

Following the presentation of the tripartite framework, this section delineates its core contributions to strategic HRM and inclusion theory. It then pivots to practical application, deriving a suite of actionable recommendations for esports organisations seeking to implement the model and for HR professionals navigating similar challenges in other sectors.

4.2.1. Theoretical Contributions

The tripartite framework developed in this paper makes several meaningful contributions to the broader field of HRM and organisational theory. Firstly, it serves to radically contextualise SHRM within an extreme operational environment. Esports, with its digital-native, high-velocity, and publicly scrutinised nature, acts as a stress test for HR principles^[3]. The framework demonstrates that in contexts where external hostility is a persistent threat, the strategic HR choice shifts. Investment is required not just in developing human capital for performance, but in protecting it through what can be termed “protective inclusion”, a set of practices designed to insulate and nurture talent against environmental toxicity^[26]. This expands the strategic purview of HR to include explicit boundary defence and psychological armour as core to sustaining competitive advantage. Secondly, the model advances inclusion climate theory by introducing the concept of the “Buffered Inclusion Climate”. Traditional inclusion climate research often examines organisations within relatively neutral or passively supportive external environments^[16]. This paper theorises a climate that is consciously and actively constructed *in opposition* to an external climate of exclusion and hostility. It highlights the proactive, defensive, and ongoing work HR must undertake to maintain this internal sanctuary. This adds a critical boundary-management and external threat-response dimension to the understanding of how inclusion climates are formed and maintained, suggesting they are not just internally generated but are also defined by their differentiation from the outside. Thirdly, the framework provides a novel integration of psychological safety with the management of external threat. Much of the literature on psychological safety examines internal team dynamics and leader behaviour^[23]. This study explicitly links the internal state of

psychological safety to the organisation’s management of external, boundary-spanning threats. It positions HR systems, from crisis protocols to social media policies, as critical moderators in this relationship. These systems are theorised to reduce the salience and impact of external threats, thereby freeing up cognitive and emotional resources for employees to engage in the interpersonal risk-taking that defines high-performing, innovative teams.

4.2.2. Actionable Recommendations for Esports Practitioners

The insights generated from the esports crucible are highly transferable to a wide array of contemporary industries. For any organisation with a digital or remote workforce, the strategies for fostering inclusion and psychological safety in a digitally mediated environment are directly applicable. The lessons on managing porous boundaries, facilitating connection online, and preventing digital communication from becoming toxic are invaluable. For industries with public-facing employees, such as customer service, journalism, retail, or even politics, the “Duty of Care” model and boundary support strategies are essential^[8]. These employees are on the front lines of public opinion and often face abuse; HR must have systems to protect them. Furthermore, the framework offers a robust blueprint for cultural transformation in any organisation struggling with deep-seated, exclusionary norms. It emphasises that sustainable change requires synchronous, multi-level intervention: changing the rules [Structural], changing what leaders reward and punish [Cultural], and changing the day-to-day experiences of employees [Relational]. Attempting any one in isolation is likely to fail. The esports case, with its extreme resistance, demonstrates that even in the toughest environments, a systematic, courageous, and integrated HR-led approach can initiate meaningful change^[3].

For practitioners within the esports industry, this framework provides a desperately needed transition manual, moving HR from a reactive, administrative, and often marginalised function to a proactive, strategic, and central pillar of the organisation. The model offers a clear, actionable pathway. The first step is a comprehensive audit. Organisations should rigorously assess their current practices against each domain of the framework: Do they have the Structural policies? Is the Cultural messaging aligned and modelled by leaders? Are the Relational support systems in

place and effective? The second step is to prioritise. The logic of the model suggests beginning with strengthening the Structural foundations. Clear, fair policies enable and give teeth to cultural change initiatives and make relational support credible. Trying to foster psychological safety [Relational] without a code of conduct to back it up [Structural] is often futile.

The third step is integrated implementation. Initiatives should be rolled out in a connected manner. The launch of a new, stringent Code of Conduct [Structural] should be accompanied by all-hands training led by the CEO [Cultural], and the simultaneous introduction of a new, confidential reporting hotline and dedicated HR contact [Relational]. This sends a unified message. Finally, organisations must develop new Metrics for Success. Moving beyond win-loss records, they should track leading indicators of a healthy, inclusive organisation: demographic diversity in hiring pipelines and promotion rates, regular anonymous employee well-being and psychological safety surveys, retention rates of underrepresented talent, and even sentiment analysis of internal team communications. These metrics allow HR to demonstrate the tangible return on investment in inclusive practices, building the business case for continued commitment.

5. Conclusions

The esports industry stands at a definitive crossroads. Its impressive commercial trajectory and aspirations for mainstream cultural legitimacy are fundamentally contingent upon its ability to resolve its profound human capital crisis. This paper has argued that this crisis is not ancillary but central, and that its resolution is, at its heart, a strategic human resource management challenge. The proposed tripartite framework, encompassing Structural, Cultural, and Relational domains, provides a comprehensive roadmap for HR to transition from a function that manages the fallout of a toxic ecosystem to the chief architect of organisations that are inherently resilient, ethically attractive, and competitively superior. Building genuinely inclusive organisations within the world of esports is an endeavour that demands systemic courage and consistent effort. It requires the structural courage to draft, implement, and, most importantly, enforce rigorous policies even when applied to the most valuable stars. It demands cultural leadership that visibly models in-

clusive values, holds everyone accountable, and relentlessly communicates why these matter for the soul and success of the organisation. And it necessitates relational diligence, a day-by-day commitment to nurturing the psychological safety, practical support, and authentic belonging that allows every employee, from any background, to thrive. Together, these layers construct the “buffered inclusion climate”, a vital sanctuary within the storm that not only protects employees from harm but also actively enables diverse talent to perform, innovate, and flourish at the highest level.

For the esports industry, embracing this strategic HR orientation is no longer optional; it is an ethical imperative and a competitive necessity. The organisations that master this complex undertaking will not only secure a moral high ground but will also unlock a significant strategic advantage. They will attract and retain the best and most diverse global talent, build the most durable and respected brands, forge deeper connections with a wider fanbase, and ultimately achieve a more sustainable and legitimate form of success. For the broader field of Human Resource Management, esports serve as a powerful, forward-looking case study. It demonstrates that in an increasingly digital, public, and fast-paced world, the task of building humane, inclusive, and high-performing workplaces is becoming more complex and more critical than ever. The challenges faced in the esports arena are merely the leading edge of trends affecting many sectors. Therefore, the strategies explored here offer invaluable lessons. The game, for both esports and for modern HR, has irrevocably changed. To succeed in this new landscape, HR strategy itself must level up, embracing its role not as a support function, but as the definitive strategic partner in building the future of work.

5.1. Limitations

This study acknowledges several limitations inherent in its theoretical nature. The primary limitation is the conceptual basis of the framework itself, as it is derived from literature synthesis rather than empirical testing. As such, the proposed model’s efficacy in practice remains hypothetical and requires future validation through both qualitative case studies and quantitative analyses within actual esports organisations. Secondly, the framework assumes a certain degree of organisational maturity, dedicated resources, and leadership commitment, which may not be present in smaller or

emerging esports entities. Its prescriptions, therefore, might face significant implementation barriers in less structured environments. A third limitation concerns the rapid evolution of the esports industry. The unique operational challenges described are dynamic and may shift with new technological platforms, monetisation models, and audience behaviours, potentially affecting the relevance of specific interventions over time. Finally, the model focuses on organisational-level strategies and may not fully address the systemic, societal-level drivers of toxicity in gaming culture, which are crucial for achieving industry-wide transformation.

5.2. Future Research Avenues

Future research should prioritise empirically testing the tripartite framework through qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews with HR professionals, team managers, and players within esports organisations. These interviews could investigate the perceived feasibility, implementation challenges, and preliminary outcomes of the structural, cultural, and relational strategies proposed, providing rich contextual insights. Quantitative research is also needed to measure the model's impact by developing and validating scales for "protective inclusion" and "buffered inclusion climate" and examining their correlation with established metrics for employee well-being, team performance, and talent retention. Comparative studies could explore the applicability and necessary adaptations of the model in other high-velocity, digitally mediated industries, such as influencer marketing or tech startups. Finally, research should investigate the interplay between organisational interventions and broader platform-level governance to develop a more systemic understanding of combating toxicity.

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Data Availability Statement

No new data were created in this study. As a theoretical research paper, this work is based entirely on analysis and synthesis of existing scholarly literature. All sources referenced are properly cited and available through standard academic databases.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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