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Gaming Against Digital Divide: Qualitative Research on Gamers' Access to Equipment

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Abstract

In the digital gaming industry, production relations are primarily structured around creative actors such as game companies, developers, and publishers. However, gamers also participate in this ecosystem, occupying dual roles as both consumers and producers. This study examines gamers' experiences, which constitute an essential component of the gaming industry, through the lens of the first level of the digital divide, which pertains to *access* to gaming equipment. Specifically, it investigates the extent to which gamers' ability to obtain the necessary equipment influences the quality of their gaming experience and their potential progression toward professionalization. The primary aim of the study is to explore how gamers' access to the necessary hardware, peripherals, and suitable gaming environments shapes their ability to enter the gaming sphere, develop their skills across different types of games, and potentially reach a professional level. These processes are analyzed in relation to the physical-access dimension of the first-level digital divide. The study employs a qualitative research design and is based on in-depth interviews with 16 Turkish PC and console gamers, primarily casual players and including one professional gamer. The data were categorized and analyzed under four key themes: gamers' perceptions of gaming and professionalism; the role of gaming equipment and access in ensuring a high-quality gaming experience; the relationship between economic resources and gaming performance; and strategies used to compensate for limited access to equipment. The findings, contextualized within the relevant literature, indicate that access to high-quality equipment, the ability to make game-related purchases, and sufficient time for gameplay are critical factors. Additionally, financial support during periods of unemployment, as well as material and emotional support from individuals outside gaming communities, plays a key role in entering and advancing within the gaming field. Thus, players who experience physical-access barriers associated with the first-level digital divide because of limited economic resources occupy a disadvantaged position within the gaming field. However, these structural inequalities remain largely unrecognized by participants, as some expressed the belief that economic barriers can be overcome through talent, determination, and luck. Opportunities such as participation in tournaments and content creation (e.g., live streaming) were perceived as viable paths to recognition and professional success, thereby masking the substantial inequalities produced by the digital divide.

Keywords

Digital Gaming; Digital Divide; Gaming Equipment Access; Economic Resources; Gamer Experience

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Игра против цифрового разрыва: качественное исследование доступа геймеров к оборудованию

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Аннотация

В индустрии цифровых игр производственные отношения преимущественно формируются вокруг творческих акторов, таких как игровые компании, разработчики и издатели. Однако геймеры также участвуют в этой экосистеме, занимая двойственную позицию как потребителей и производителей. Настоящее исследование рассматривает опыт геймеров как один из существенных компонентов игровой индустрии через призму первого уровня цифрового разрыва, связанного с доступом к игровому оборудованию. В частности, анализируется, в какой степени доступ геймеров к игровому оборудованию влияет на качество их игрового опыта и потенциальную траекторию профессионализации. Основная цель исследования состоит в том, чтобы выявить, каким образом доступ геймеров к необходимому аппаратному обеспечению, оборудованию или игровой среде определяет их возможность войти в игровую сферу, продвигаться в освоении различных типов игр и потенциально достигать профессионального уровня. Это рассматривается в контексте измерения физического доступа, относящегося к первому уровню цифрового разрыва. Исследование основано на качественном дизайне и опирается на глубинные интервью с 16 турецкими казуальными геймерами, играющими на ПК и консолях, среди которых был один профессиональный игрок. Данные были категоризированы и проанализированы в рамках четырёх ключевых тем: представления геймеров об игре и профессионализме; роль игрового оборудования и доступа к нему в обеспечении качественного игрового опыта; связь между экономическими ресурсами и игровой результативностью; стратегии, используемые для обхода необходимости в широком доступе к оборудованию или его наличия. Полученные результаты, рассмотренные в контексте релевантной литературы, показывают, что доступ к высококачественному оборудованию, возможность совершать связанные с играми покупки, а также наличие времени для игры являются критически значимыми факторами. Кроме того, финансовая поддержка в периоды безработицы, равно как материальная и эмоциональная поддержка со стороны людей вне игрового мира, играют важную роль во вхождении в игровое поле и продвижении внутри него. В этом контексте можно утверждать, что игроки, сталкивающиеся с проблемами физического доступа, определяемыми на первом уровне цифрового разрыва и обусловленными ограниченными экономическими ресурсами, оказываются в неравном положении на игровом поле. Однако эта ситуация остаётся для участников невидимым барьером, поскольку некоторые из них выражали убеждение, что экономические препятствия могут быть преодолены благодаря таланту, целеустремлённости и удаче. Такие возможности, как участие в турнирах и создание контента, например стриминг, воспринимались как реальные пути к признанию и профессиональному успеху, тем самым маскируя выраженные неравенства цифрового разрыва.

Ключевые слова

цифровые игры; цифровой разрыв; доступ к игровому оборудованию; экономические ресурсы; игровой опыт

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Introduction

Digital games played on consoles, computers, or mobile devices constitute a domain that extends far beyond everyday gameplay. This domain encompasses gaming culture, the gaming industry, gamer identity, and streaming practices, representing a multilayered interplay of production and consumption. Within it, economic and cultural dynamics intersect at both the individual (gamer) and structural (industry) levels. Within this industry, creative labor is structured through both mainstream (AAA) and alternative (indie) development models, while gamers actively participate in in-game economies, game streaming, and increasingly institutionalized e-sports events. Economic activity and value creation in the digital gaming field therefore operate across interconnected micro- and macro-level processes. The growing institutionalization and professionalization of e-sports become more evident when e-sports are compared with traditional sports. In many traditional sports, including team-based disciplines, success depends largely on individual effort, physical ability, and mental endurance, while equipment generally plays a secondary role. In contrast, in digital competitive environments such as e-sports, where gameplay is impossible without specialized equipment, financial resources become decisive from the outset. Computer hardware, internet speed, and peripheral devices such as keyboards, mice, and headsets can directly affect performance. Consequently, participation and continued competition in e-sports depend on a material and technological foundation. In this respect, e-sports differs from traditional sports and can be understood as a domain in which technological infrastructure plays a central role in determining both access and success.

As of 2025, the gaming industry in Türkiye generated more than $3 million in revenue, with projections indicating that this figure will reach $4.8 million by 2030 (Dierks, 2025a, p. 5). The average revenue per gamer stood at approximately $236 and was expected to increase by 2030 (Dierks, 2025a, p. 6). Within this steadily growing sector, mobile games dominate the market, supported by a gamer base of 45 million[1]. As smartphones have become increasingly embedded in daily life, they serve as the primary platform for gaming. Thus, mobile games function primarily as a medium for entertainment-oriented play, in contrast to the more professionalized forms of participation commonly associated with computer and console gaming. Gamers'[2] economic engagement with games is concentrated primarily in game downloads (39%) and in-game purchases (35%), while online gameplay and subscriptions to gaming services account for smaller shares of this activity (Dierks, 2025a, p. 54). Together with growing per-gamer revenue

1 The most commonly used devices for gaming, in order of usage rates, are: smartphones (77%), desktop or laptop computers (54%), tablets (45%), smart TVs (37%), and game consoles (27%) (Dierks, 2025a, p. 53).

2 According to 2024 data, 45% of gamers in Turkey are women and 55% are men. Based on 2023 data, gaming durations in Turkey are mostly concentrated within 1–5 hours per week (31%) and 6–10 hours per week (14%), while the proportion of those who play more than 20 hours per week is 8% (Dierks, 2025a, pp. 51–52).

from in-game advertising, these patterns demonstrate that gamers are integral to the gaming industry at both the macro and micro levels.

This overview of Türkiye's gaming industry from the perspective of gamers demonstrates that their economic engagement with digital games has expanded significantly. Such engagement now ranges from purchasing games and constituting the target audience for in-game advertising to participating in professional e-sports, subscribing to gaming services, and making in-game purchases (An & Lv, 2025; Erdoğmuş et al., 2023; Valaei et al., 2022). Digital games, particularly mobile games, are now among the most common forms of entertainment. Yet for some players, gaming extends beyond leisure and represents a potential career path (Bányai et al., 2020). The growing investment in professional e-sports is reshaping the role of gamers, positioning them as increasingly prominent actors in the industry. Notably, the high earnings of e-sports players in both Türkiye[1] and other parts of the world continue to inspire aspiring gamers to pursue professional careers.

As e-sports becomes increasingly institutionalized through league-level tournaments and is positioned as a viable alternative career path, the question of whether being merely a "good gamer" is sufficient has become increasingly relevant. At this point, gamers' ability to pursue professionalization depends not only on their individual skills but also on their access to the necessary equipment and resources. In this regard, the study seeks to illuminate the micro-level economic dynamics of gaming participation and to examine these dynamics through the lens of the first level of the digital divide: physical access. Rather than focusing on gamers' direct economic activities, such as in-game purchases, this study examines the economic resources and conditions that determine their ability to obtain the equipment necessary to enter the gaming sphere, improve their gaming experience, and potentially progress toward professionalization. Building on this aim, the study proposes the following hypotheses concerning the structural role of economic resources in shaping access to and participation in the gaming sphere:

- (H1) Economic inequalities in the digital gaming sphere restrict gamers' access to high-performance gaming equipment.
- (H2) Limited access to high-performance gaming equipment reduces players' ability to obtain a high-quality gaming experience and diminishes their chances of progressing to professional gaming.

To examine these hypotheses, interviews were conducted with PC and console gamers. These interviews served as the empirical foundation for analyzing access-related challenges, both in terms of entering the digital gaming ecosystem and progressing toward professionalization. Through in-depth interviews, the study explored how gamers define themselves, the economic barriers they encounter

1 According to 2024 data, in Turkey, the earnings of a professional e-sports player were recorded as high as 204,000 dollars and as low as 44,000 dollars (Dierks, 2025b).

during gameplay, and the strategies they adopt to navigate these obstacles. The study further analyzed the findings through the lens of the digital divide. The theoretical framework is organized around three core themes: the conceptual and practical dimensions of the digital divide; the positioning of gamer identity within digital game culture; and the forms of gamer participation in the economic structures of the digital gaming industry. The first section outlines the conceptual framework of the digital divide underpinning the study. The second focuses on gamer identity, defining the concept, delineating its parameters, and addressing the gamer's dual role as both consumer and producer. The final section examines physical access as a central dimension of digital inequality and considers how gamers' economic resources shape their participation in the industry.

Literature Review

Digital Divide and Digital Inequality

Disparities in access to and use of the internet and digital tools have become intertwined with existing social inequalities associated with demographic characteristics, thereby creating an additional layer of stratification. This phenomenon, identified during the early development of digital technologies, has been examined in the literature under various terms, including the digital divide, digital gap, and digital inequality, and remains the subject of ongoing debate across multiple disciplines. In its early conceptualizations, the digital divide primarily referred to the disparity between individuals who had internet access and those who did not, with the latter consequently experiencing disadvantage. Such discussions often focused on demographic variables such as income, education, and ethnicity (Rogers, 2001, p. 100). However, as van Dijk (2020, pp. 7–11) argues, the digital divide encompasses far more than physical access. It has evolved into a multidimensional concept comprising three distinct levels, each corresponding to a particular phase in the historical development of digital communication. The first level of the digital divide (1995–2003) concerns inequalities in physical access to digital tools, emphasizing the economic conditions that determine whether individuals can purchase digital devices and connect to the internet. This level is closely associated with poverty and countries' broader economic welfare and addresses access at both the individual and national levels. The second level, beginning in 2004 and continuing to the present, focuses on skills-based inequalities that stem from differences in digital literacy and competence. These disparities are shaped by variables such as education, income, employment, social status, age, and gender. The third level, emerging from 2012 onward, addresses outcome-based inequalities, referring to differences in the social, economic, and institutional outcomes generated by increasingly widespread access and digital skills. This level shifts attention to how digital participation translates into tangible advantages or disadvantages within broader institutional and societal contexts. Importantly, these three levels

are not strictly sequential. Rather, they constitute a dynamic and overlapping structure in which multiple forms of digital inequality can coexist and interact.

The examination of inequalities associated with the digital divide across a wide range of disciplines underscores its significance as a multidimensional social issue. Because individuals' social positions are inherently shaped by structural and demographic factors, inequalities arising from the digital divide are studied in relation to broader social conditions. Increasingly, the digital divide is discussed not only in terms of physical access—the so-called first level—but also in relation to disparities among individuals who already have access. Research in this area often examines micro-level inequalities associated with demographic and social variables, including the digital exclusion of disadvantaged groups, age-related differences in digital literacy, rural–urban access gaps, and divergent patterns of use among high- and low-income youth (Hargittai, 2021). In parallel with studies emphasizing the fragmented and nonuniform nature of digital inequality, macro-level research has increasingly connected the digital divide to broader structural issues such as power and poverty. This body of research investigates the relationship between information and communication technologies (ICTs) and issues such as equality, globalization, poverty, and social justice. It also critically examines global digital inequality and the role of the internet in shaping democracy, citizenship, freedom, and regulatory frameworks (Compaine, 2001; O'Hara & Stevens, 2006). Other scholars, such as Robinson et al. (2015), have examined the interplay between contemporary economic conditions and digital stratification and emphasized that digitally disadvantaged workers and entrepreneurs encounter structural barriers not faced by their digitally advantaged counterparts. They argue that these disparities contribute to broader shifts in patterns of economic stratification. Taken together, these studies suggest that the digital divide continues to evolve alongside preexisting social and economic inequalities, deepening disparities among social classes, groups, and identities at both the micro and macro levels. Nevertheless, the evidence suggests that the first-level digital divide, on which this study focuses, constitutes the foundational layer upon which subsequent forms of digital inequality are constructed, particularly in light of enduring economic disparities and class-based divisions.

Digital Game Culture and Gamer Identity

Digital game culture constitutes a multilayered and expansive structure situated within the broader cultural sphere and, more specifically, within digital culture (Gere, 2018). It is shaped by the actions and interactions of various actors in the gaming ecosystem, including gamers, game companies, and developers. Although defining digital game culture precisely may be difficult, scholars emphasize that it should be understood as a distinct cultural formation with its own internal logic, norms, and practices (Corneliussen & Rettberg, 2008, p. 7). As such, comprehending this complex digital game culture necessitates an examination of multiple interrelated variables, including game-specific language, gamer

demographics, the immersive qualities of individual games, patterns of gamer interaction, and the economic dynamics embedded in game production. From this perspective, massively multiplayer online games (MMOs), including massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), illustrate how individual games can "produce a culture of their own," as Süngü (2025, p. 276) notes, owing to their expansive scale and deeply immersive environments. A sense of belonging, a shared language, and identities emerging from large gaming communities and sustained in-game interactions constitute key components of this culture. Moreover, the cultural backgrounds and identities that gamers bring into the gaming environment also play a critical role in shaping not only gaming culture but also broader forms of gamer identity. In this context, research on gamer identity offers valuable insight into digital game culture, particularly when examined through diverse and intersecting perspectives.

In digital games, gamer identity can be understood both in terms of the avatar or character represented in the game and through the nature and intensity of the individual's engagement with gameplay. Early research often portrayed gamer identity, particularly within gaming environments, in a positive light, framing it as a space of freedom detached from identity markers such as age, gender, and education. However, this perspective was later criticized for failing to account for the complex and often profound connections between virtual identities and gamers' offline social realities (Murphy, 2004, p. 224). As scholarship on digital culture has become more established within new media studies, conceptualizations of gamer identity have likewise diversified. More recent research moves beyond externally imposed definitions and approaches gamer identity as a self-reflexive construct, investigating whether, how, and under what conditions individuals identify as gamers. Shaw (2012, p. 30), for instance, argues that gamer identity should be based on gamers' self-perceptions rather than externally imposed criteria. Further research has demonstrated that various factors shape whether and how individuals come to identify as gamers. These factors include the frequency of gameplay, whether individuals are perceived as gamers by their peers, the types of games they engage with, demographic characteristics such as age and gender, the extent to which they discuss games, and the degree to which gaming is embedded within their social networks (De Grove et al., 2015, pp. 356–357). In this light, gamer identity encompasses not only an individual's self-perception in relation to gameplay but is also shaped by broader structural factors, including time investment, skill level, and access to gaming equipment.

Another way to approach gamer identity within digital culture is through the identity-formation processes facilitated by cyberspace. From selecting a username on social media to adopting a nickname in gaming environments, digital interactions facilitate the diversification of identity (Konijn & Bijvank, 2009). In this regard, a single user may inhabit multiple distinct identities across various digital games, expressing themselves in ways that can differ significantly from their

relatively stable offline identities (Filiciak, 2013; Fox & Ahn, 2013). Research has shown that gamers consider a range of factors when creating digital identities or avatars, including the desire to make characters resemble themselves and to express physical or personality-related aspects of self-representation (Zimmermann et al., 2023). Avatar-based identity formation may also influence online gamer loyalty (Teng, 2019). However, predictions about gaming practices and generalizations about players based on variables such as age, economic status, race, playing time, or mental and physical health may not yield reliable conclusions (Williams et al., 2008, pp. 1007–1012). In line with the self-reflexive approach to gamer identity discussed earlier, these identity-related factors are likely to vary according to individual experiences and the specific context of each study. Accordingly, gamer identity in digital games can be understood as inherently fluid, context-dependent, and subject to continual transformation[1].

Economic Dynamics in the Gaming Field and the Role of the Gamers

Video and digital games are cultural products whose production, distribution, and consumption are organized within a system commonly referred to as the gaming industry. This industry includes major corporations such as Microsoft, Sony, and Nintendo and is organized around four primary components: game development (encompassing software and design), publishing (covering financing, production, and promotion), licensing (pertaining to intellectual property), and distribution (referring to the delivery of gaming hardware and software to retail channels) (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009, p. 39). The core preproduction and production stages typically last approximately 18 months for console games and 3 to 15 months for PC games (Kerr, 2006, p. 42), requiring substantial time and intensive labor. Creative labor plays a central role in game development, prompting scholars to analyze this process through theoretical frameworks such as cognitive capitalism, immaterial labor, digital labor, and the creative industries. In this context, game development is not merely a technical endeavor but also a domain in which creativity and cognitive labor are commodified. Gamers, in turn, are integral to this expansive industry. Participatory culture blurs the boundaries between the dominant structures of the gaming industry and the subcultures formed by gamers and mod developers (Giddings & Kennedy, 2006, p. 134). As *produsers* (a hybrid of producers and users), gamers engage with the industry not only as consumers but also as active contributors through modding, content creation, streaming, and in-game interactions. From a critical perspective grounded in digital capitalism, however, gamers' participatory roles are closely linked to the capital flows that sustain and reproduce the industry.

1 However, in today's professional gaming domains such as e-sports, it should not be overlooked that these identities—particularly nicknames—can become symbols of status and popularity. Establishing a "name" for oneself and attaining permanence in high-level competitive play offers a distinct perspective on the fluidity of identity. Furthermore, in some games, players are not permitted to change their usernames, making it compulsory to retain the same name throughout the game (Hagström, 2008, p. 265).

This reliance on gamers' labor and entrepreneurial creativity has given rise to a secondary economy within the broader gaming sector. This socioeconomic entanglement between gamers and the online gaming industry has been aptly characterized as "working while playing" (Zhang & Fung, 2014).

As both consumers and producers, particularly through their contributions to in-game enhancements and modifications, gamers engage in forms of immaterial labor. Their participation in this secondary economy also reinforces their role as consumers through direct expenditures on games and hardware. These spending behaviors form part of a continuous cycle, as digital games are classified as "experience goods"—products whose quality can be evaluated only after they have been purchased and used (Alvisi, 2006, p. 66). Gamers also invest directly in hardware, peripherals, and in-game upgrades; such expenditures have been linked to several underlying motivations (Erol & Çırak, 2020, p. 196). Given the substantial number of gamers who participate in this economic cycle through in-game spending, examining their motivations is essential to understanding the intersections between game culture and the broader economy. Park and Lee (2011, p. 2182) identify several forms of value that gamers pursue through such purchases: "competence value" (enhancing character abilities), "entertainment value" (increasing gameplay enjoyment), "visual authority value" (gaining aesthetic distinction among peers), and "material value" (securing in-game status and recognition). Research on Turkish gamers further supports the notion that authority- and status-related motivations are particularly influential in driving purchases aimed at character development. Gamers often make financial investments to gain power, prestige, and virtual status (Talay, 2022, p. 305) and may even construct a form of virtual career through these activities, for instance, by purchasing accessories or cards to bypass server traffic and accelerate progress (Binark & Bayraktutan, 2011, p. 308). While many of these expenditures may serve symbolic purposes, such as achieving status or building a virtual career, another important motivation is the potential for financial return. The play-to-earn model, commonly associated with NFT-based game economies, enables gamers to generate real income through gameplay (Aydemir & Fetah, 2022, pp. 983–984). In such systems, gamers can transfer their accumulated virtual currency to external accounts (Binark & Bayraktutan, 2011, p. 308) or monetize their developed characters and in-game items (Talay, 2022, p. 305), thereby transforming play into a financially productive activity.

In summary, the gaming industry functions within a complex *economic* and cultural ecosystem in which gamers occupy multifaceted roles, not only as consumers but also as contributors, co-creators, and market participants. Gamers' creative and cognitive engagement contributes to both production and consumption, reflecting broader trends in digital labor and participatory culture. Through in-game purchases, hardware investments, and content creation, gamers become embedded in a continuous economic cycle that blurs the boundaries between play and labor. However, while these dynamics underscore

the increasingly intertwined relationship between gamers and the broader gaming economy, participation in this ecosystem is neither equally distributed nor universally accessible. The forms of economic engagement described, ranging from hardware investments to in-game spending, are contingent upon a minimum level of financial resources, implicitly excluding those with limited access to such means. Consequently, opportunities for participation vary considerably among gamers. Particularly in competitive or semiprofessional settings, financial barriers to acquiring high-quality equipment, upgrading systems, or making strategic in-game purchases can impose structural disadvantages.

This study builds on these insights by focusing on the challenges faced by economically disadvantaged gamers and examining how limitations in material access shape their gaming practices and hinder their ability to compete on equal terms. By situating gamers' experiences within the broader context of the digital divide, the study aims to reveal how economic inequality is reproduced within the ostensibly open and meritocratic landscape of digital gaming.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative methodology, with in-depth interviews serving as the primary method of data collection. A total of 16 participants from the digital gaming sphere were interviewed; seven interviews were conducted in person and nine were conducted online, with each session lasting approximately 25 minutes. The principle of data saturation was used to determine when additional interviews no longer generated new insights and to establish that the sample was sufficient to address the research questions (Marshall, 1996, p. 523). The criterion for participation was self-identification as a gamer. In this context, self-identification as a gamer referred simply to defining oneself as someone who plays video games. In practice, this criterion encompassed individuals who regarded themselves as part of gaming culture because they spent time or money on games, followed gaming-related content, or maintained at least an occasional connection to gaming. Thus, participants' self-identification as gamers was based on their engagement with gaming in everyday life, including regular or occasional gameplay and the allocation of time or financial resources to gaming-related activities. This inclusive selection criterion was intended to facilitate an exploration of the relationship between gamers' subjective experiences and their economic needs, both in-game and outside gaming environments. However, despite this broad definition, the sample itself reflected a shared understanding of what it meant to be a gamer, at least within the scope of this study. The characteristics commonly associated with the "gamer" identity among participants included spending time in multiplayer, team-based games; varying frequencies of play; and general familiarity with the dynamics, language, and social norms of gaming environments. Some participants played regularly and invested both time and money in gaming, while others

engaged more casually. Despite these differences, all participants demonstrated a sustained connection to gaming culture.

Participants were recruited through homogeneous sampling based on the shared characteristic of playing digital games, which was subsequently complemented by snowball sampling, whereby existing participants referred other gamers within their networks. After demographic data were collected to contextualize the participants' profiles, the interview questions explored how individuals defined themselves as gamers, including their gamer identity and level of engagement, as well as their relationship with games, including the duration of gameplay and their preferred genres. The second part of the interview focused on technical and hardware-related issues, particularly the role of financial resources in shaping the quality of gameplay and participants' progression toward professionalization. All procedures were conducted in accordance with established academic and ethical research standards. Ethical approval was obtained before fieldwork began, and informed consent was obtained from all participants through written consent forms.

The following table presents the demographic characteristics and gaming practices of the study participants:

Table 1. Demographic Information of the Participants

	Gender	Age	Education	Occupation	Income/month	Years of Playing	Playing Level
P1	Male	19	High School	E-sports Gamer	Family Support	14 years	Professional
P2	Male	22	University	Student	Family Support	14 years	Semi-prof
P3	Male	22	University	Employed	40-50k TL	17 years	Semi-prof
P4	Female	25	University	Employed	20k TL	8 years	Amateur
P5	Male	21	University	Student	Family Support	12 years	Amateur
P6	Male	21	University	Student	Family Support	15 years	Intermediate
P7	Male	21	University	Student	Family Support	15 years	Semi-prof
P8	Male	21	University	Employed	35-40k TL	18 years	Semi-prof
P9	Male	25	University	Student	Family Support	9 years	Semi-prof
P10	Male	24	University	Employed	90-100k TL	17 years	Intermediate
P11	Male	23	University	Unemployed	Family Support	17 years	Semi-prof
P12	Male	22	University	Student	Family Support	10 years	Amateur
P13	Male	23	University	Employed	25k TL	10 years	Semi-prof
P14	Male	27	University	Employed	35-40k TL	20 years	Semi-prof
P15	Male	22	University	Unemployed	Family Support	10 years	Intermediate
P16	Male	25	University	Unemployed	Family Support	20 years	Intermediate

As presented in Table 1, the participants in this study were predominantly male and ranged in age from 19 to 27 years. With the exception of one participant, who was a high school graduate and professional e-sports player, all other participants had either completed or were pursuing a university education. Many of the participants were students, while a smaller number were employed or recent graduates who were unemployed[1]. Notably, the majority of participants reported "family support" as their sole source of income. This suggests that they were not engaged in regular paid employment, which was consistent with their status as students or recent graduates. Only a few participants reported earning an independent income, and their earnings fell within modest income brackets. In terms of gaming experience, most participants had played digital games for an extended period, ranging from 8 to 20 years. This long-term engagement was evident among participants regardless of their income status.

Although gameplay was the sole inclusion criterion established for the study, the use of snowball sampling resulted in a relatively homogeneous sample in terms of gender, age, and educational background. Because most participants played multiplayer games, they often recommended their own teammates for interviews. This recruitment pattern limited the diversity of the sample and is acknowledged as a study limitation. However, this homogeneity may also be partly attributable to broader patterns, including the relatively young age profile of digital gamers and the predominance of male players in first-person shooter (FPS) games. Although the study does not seek to compare access to gaming across gender categories, it recognizes that these demographic patterns may shape gaming experiences in ways not fully captured in the present analysis. Nevertheless, the participants may be understood as a relatively homogeneous, network-based sample, and future research could build on this study by including groups with different demographic characteristics.

Findings and Discussion

Perception of Gaming and Professionalism: Time, Money, Family

Gaming practices, often beginning with early exposure to games, have contributed to the emergence of diverse gamer identities shaped by experiences ranging from arcade gaming to play on consoles, PCs, and mobile devices. Like all identities, gamer identity is socially constructed and therefore inherently fluid and variable. Rather than imposing fixed definitions of what it means to be a gamer,

1 The demographic and lifestyle characteristics of the participants closely align with the general profile of Turkish gamers aged 18–24 presented in the *Türkiye Game Market 2024 Report* (GIT, 2024). According to the report, this age group consists primarily of university students or part-time workers, prefers laptops and consoles, plays for self-expression and competition, and is highly active in digital environments (GIT, 2024, p. 68). The report also indicates that 25–30% of gamers in Türkiye are aged 18–24 and that 55% are male, which is broadly consistent with the demographic composition of the current sample (GIT, 2024, pp. 158–159). Although these figures are not disaggregated by platform or gaming style, they provide a useful benchmark for comparing the sample with the broader gaming population.

recent scholarship emphasizes the importance of understanding whether and how individuals self-identify as gamers (De Grove et al., 2015, p. 348; Shaw, 2012, p. 30). In line with this perspective, the present study did not assign predefined gamer identities to participants. Instead, participants were asked to articulate their own perceptions of their engagement with games. As anticipated, many participants found it difficult to provide clear or definitive definitions. This ambiguity suggests that gamer identity is more closely linked to personal experience and self-perception than to rigid classifications and that such identities exist along a subjective and continually evolving spectrum:

> "I took a one-year break, but I still recommend going back to being an e-sports gamer. Because back then, I played a lot—really a lot—and I still do" (P1)
>
> "I think I'm above amateur level, but not professional either, because professionalism is a whole different system" (P2)
>
> "I honestly wouldn't define myself as an amateur because I've participated in a lot of tournaments. If I called myself an amateur, I'd be doing myself a disservice, but if I called myself a professional, I'd be doing a disservice to the professionals" (P3)
>
> "I don't think I'm a professional. But I'm somewhere between mid and professional." (P13)
>
> "Semi-professional, let's say. Since I'm not part of any e-sports organizations. I'm not an amateur, though—I've been playing for a long time" (P11)

With the exception of one professional gamer (P1), all other participants reported long-term engagement with gaming, averaging approximately 15 years of experience. However, rather than identifying with the binary categories of "amateur" and "professional," participants often described their level of engagement using more nuanced or hybrid terms, such as 'above amateur', 'semi-professional', 'mid-level', 'above mid-level', or simply 'normal'. These self-descriptions indicate that participants viewed themselves as more skilled and experienced than casual or novice gamers but not fully aligned with professional status. Participants largely attributed this distinction to the fact that gaming was neither their primary occupation nor a source of income. Participants consistently associated the term "professional" with pro gamers active in e-sports leagues—individuals who compete in tournaments, earn income through gaming, and pursue it as a full-time career. The increasing visibility of e-sports in Turkey, including the establishment of the Turkish E-Sports Federation (TESFED) and the rise of e-sports clubs, appears to have shaped participants' perceptions of what it means to be a professional gamer. Although they were well informed about these developments and had been playing for many years, participants did not identify themselves as professionals. For these gamers, professionalism was defined primarily by institutional affiliation, such as membership in an e-sports club, together with income generation and the allocation of substantial time and effort to gaming as a recognized career path:

> "Professional FPS gamers, regardless of the game, spend at least 10 hours a day on it, day and night" (P15)

> "Playing professionally and playing casually are two different things. A professional might, for example, spend 10 hours a day in team training... To do this, a person needs the right mentality, need to be willing to work hard" (P1)

> "To be a professional, you really need to play a game for a long time. You need to put in a lot of effort. You have to spend a lot of time" (P3)

> "You have to completely dedicate yourself to the game because it's a very tough and competitive industry. You need to play at least 8 to 10 hours a day" (P8)

> "First of all, it requires a lot of time. Because professional FPS gamers, no matter the game, spend at least 10 hours a day on it, day and night. Sometimes they even play for 24 hours" (P15)

Within this context, the amount of time devoted to gaming emerged as a key factor in how individuals defined themselves as "good gamers." Several participants who currently identified as "amateurs" (P7, P6, P10) noted that labels such as "professional" or "semi-professional" had more accurately described them at earlier stages of their gaming trajectories. However, they could no longer sustain the level of engagement associated with those labels. This suggests that professionalism was not necessarily perceived as a fixed or permanent status but rather as a temporary position associated with periods of intensive gameplay and sustained commitment.

Accordingly, participants' self-identification as "amateurs" reflected a fluid and evolving gamer identity. Their self-perception was shaped less by ability than by changes in personal circumstances over time, such as reduced gameplay frequency or an inability to sustain previous levels of competitive achievement. Rather than indicating a lack of skill, the term "amateur" functioned as a marker of one's current position within the broader gaming field:

> "I'm an amateur gamer. There were times I felt professional. We used to participate in internet café tournaments. I'm not fully professional. I had rankings in Europe during the pandemic, but I wasn't playing officially" (P7)

> "If we're talking about now, you could say amateur, but if we're talking about the past, I was a mid-level gamer" (P6)

> "Somewhere between amateur and mid-level... But especially now, it's leaning more toward amateur. Because if you don't pursue it like a job, you inevitably fall behind. Professionals are really good. They play so well... For example, I play really well in the first games I mentioned, but when I go up against those teams, I don't stand a chance—there's no way I can beat them" (P10)

Participants who reported having performed at a higher level earlier in their gaming trajectories but who now identified as amateurs—or viewed themselves as becoming more amateur because of declining performance—illustrate that perceptions of gaming experience and skill are continually redefined over time. This finding aligns with previous research, such as Dietkow (2023, p. 38), which

showed that individuals who had limited hardware resources, lacked peripheral equipment, or felt competent in only one game often hesitated to self-identify as "gamers". These individuals frequently compared themselves with idealized gamer profiles recognized by their peer groups, further complicating their self-perception. By contrast, all participants in the present study consistently identified as gamers. However, the key point of differentiation lay in how they distinguished themselves from professional players. The institutionalization of e-sports has contributed to a more rigid and formalized understanding of what constitutes professional gaming, making it more difficult for gamers to self-identify as professionals even when they demonstrate advanced skills. Despite not describing themselves as professional gamers, the participants' substantial time investment and consistent ability to outperform novices reflected a high level of engagement and competence. Although most participants primarily played first-person shooter (FPS) games and avoided the term "professional," their self-descriptions aligned more closely with those of a "skilled" or "experienced" gamer.

When discussing the conditions required to become professional gamers or improve their gaming experiences, participants identified family support as a significant factor. Most participants, who began gaming during childhood, described their initial experiences as occurring either in internet cafés or at home. Participants considered a dedicated space at home essential for progressing to more advanced levels of gameplay. This point was strongly emphasized by P14, P13, and the professional gamer, P1:

> "They absolutely need to have a room of their own" (P14)

> "In terms of space, if you have your own room, it's definitely possible" (P13)

> "So first of all, a proper, comfortable home. Basically, an environment without pressure, a stable setting" (P1)

> "You need a completely quiet space. Among Turkish youth, there's often this thing—like you're playing in your room, and suddenly your mom walks in. But we can't explain to our moms that the game doesn't pause. Because it's an online game, and every second we're trying to grind and get stronger. You need a more isolated environment, where no one interrupts or calls out to you…" (P8)

Participants' emphasis on the need for an isolated and dedicated gaming space, particularly P8's account, highlights the difficulty of establishing such an environment within the family home. Beyond the practical need for a private and quiet space, several participants also emphasized that advancing in the gaming world required not only financial resources but also emotional support from their families:

> "I think family support is, above all, psychologically very important" (P5)

> "Becoming a professional gamer is actually like becoming a professional athlete. First and foremost, you need your family's support" (P16)

According to participants who began gaming at a very young age, the family typically served as the primary, if not the sole, source of financial support. This dependence reflects the sustained, long-term investment required to reach a competitive level and begin earning an independent income through gaming. From the perspective of digital inequality, which manifests both online and offline across the life course (Robinson et al., 2015, p. 571), participants emphasized that a family's financial capacity must be sufficient not only to cover gaming-related expenses but also to provide a stable home environment and meet the gamer's basic needs. Their statements illustrate this interdependence:

> "The family needs to support them—saying things like 'we trust you.' During the process of becoming professional, they're playing 10–12 hours a day, but not all of them can immediately join a team or club and start earning money. So during that time, they need some financial support from their family" (P15)

> "If someone has certain equipment and wants to upgrade it, their family needs to be at a certain economic level, especially considering conditions in Turkey today—these things aren't cheap" (P12)

> "You need to be mentally at ease—no worries about making ends meet at the beginning. First, you shouldn't be dealing with problems like making money, eating, having shelter, or going out. Second, your environment—starting with your parents—needs to be supportive" (P10)

The availability of adequate financial and spatial conditions is closely linked to a family's economic position and broader attitudes toward gaming. Playing computer games is frequently associated with addiction and carries various negative connotations, leading many families to approach gaming with skepticism or disapproval. However, family attitudes toward digital games are not uniformly negative. Parental perspectives may vary according to game genre—for instance, educational games, sports simulations, or first-person shooters (FPS)—and, in some cases, allowing controlled gameplay may even be viewed as part of responsible parenting (Aarsand, 2011, p. 330). Nonetheless, the accounts shared by participants, whether based on personal experience or secondhand knowledge, largely reflected family attitudes consistent with a stigmatizing view of gaming. This perspective commonly associated gaming with addiction, idleness, or a lack of discipline. Many gamers expressed frustration that families often continued to fail to recognize gaming as a legitimate professional pursuit. Instead, it was frequently perceived as a distraction that undermined academic success and disrupted conventional career paths:

> "Because our parents are a bit older... It's not just me—probably 99% of people in this industry have experienced this. They don't really understand it. They think we're just playing games. And sure, we are playing games, but this is actually our job. We're competing here. But still, they keep interrupting us" (P1)

> "Our generation's parents are generally of a certain age. Since they encountered the digital world quite late, they may not see it as a profession or a source of income" (P5)

> "In families, the gaming industry is unknown. You need to start young. They say it affects your school" (P2)

> "[They always say] 'go and find a real job'; 'What are you going to earn from gaming?' and so on... Families want things from the real world. They always start out prejudiced. If a young person has the passion and talent for this, family support is crucial" (P9)

The findings suggest that participants' self-identification at different levels of engagement was shaped not only by the formalized professional identity associated with e-sports but also by the current intensity and continuity of their gaming practices. Rather than reflecting a fixed or static status, gamer identity was fluid and evolved over time in response to changes in individual experience and involvement. Another salient finding was the strong influence of family attitudes toward gaming and gamer identity, which could either support or constrain the pursuit of a professional career. Participants consistently emphasized that becoming a professional gamer required substantial time and effort. They viewed playing 8-10 hours a day and organizing one's daily routine around gaming as nearly impossible without family support. For those who began gaming at an early age, the possibility of transforming this activity into a full-time occupation later in life depended largely on sustained assistance from their families. However, many participants noted that family perceptions—particularly concerns about academic underperformance or the belief that gaming is not a "real job"—often impeded such support. Participants regarded these attitudes as major barriers that delayed or, in some cases, entirely prevented the transition to professional gaming. Beyond time investment, family support, and a conducive environment, participants also highlighted the critical role of access to appropriate equipment and technical infrastructure in obtaining a high-quality gaming experience. The significance of this theme and its underlying subdimensions is examined in greater detail in the following section.

Hardware and Equipment Access as Determinants of Gaming Quality

A fundamental condition of gaming is access to the hardware necessary for gameplay. Gaming practices are inherently shaped by specific patterns of consumption, including the types of games played, the frequency of play, and ownership of gaming devices and related equipment (De Grove et al., 2015, p. 347). Hardware requirements often vary by game genre, while infrastructural factors such as internet connectivity and bandwidth are equally important. When participants were asked about the equipment and internet infrastructure necessary for an optimal gaming experience or progress toward professionalization, their responses revealed a wide range of experiences shaped by differing personal and economic circumstances. This section examines how access to gaming equipment is mediated by gamers' economic resources. It draws on participants' reflections on when they first acquired essential tools and how they evaluate the equipment needed to achieve a satisfactory or competitive level of play.

With regard to computer hardware, many participants identified the monitor as a critical component of competitive parity and high-performance gameplay, particularly in FPS games. P6, who had personally experienced the effects of inadequate equipment, described the disadvantage encountered during a European tournament:

> "We had joined a European tournament, and we were in the quarter-finals playing against a German team. My equipment was so bad that my computer shut down in the middle of the game and suddenly started updating. It was so bad that it froze. We got eliminated because of me" (P6).

In this instance, hardware limitations prevented the participant from fulfilling his responsibilities to his teammates and contributed to the team's elimination from an important tournament. Similarly, participants P3 and P2 emphasized that playing with inadequate equipment places gamers at a competitive disadvantage:

> "When you look at it, there's something called Hz difference. Someone playing on 144 Hz doesn't stand a chance against someone on 60 Hz. There's no way those gamers can be on equal footing" (P3)

> "Computer hardware, graphics card, processor... Someone connects from abroad, they have a better economy. They buy the latest 360 Hz monitor. I'm playing on 60 Hz. The person on 360 Hz appears more slowly and reacts faster. Naturally, they get ahead of us" (P2)

Participants also noted that, although gamers may enter the field using basic or average equipment, hardware upgrades become increasingly necessary over time, particularly for those aspiring to reach a professional level. As P1, a professional gamer, and P8 noted, this progression often follows a recognizable pattern:

> "It changes over time, but even if you get the best gear—it positively affects your game performance. Sure, some people make it to the top with low-tier setups, but eventually, they move on to average or above-average gear. They have to. Because in the game, everyone plays with top-level equipment" (P1)

> "You can reach a certain level with a bad computer, but beyond that point, it becomes a struggle. You press a key and it responds late, and that delay can get you killed. In these games, every millisecond matters. Matches can be lost because of things like this" (P8)

Participants' emphasis on competing against players who use high-performance equipment underscores the importance of economic resources not only for acquiring quality hardware but also for maintaining competitive parity. Participants who viewed fairness in gaming as contingent upon comparable hardware consistently stressed that high-quality equipment is not merely advantageous but ultimately indispensable for those seeking to progress toward professionalization. As van Dijk (2020, p. 2) argues, access to digital technologies is not a one-time decision involving the purchase of specific tools; rather, it is an ongoing process involving the continuous updating of hardware, software, peripherals, and service subscriptions. The participants' comments regarding the need for ongoing hard-

ware upgrades reflect this dynamic, reinforcing van Dijk's assertion that access is not a static condition but a continually evolving process. A one-time acquisition of gaming equipment is therefore insufficient; remaining competitive requires gamers to update their technologies continually. Participants also noted that advances in game graphics have substantially increased hardware requirements. As games become more visually sophisticated, a powerful computer is essential not only for optimal performance but also for running modern games at a playable level:

> "Today, graphics systems have advanced significantly. Games have evolved. For example, GTA 6 is coming out, and there is talk in the tech world about graphics cards costing much" (P11)

> "Since graphics in today's games have become excessively good, you need a good computer and a good graphics card. Therefore, if you want to play the game without lag, having a good graphics card and a good processor is essential" (P15)

> "Today, the requirements of games, the system requirements, are very high, so you need equipment that is somewhat mid-range and expensive" (P13)

Hardware upgrades are closely linked to a gamer's economic resources. Although most gamers aspire to use high-quality equipment, limited financial resources create a clear distinction between those who can afford such tools and those who cannot. In this regard, the first level of the digital divide, which centers on physical access, remains a significant barrier within the gaming field. Similarly, disparities in internet access contribute to first-level digital inequality. Poor connectivity or inadequate internet infrastructure can create substantial disadvantages, particularly in competitive gaming environments. Participants P2 and P3 specifically highlighted issues such as high ping, emphasizing that internet-connection quality is now as critical as hardware performance and, in some cases, even more important:

> "The most important thing is the internet. Having fiber is important, otherwise there's no lag in the game" (P2)

> "The internet is also important. There's lag in games. You connect to games through a server. If the game freezes, you fall behind" (P3)

According to P4 and P7, slow internet speeds place gamers at a disadvantage against opponents when they play on European servers and can impede communication and networking:

> "For example, (overseas) it runs at 20 ms, which is a pretty good ping, but because we're connected to a European server, because we're connected from Turkey, it's 70 ms" (P4)

> "If your internet isn't good, you can't network with most people because you're also playing this game with foreigners. Especially if you get to certain places, you need to communicate with people in Europe. If your connection isn't good, you can't communicate properly with them" (P7)

Access to the ideal hardware setup described by participants is shaped by their financial resources. Given the types of equipment identified and the costs associated with internet connectivity, financial capacity remains a key barrier to entering the digital gaming space. For gamers seeking to pursue gaming professionally, rising equipment and infrastructure costs continue to restrict access. When asked whether—and, if so, when—they had been able to obtain the ideal equipment they described, participants frequently identified family support as a determining factor. In several cases, families served as the sole source of financial assistance. For example, P6 and P2 noted that their families were their only source of support for acquiring a high-performance computer or other gaming equipment:

> "It was very difficult to convince my family of this. It took me a long time. It might have taken me almost five years to convince them. Because there are no other resources" (P6)

> "After I got into university, my family paid for it. Otherwise, I couldn't have done it. New ones are coming out, but I have the average equipment. It's hard to get these because the family doesn't support you. There's a quid pro quo: if you get this, we'll get that; if you get that, we'll get this" (P2)

The reciprocal arrangement described by P2 was particularly evident during the participants' high school years, when families often used gaming-related rewards, such as computers, as incentives contingent upon academic success. In many cases, families offered gaming equipment as a reward or motivational tool for reaching specific milestones, such as passing university entrance examinations. As reflected in the participants' accounts below, most reported that they were able to acquire a high-performance gaming computer only after successfully completing these examinations and beginning their university education:

> "When I was young, my family didn't care about these things because they thought I would fall behind in school. But when I started high school my dad bought it for me after I insisted." (P7)

> "I think I got my computer when I went to university. I've had good equipment for 4-5 years now. Before that, I didn't have very good equipment. My family bought it. It was entirely my father's gift" (P13)

> "The year I was going to university, I asked my dad [for a computer]. He bought it for me as a gift for entering university" (P15)

> "I didn't have a good computer until I went to university. During my university years, with my family's support, I got a mid-range computer" (P14)

Given the participants' ages and educational statuses, with most being current university students or recent graduates, families served as the primary source of funding for acquiring even mid-range gaming equipment. Despite having played games since childhood, many participants gained access to the equipment they desired only during their university years, often after prolonged negotiations with their families. This assistance arrived relatively late in their gaming trajectories and may be attributed to family attitudes that initially discouraged gaming,

as discussed in the previous section. However, once high school ended and the perceived 'threat' to academic achievement diminished, families began to shift their position. The equipment they had previously refused to provide was, in a sense, reframed as a reward granted in recognition of academic "success," such as admission to a university.

However, some participants were eventually able to obtain their desired equipment through their own income or achievements. For example, P1, the professional gamer, noted that he had acquired the high-end equipment he currently used through earnings from e-sports tournaments. This example illustrates an alternative route to accessing quality hardware—one based on individual skill and success within competitive gaming rather than on family support:

> "I acquired all of these over time. If the economy had allowed it, I would have bought them when I first started. But I bought them one by one because I earned them all from my own tournament winnings or my own salary, etc. — with money I earned myself" (P1)

Some gamers stated that their strong commitment to gaming led them to reduce spending on basic needs such as food and beverages to purchase equipment (P9). P14, meanwhile, reported acquiring quality equipment over a period of two to three years using income earned from streaming on social media platforms. Another participant, P8, stated that he began purchasing his own equipment only after becoming competitive and that this process took four to five years:

> "I have had access to these resources for the past three years or so. That's related to my passion for gaming. Sometimes, people cut down on food and drink just to be able to buy a game or to upgrade their equipment to play better…" (P9)

> "I've been a streamer for 8 years. After I became a streamer and started earning my own money through the support of others, I was able to gradually build my computer, piece by piece. That took me 2–3 years" (P14)

> "At first, I was playing with a poor-quality computer. I was just learning the game. Then, when I realized I had potential, I started working on my own and bought my own equipment, and for the past 4–5 years, I've had much better gear" (P8)

The findings indicate that family support, alongside participants' individual efforts, played a significant role in enabling access to the equipment and infrastructure required for a satisfactory gaming experience, even among those who were not pursuing professionalization. At the same time, disparities in access to high-performance hardware and high-speed internet continued to shape gameplay quality. Access to high-quality equipment enhanced participants' competitiveness, whereas insufficient resources placed them at a structural disadvantage. Although a few gamers acquired quality equipment through opportunities they created independently, most obtained their desired hardware through family assistance. With the exception of P1, however, none of the participants had obtained sufficient support to become professional gamers.

Economic Resources and a Good Gaming Experience

Although the findings presented in the first two sections are not explicitly framed in terms of economic capital, they reveal the decisive role of economic conditions. For instance, for individuals seeking—or believing that they have the potential—to become professional gamers, access to high-quality equipment and the legitimization of gaming as a serious endeavor are essential. This legitimization often translates into both financial and emotional support from the family. Without family financial support, in particular, establishing an e-sports career at an early age appears difficult. As previously discussed, within the fluid and success-oriented structure of gamer identity, gamers may become professionals later by creating the necessary conditions independently. The main argument, however, is that digital inequality is not limited to whether individuals have access to a digital device; it also encompasses access to the high-quality tools and time required to attain a particular level of participation (e.g., becoming an e-sports gamer, participating in tournaments, securing a place in leagues, etc.). To examine this dynamic from the participants' perspective and allow them to articulate directly the connection between their gaming experiences and financial circumstances, they were asked whether their economic situation had posed an obstacle to becoming skilled gamers. The participants, most of whom came from middle- and upper-middle-class socioeconomic backgrounds and had an average of 15 years of gaming experience, repeatedly emphasized the influence of economic status on becoming a good or professional gamer. This emphasis partly reflected the fact that many had obtained their desired equipment only within the previous four to five years. The first important factor was the availability of a financially stable environment that would allow a gamer to play for 10–12 hours a day while still meeting basic needs. P1, who had to pause his professional gaming career for economic reasons, explained this situation in detail:

> "So, the reason I took a year off was this (economy). I mean, it's not the main reason, but it's an indirect one. There are many factors, but I think the most important is the economy. Because I have friends, for example, who are really well-off, either through their families or on their own. Their minds are 'at ease'. After all, they have nothing to lose here. They also don't have any expectations of earning money. So, zero pressure. And someone who isn't at ease, who isn't mentally relaxed, simply cannot be in this industry. Because in the end, you're playing games. If someone has financial expectations, if they are in urgent need, it's (difficult). You don't know when you'll get into a team, when you'll go pro. But the economy is really important. I'm saying this because I've experienced it myself. I'm not a very easygoing person either. And because I'm not that relaxed of a person, I say this: the economy is definitely a 4 out of 5 (in terms of its impact). Without it, you can't do it, you can't continue" (P1)

The condition described by P1 as being "at ease" refers to having sufficient financial resources, either through family support or personal income, to play games for extended periods and, in other words, pursue gaming profession-

ally. P1, a professional gamer who competed in tournaments, stated that financial pressures had prevented him from maintaining a regular gaming schedule over the previous year, ultimately leading him to take a break. In light of the preceding participant accounts, which consistently emphasized sustained, long-term gameplay as a prerequisite for professionalization, P1 occupied a structurally disadvantaged position. Moreover, his experience demonstrates that classifications such as amateurism and professionalism are not fixed but may shift over time depending on individual circumstances and trajectories. Similarly, some gamers described the relationship between financial status and gaming in terms of both the time devoted to play and the need for sufficient economic resources to sustain daily life during this period.

> "In Turkey, you already can't find much time while working. That's why it's also hard to dedicate time to e-sports; doing both work and this at the same time. So, you need to be financially well-off" (P7)

> "If you're living with your family… The person convinces their family and says, 'I'm going to focus on gaming.' Let's say they don't have financial problems; their parents are well-off. And if there's even a sponsor funding this, maybe then it could be done. I don't know to what extent this is actually funded or how it works in Turkey though" (P12)

As discussed above, participants indicated that their ability to attain financial security often depended on their families' economic circumstances:

> "If someone is living alone, when they spend 10–12 hours a day on gaming, how are they going to pay their rent, their internet bill? How will they feed themselves? They'll have to get a job somehow to support themselves. That's why they're absolutely needs to be a source of income so that they can spend 10–12 hours a day on gaming while still being able to eat and pay for their rent, electricity, and water" (P15)

> "For example, ever since I started working, I haven't been able to dedicate as much time to games as I used to because I have rent to pay and things I need to buy. If I were to spend 8–10 hours a day gaming now, and I'm not an e-sports gamer, not earning money from it yet, that could lead me directly into financial collapse, and I simply couldn't do it" (P8)

> "The family needs to provide basic support, and finances need to be in good shape. I would have liked to pursue a career in e-sports, but I also wanted to continue with school alongside it" (P7)

The recurring emphasis on family as a source of support was closely linked to the participants' age group. Because most participants still lived with their families, the family was typically their primary source of financial support. More broadly, the population most actively involved in gaming consists largely of children and young adults who are likely to live with their families (GIT, 2024, p. 158; TÜİK, 2024)[1].

1 60% of individuals who play games are between the ages of 18 and 34 (GIT, 2024, p. 158). GIT (Gaming in Türkiye). 2024. Turkish Gaming Industry Report 2024. Retrieved on August 1, 2025, from https://www.gaminginturkey.com/files/pdf/turkiye-game-market-report-2024.pdf. The proportion of children (aged 6–15) who play digital games is 74% (TÜİK, Rate of information technology usage by children

Therefore, the repeated references to family support throughout the interviews reflect the central role of the family in these gamers' everyday experiences. For individuals who engage with gaming from childhood through adolescence and even into the post-university period while remaining in the family home, perceiving advancement without family support as unfeasible is understandable. At this point, the family's purchasing power and consequent ability to provide digital tools become decisive. The first-level digital divide, a long-standing area of debate, is thus reproduced through the distinction between those who have access and those who do not (Lythreatis et al., 2022, p. 2). In this regard, even when families wish to support a child whom they believe to be talented, financial limitations may prevent them from doing so.

Second, participants emphasized that computer hardware and internet connections needed to be of high quality or at least above average. Access to such equipment was also contingent on the gamer's economic capital. When asked whether economic conditions had impeded their ability to obtain it, participants responded based on their own experiences:

> "If this question (economy) had been asked 10 or 15 years ago, it wouldn't have mattered much, because back then, game graphics weren't this advanced. Even if you had a bad computer, it didn't make much difference, since the graphics were already low and the game capacity was limited. So you wouldn't be at much of a disadvantage compared to your competitors. But nowadays, games have very high graphics. They've started to be very large in terms of gigabytes. Then there's the issue of fiber internet. So, economic reasons can now really become a problem" (P8)

> "The better your equipment is, the better your development becomes. I can give an example from myself. I know I have potential, but I can't reflect it in the game. That's entirely due to the equipment. But once I have the equipment, I can carry the game with ease" (P6)

Third, according to P5 and P6, under prevailing economic conditions in Turkey, obtaining high-quality equipment and reliable internet and purchasing games are expensive:

> "Because accessing technological devices in Turkey is economically very difficult. Even when we try to buy the most basic professional item, it turns out to be expensive. Even a middle-income family may not always be able to afford it, so while emotional support may be provided, financial support may fall short. If you want to compete on the same level as others, it makes a difference. Of course, it matters if you want to be at the top level because the top gamers have the best equipment. This is not something that can be achieved by talent alone" (P5)

> "Even getting good, quality internet is expensive in our country" (P6)

> "You also need to buy games. Nowadays, games cost around two to three thousand lira. Even the cheapest ones are about 500 lira. And cheap games aren't much fun. Their stories are limited, and they may have graphical issues. To play a good game, you usually need to be in a good financial position" (P11)

by gender and age group). Retrieved on August 1, 2025, from https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Kategori/GetKategori?p=bilgi-teknolojileri-ve-bilgi-toplumu-102&dil=1

At the same time, gamers who lacked the necessary equipment at home faced the additional financial burden of paying to use internet cafés as an alternative gaming space:

> "Most people have to play at internet cafés because they lack adequate equipment at home. And even then, they may or may not be able to allocate a certain budget for it. Every aspect of this depends entirely on money" (P7)

> "But if they go to an internet café, they have to pay large amounts. If people spend 12 hours a day there, they'll be paying 300 TL—and then they'll have no money left in their pockets" (P15)

The findings in this section suggest that gaming trajectories are shaped more strongly by material conditions than by individual talent or motivation alone. Participants indicated that access to financial resources during periods of intensive gameplay, equipment quality, and internet speed were critical to obtaining a satisfactory gaming experience or reaching a professional level. Based on their own experiences, most participants reported that they initially lacked adequate equipment but eventually obtained better hardware, largely through family support. While all agreed that high-quality equipment was necessary, they also shared the view that access to it depended on financial resources. They further emphasized that alternatives such as internet cafés also imposed substantial costs, particularly under economic conditions in Turkey. Participants' experiences demonstrate the importance of economic capital both for entering the gaming field and for progressing toward professionalization. In this sense, gaming emerges not merely as a recreational activity but as an unequal practice requiring substantial investments of time and resources and remaining deeply entangled with broader economic structures. Nevertheless, despite these significant constraints, participants also proposed potential strategies for overcoming them. The next section critically examines these strategies and the assumptions on which they rest.

Escaping the Economic Burden: Talent, Luck, and Being Discovered

When asked how strongly economic conditions affect the pursuit of professional gaming or a high-quality gaming experience, participants acknowledged the importance of financial resources but also emphasized that skilled gamers may overcome these obstacles through talent and perseverance:

> "I think talent is also very important. I've had friends like that. They had amazing setups and great financial situations, but they simply weren't cut out for this. You think, 'If I had that computer, imagine what I could do.' I think this is really about talent" (P3)

> "Sometimes it's not about the equipment. There are times when talent speaks for itself. But if I consider it from the perspective of someone starting from scratch and wanting to improve, then I'd definitely say I need proper equipment" (P4)

> "If you're not talented, no matter how good your equipment is, it won't matter..." (P2)

In addition to talent, participants highlighted personal qualities such as determination and a strong desire to succeed. They suggested that, especially for those who are talented and aspire to become professionals, it is essential to push one's limits and persistently pursue this goal:

> "This is a dream. If you follow this dream, I don't think it's impossible. If you believe you have talent, you should definitely push every limit. If you manage to get yourself discovered, the financial side of things will be resolved" (P3)

> "If you're talented, yes. You can get discovered even without equipment or internet at internet cafés. There are many ways to show yourself; you can attend events, participate in tournaments. Most tournaments are held in internet cafés nowadays anyway" (P13)

> "Economy is important, but a gamer's ambition and willpower can overcome certain things. Some people can't do anything even when they have the sources, while others can go far without any sources. Someone who truly loves this will find a way. They'll play one way or another" (P9)

> "There are examples (of success despite financial hardship), but you need to be really passionate. You also need to go against your family a bit. Back when I ranked in Europe, my equipment wasn't very good. I was playing against people with equipment two or three times better than mine, and I still ranked among them. So it's something that can be achieved even with poor equipment. It's not a fantasy. It can definitely be done, but having financial sources makes it much easier" (P7)

Drawing on his own experience, P7 stated that he had attained a European ranking despite lacking high-end equipment. However, he later explained why he had been unable to sustain that level:

> "I ranked in Europe, but I couldn't hold on for long. Because I started playing this game (Valorant) when it first came out. I had reached a certain level, but once the game became more widespread, and new equipment kept coming out... Generally, people in Europe already have the latest equipment compared to Turkey. I couldn't keep up with them. I couldn't compete much" (P7)

The short-lived nature of this success, achieved despite inadequate equipment, illustrates, as previously discussed, the fluidity of gamer status within the field's inherently competitive dynamics. When gamers are unable to devote sufficient time to gameplay or upgrade their equipment, their position becomes more precarious. Conversely, the more time they devote to gaming and the more they invest in hardware upgrades, the greater their chances of reaching advanced levels. The participants' statements clearly illustrate these instances of status loss.

According to the participants, gamers who are sufficiently talented and motivated may eventually be "discovered," although this possibility also depends substantially on luck:

> "The luck factor is actually really important here. Because being discovered can sometimes come down to luck. For instance, in one of your games, you might end up matched with a professional gamer. If they like your gameplay, even just say, 'Wow, this gamer is really good', they might recommend you. luck is a big factor in this, in my opinion" (P3)

> "I think it's completely about marketing yourself. You need a bit of luck too. You start with a small team. You can showcase yourself on the European stage in that small team. Then one of the big e-sports teams might take you. If you can get discovered and show your family that you have a stable income, I think it could be effective. You can overcome economic barriers. If you're a good gamer, if you can be discovered, if you can market yourself well, if you can advertise yourself... You need luck too. Life moves forward with hope" (P5)

Within this "life driven by hope," the chain of possibilities described by P3 and P5 was reinforced by the shared example of Melih, a figure embedded in the participants' collective memory[1]:

> "For example, Melih. He was a very young kid. He was discovered really quickly. He didn't have a computer; he used to play in an internet café. And somehow, he was discovered. I think the economy can be worked out. If you're a good gamer, if you're talented, you'll definitely get somewhere" (P4)

> "There's a real example. I don't know many names, just one big streamer's name. There was this kid—Melih. He didn't have money, and Unlost, the streamer, discovered him. He was really talented, playing from an internet café. It can be solved, but you really have to be talented. And someone has to notice it" (P10)

> "I think what's important here is being able to make your voice heard. I'm not talking about what your friends at the internet café say. It's important to use social media a bit to get your name out there. Our brother Melih really made his voice heard at the time. People who supported him somehow managed to get him in touch with the streamer. That's how those opportunities became possible. You need that kind of popularity at some point" (P14)

> "It's like the issue of being noticed. There was this kid once. He was really good at CS and used to livestream. A popular streamer noticed him. He started sending him keyboards, mice, equipment, computers... He supported him. He helped the kid get somewhere. If that kid hadn't started streaming, how would Unlost have ever discovered him? Even that meeting was a stroke of luck" (P15)

However, an important detail in this account is that the individual in question, Melih, did not attract attention passively—i.e., he was not discovered "somehow," as P4 puts it, merely by playing games. Rather, his visibility was facilitated through a specific network: his livestreams reached a popular gaming streamer who helped amplify his presence. Livestreaming nevertheless emerged in participants' accounts as an alternative route to visibility, despite the steady decline in both Twitch downloads and user numbers in Turkey (Dierks, 2025a, pp. 47–48). In this context, reducing professionalization to talent, ambition, luck, or the ability to engage in self-promotion, as noted by P5, overlooks structural barriers and obscures underlying inequalities. Success narratives grounded in personal qualities such as "talent" and "ambition" may operate as a form of false consciousness by masking

1 Melih Kalkan was a talented young child gamer who gained recognition despite his age. He became known through collaborative streams with the popular Twitch broadcaster *Unlost*, who also supported him by providing gaming equipment. Sadly, Melih passed away at just 14 years old due to a chronic illness. Melih's age, talent, illness, the support he received, and his untimely passing all contributed to his recognition in the gaming world and to his lasting place in collective memory.

the external and material conditions, including economic structures, that shape social phenomena and reproduce inequality. Similarly, beliefs in "luck" and "being discovered" obscure structural disparities and discourage critical engagement with material conditions by legitimizing individual effort as the primary route to success. The repeated invocation of Melih's exceptional success story, embedded in participants' collective memory, marginalizes the broader, largely invisible majority whose experiences do not conform to this rare example. Prioritizing this exceptional "miracle" narrative legitimizes the hope of "making it one day" and rationalizes continued investment in gaming. However, some participants adopted a more critical perspective, noting that alternative routes to visibility exist and that "being discovered" cannot be reduced to chance alone. They emphasized that gamers who consider themselves talented should actively seek opportunities to increase their visibility.

More concrete routes to recognition identified in the preceding statements included playing on the same team as a professional gamer, livestreaming, uploading videos, and establishing a visible presence on social media. Other strategies mentioned by participants involved cultivating distinctive qualities, attracting the attention of e-sports players, and participating in tournaments organized by companies or internet cafés. In contrast to the uncertainty embedded in the belief that "if someone is very talented and lucky, they will eventually be discovered," these strategies emphasize a visibility-oriented approach based on individual initiative. This approach becomes particularly relevant when considered in relation to gaming's role on contemporary social media platforms. At the intersection of the gaming industry and social media, gaming emerges not only as a space for talent and competition but also as an alternative career path increasingly shaped by content-creation practices.

Finally, some participants regarded the combination of talent, luck, and discovery as highly unlikely to produce professional success. They argued that concrete limitations—such as insufficient time or inadequate access to equipment—undermine a straightforward cause-and-effect relationship such as 'being discovered because one is talented':

> "If you're talented, you'll definitely be discovered. I don't really agree with that. It's a one-in-a-million chance. If you enter this field based on that hope, you won't get anywhere. If it happens later on by chance and takes you somewhere, that's good" (P15)

> "No way—nobody really cares. Someone might be very talented, but has a bad computer, bad ping, no effort, just sitting there waiting to be discovered. The world doesn't work like that" (P8)

> "It's really hard for someone who can barely make it to an internet café and only spend a limited amount of time at a computer to be discovered, compared to someone who's always in front of one. They can't always be available... It's a really difficult process. I think it could even crush someone's enthusiasm" (P14)

> "You might get somewhere if you're talented, but it's really rare. Since games are now recorded, being discovered is easier, but to stand out, you need to be in the top 5-10%. And to do that, you need to play a lot and dedicate time" (P7)

This section has examined the strategies gamers use to overcome economic constraints that substantially shape their opportunities. Because the hope of "being discovered one day despite economic hardship" operates as a powerful source of motivation, it may make structural inequalities more difficult for gamers to recognize. The belief that survival in a vast industry such as gaming depends primarily on ambition, passion, and exceptional talent reflects a pattern that can be interpreted through the concept of false consciousness. However, the more critical perspectives adopted by some participants—who regarded economic conditions as more decisive and distanced themselves from this optimistic narrative—demonstrate that gamers do not share a single, unified belief system.

Conclusion

This study examines the extent to which economic dynamics and gamers' existing financial resources shape their ability to participate in the gaming world, obtain a high-quality gaming experience, and transition into professional fields such as e-sports. It produced several key findings. Beyond in-game economic practices, such as in-game purchases and game downloads, participants described various ways in which broader economic conditions shape their entry into the gaming world, their ability to sustain their participation, and their potential to reach an advanced level of play. This finding is consistent with digital divide research, which emphasizes the role of economic capital as a structural barrier governing not only initial access but also the depth and quality of digital participation.

One key finding is that gamers consider both material and emotional family support essential to obtaining a high-quality gaming experience and reaching a professional level. A prerequisite for such support is a positive family attitude toward gaming and the absence of perceptions that frame it as detrimental to education or future career prospects. Furthermore, those seeking to become professionals in the digital gaming sphere must devote a substantial amount of time to gaming each day. Sustaining this intensive schedule from an early age requires family support. Accordingly, participants identified the family as the source of the initial resources required to enter the gaming field during childhood, not only financially but also emotionally, through approval and encouragement. Findings concerning the importance of hardware and equipment for a high-quality gaming experience, as well as the ability to obtain them, demonstrate that economic capital—whether provided by the family or the individual—plays a critical role at every stage, from beginner to professional levels. Participants described missed opportunities resulting from inadequate equipment and noted that, because many had begun gaming at a very young age, their families constituted the primary source of funding for such purchases. Accordingly, the family

emerges as the principal source of out-of-game economic capital, providing the foundational resources necessary for advancement within the gaming sphere. Regarding the relationship between material resources and the ability to attain a desired level of play or become an e-sports gamer, participants emphasized that computer equipment and internet connectivity must be at least above average, if not high-quality. Their responses therefore underscored the decisive role of economic conditions.

A second key finding is that inadequate equipment constitutes a substantial barrier to advancement in gaming. Additional financial obstacles arise from Türkiye's exchange-rate conditions, which considerably increase equipment costs compared with those in other countries, and from the pressure of meeting basic needs such as food and housing, particularly when pursuing gaming limits opportunities for stable employment. The study also identified a strong belief among participants that financial limitations can be overcome. Although they acknowledged the importance of economic resources in obtaining the equipment and conditions necessary for gaming, they argued that these constraints could be surmounted through alternative strategies. The belief that talented gamers can progress despite financial hardship and reach their desired level through ambition and determination is reinforced by success narratives embedded in gaming culture's collective memory. However, when considered in relation to the economic dynamics of the gaming industry, this belief functions as a form of false consciousness that obscures the digital inequality produced by disparities in access and economic capital. In light of these findings, the study concludes that out-of-game economic capital plays a critical role in obtaining the equipment, hardware, and internet access required for gaming; ensuring that these resources meet professional standards; and covering daily living expenses in the absence of stable employment. The findings therefore indicate that economic inequalities in the digital gaming sphere restrict gamers' access to high-performance gaming equipment (H1) and that limited access negatively affects their ability to attain a high-quality gaming experience and reduces their chances of transitioning into professional gaming (H2). An unexpected finding is that, in the absence of favorable material conditions, the perceived combination of talent and luck sustains participants' hope of being discovered.

This research identifies three key areas for future study:

- the role of financial and emotional family support in progression toward high-level gaming, particularly professionalization;
- the belief, interpreted here through the concept of false consciousness, that talent and ambition alone can ensure success, thereby obscuring economic barriers and broader structural inequalities such as the digital divide; and

- the experiences of participant groups with more diverse demographic characteristics, given that the present study relied on a naturally occurring homogeneous sample.

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