E-SPORTS IN ACADEMIA: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF SECONDARY AND

POSY-SECONDARY E-SPORTS ATHLETES' EXPERIENCES

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ABSTRACT

E-SPORTS IN ACADEMIA: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF SECONDARY AND

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Esports (electronic sports) is the emerging field of organized video game-based competition. Recently, academic institutions have begun to integrate esports into their athletic and extracurricular programs. The current body of esports academic literature examining the impact of esports on students in an academic setting (high school and college) is limited. This phenomenological study identifies the social (social capital) and emotional (athletic identity) effects of esports team membership on six high school athletes from West Texas and compares the findings with existing university esports athletes research. The results indicate that esports team members positively influences athletic identity and social network formation among esports athletes. Conversely, the findings indicate the esports athletes did not form new social networks with external entities as a result of their team membership. These findings bridge the secondary and post-secondary esports athletes' experience and provide academic institutions with insight that can lead to sustainable esports program development.

Keywords: esports, eSports, e-sports, social capital, athletic identity, high school

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Chapter I

Introduction to the Study

Competitive electronic sports (esports) teams are a relatively new phenomenon when compared to traditional sports (i.e., football, baseball, and basketball) played in academic settings. Over the past decade, academic institutions, both secondary (9th-12th grades) and post-secondary (colleges and universities), have recognized esports' potential and implemented programs to capitalize on esports' benefits. Studies show that esports involvement improves students' leadership abilities, communication skills (Tang, 2020), critical thinking, and technical skills (Rothwell & Shaffer, 2019). Additionally, Ferguson and Olson (2013) found that video games give adolescents and young adults opportunities to improve their social and emotional skills through play and interaction with others. Though many benefits to students who participate in esports exist, academic institutions must also consider the holistic and lasting effects of esports participation.

The social and emotional impact of esports on athletes in an academic setting is largely unknown. Toxic behavior and cyberbullying are commonplace in online gaming, which negatively impacts players and consistently remains unreported (Kwak, Blackburn & Han, 2015). Additionally, esports athletes are vulnerable to video game addiction (Giordano et al., 2020), obesity due to the sedentary nature of the activity (Calvert, Staiano, & Bond, 2013), and gambling, as many esports games have adopted pay-base reward mechanics (Macey & Hamari, 2019). Consequently, Tang (2020) wrote, "…[F]or the [esports] industry to grow in a healthy and sustainable manner, and more importantly, for the wellbeing and success of the players, it is imperative to develop a better understanding of the fast-growing industry as well as the player communities"

(Conclusion, para. 2). This call to action serves as this study's guiding principle by establishing a clear purpose and research goal.

The focus of this study was to identify the social and emotional trends exhibited by esports athletes who compete in an academic setting. A goal of this study was to formulate a functional understanding of the esports athlete experience in an academic setting. Furthermore, the study has built upon and supplemented the research of Schaeperkoetter et al. (2017), which examined the social (social capital) and emotional (athlete identity) experiences of esports athletes on scholarship in a post-secondary setting. Specifically, Schaeperkoetter et al. examined how college esports athletes perceived their interactions with other students and team members, their relationship to traditional athletics, and how esports athletes integrate into the campus culture (Schaeperkoetter et al., 2017).

For this study, the researcher extended the Schaeperkoetter et al. (2017) study to a different context. Establishing a quasi-replication model, the researcher made minimal and equivalent changes to Schaeperkoetter et al. (2017) study to compare the studies for commonalities. For example, in this study, high school esports athletes replaced college athletes, and other adjustments primarily affected the participant selection. These minimal but necessary alterations allowed the current study to remain applicable to the new location and participants while retaining significant similarities to Schaeperkoetter et al. (2017), and those similarities facilitated comparisons between the two studies. Analyzing the findings of both studies led to the identification of social and emotional trends that bridge secondary and post-secondary academic esports.

Chapter I of this study provides insight and context for the research topic. The remaining portions of this chapter comprise nine topics: (1) background; (2) problem statement; (3) theoretical framework; (4) statement of the purpose and research questions; (5) rationale and significance of the study; (6) assumptions; (7) limitations and delimitations; (8) definitions of terms; and, lastly, (9) summary and organization of the study are established and discussed.

Background

Esports has made dramatic leaps in popularity over the past few decades. In the early 2000s, networking innovation facilitated remote video game competitions, and businesses began investing money in video game competitions for tournament sponsorships, prizes, tournament expansion, athlete sponsorships, and establishing professional teams (Steinkuehler, 2020). In 2019, esports revenue was expected to exceed $1 billion globally (Gough, 2019; Tagle, 2019) and has been projected to reach $1.79 billion in 2022 (Tagle, 2019). Around 2015, the popularity of esports initiated the transition of competitive gaming to an academic setting.

Collegiate participation in esports has expanded over the last decade. In 2016, there were 22 post-secondary institutions with officially sponsored esports teams, and only five schools offered financial incentives such as scholarships and other aid to esports athletes (DiFrancisco-Donoghue & Balentine, 2018). As of January 2019, the number of post-secondary institution-sponsored esports teams exceeded 80, with over $9 million in student financial incentives (Rothwell & Shaffer, 2019). Additionally, according to the National Association of Collegiate eSports (NACE), as of early 2020, the number of

post-secondary institutions had expanded to over 170, financial incentives exceeded $16 million, and over 5000 students were competing as esports athletes (NACE, 2020).

Many high schools have adopted esports programs based on the growth of college esports and the possibility for students to earn scholarships and follow career opportunities, and high school esports have also been deemed valuable for their connections to science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) pathways (Rothwell & Shaffer, 2019). As secondary participation has increased, companies have established esports leagues catering to high school-aged students, and leagues have quickly proliferated to meet the growing demand for age-appropriate esports competition. The High School Esports League (HSEL), North America Scholastic Esports Federation (NASEF), and PlayVs represent nationwide esports leagues that have provided platforms and rules to facilitate controlled, team-based online competition (Pierce, 2019). Each league offers a different video game selection, tournament formats, and payment options; these help teams find leagues that best fit their unique needs.

Problem Statement

As of 2017, the body of academic literature regarding esports was sparse and primarily focused on qualitative phenomena displayed in esports tournaments (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017). Reitman, Anderson-Coto, Wu, Lee, and Steinkuehler's (2020) review of esports-centric literature found only 150 articles relevant to esports as of spring 2018. Conversely, the authors noted that 2018 marked a phenomenal resurgence in esports-focused academic research and publications (Reitman et al., 2020). Much of the recent research has focused on factors that influenced player and spectator participation (Pluss et al., 2019). The general problem seems to have been that the research focused on esports

in a K-12 setting primarily examines the pros and cons of schools adopting esports (Rothwell & Shaffer, 2019). The current body of academic literature is emergent and broad in scope—the researchers have asked if "we" should allow esports in schools, but they have yet to adequately explore the ramifications of said allowance.

The specific problem is that there has been only minimal research on the effects of esports team membership on esports athletes' social (social capital) and emotional (athletic identity) wellbeing. Schaeperkoetter et al. (2017) looked at esports athletes' academic experience while in college as members of emerging esports teams, how they interacted with other athletes and teams, and how they integrated into the existing campus culture. A comparable qualitative examination into the social and emotional experience of a high school esports athlete has, up to this point, been absent from the academic literature. With this research, academic institutions can better understand the unique needs of esports athletes and possibly use the findings to foster a healthy social and emotional culture for these athletes on their campuses.

Theoretical Foundation

This study was divided into layered, conceptual ideas. At the most superficial level, the researcher identified individual athletes' feelings and perceptions. At a deeper level, the researcher identified trends in relationships and interactions that promoted or hindered the success of an esports program within an academic setting in both secondary and post-secondary institutions. At a foundational level, the researcher examined institutional relationships: the relationships between team members, relationships between the esports athletes and the other students and staff, and relationships between the esports athletes and academic organization (i.e., the athletic department). Ultimately,

an academic institution's culture, norms, values, and expectations have guided the interactions between students, staff, and organizations within the institution. Therefore, this study examined those relationships through the lens of *sociological institutionalism theory*.

Sociological institutionalism is a subfield of neo-institutionalism, which is one of the two schools that validate institutional theory (Lowndes, 2010). Those who study sociological institutionalism have focused on the philosophies, social norms, cultural norms, rules, and practices that exist within a larger organization (Wiener, 2006). Essentially, it is these social aspects of formal and informal institutions that will guide much of the conversation found in Chapter V.

Utilizing sociological institutionalism theory, the research process, and the careful analysis of data, the researcher identified areas where academic institutions have fostered cohesive esports teams and possible areas of concern. As stated above, the findings of this study can help academic institutions act internally to ensure that the campus culture surrounding esports is appropriate and equitable.

Statement of the Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to discover the social and emotional trends that bridge secondary and post-secondary esports athletic experience. The social (social capital) and emotional (athletic identity) elements of this study link to the esports athlete's perceptions regarding: (1) interactions with their team members, (2) interactions with other members of the school (students and staff), (3) interactions with pre-existing academic institutions (other athletic programs), (4) how esports athletes

integrate into the existing campus culture, and (5) how joining an esports team has impacted their lives.

This study was divided into two phases. The initial phase identified the social and emotional trends in a West Texas high school esports team. The second phase compared the results of the high school study to Schaeperkoetter et al. (2017) and identified social and emotional trends that bridged the secondary and post-secondary esports athletic experience. The following research questions guided the study:

1. How does secondary esports team membership impact members' athletic identity?

2. How does secondary esports team membership impact social capital?

3. How does the esports-related social and emotional experiences of 'successful' secondary esports athletes compare to those of post-secondary scholarship esports athletes?

Rationale and Significance of the Study

This study extended the research of Schaeperkoetter et al. (2017), which focused on the experiences and perceptions of post-secondary esports athletes. Within the study, several troubling micro-level trends emerged within the findings. For example, the perception existed that esports athletes on scholarship were treated differently compared to other competitive athletic programs (Schaeperkoetter et al., 2017). The students believed the esports team received disproportionate treatment compared to the other school sports (Schaeperkoetter et al., 2017). Additionally, some students expressed the feeling of tension existing between traditional athletes from other programs and esports athletes (Schaeperkoetter et al., 2017), and all these perceptions were affecting the culture of the team and the social and emotional wellbeing of the esports athletes.

This study also took into consideration the idea that at the macro-level, gambling, substance abuse, gaming addiction, and toxic behavior have led to a negative esports culture and to social and emotional unwellness in esports athletes (Abarbanel & Johnson, 2019; Giordano et al., 2020; Kwak et al., 2015; Stivers, 2017). To date it has been unclear what effect these adverse aspects of esports have had on secondary esports athletes, yet it remains imperative to secure their social and emotional wellness. Esports in an academic setting is an emerging field, and initiating a deeper dialogue about trends in the field may mitigate possible exposure to harmful elements surrounding esports while fostering a healthy social and emotional environment for athletes. Following the methodology implemented by Schaeperkoetter et al. (2017) in a secondary setting, the author has sought to identify broader trends that exist in both academic-based esports settings.

Identifying the social and emotional perception trends shared between secondary and post-secondary esports athletes will enable esports academic institutions and individual teams to make informed decisions regarding the possible needs of their student-athletes. With this information, institutions can conduct focused audits to identify potential problems that exist within their current programs. Furthermore, institutions can use this information to reinforce positive trends and create interventions to address negative trends.

Assumptions

Assumptions are elements deemed or understood as true for the purposes of an experiment or study (Creswell, 2018). The following assumptions were made herein:

1. The participants will respond to the questions honestly and candidly.