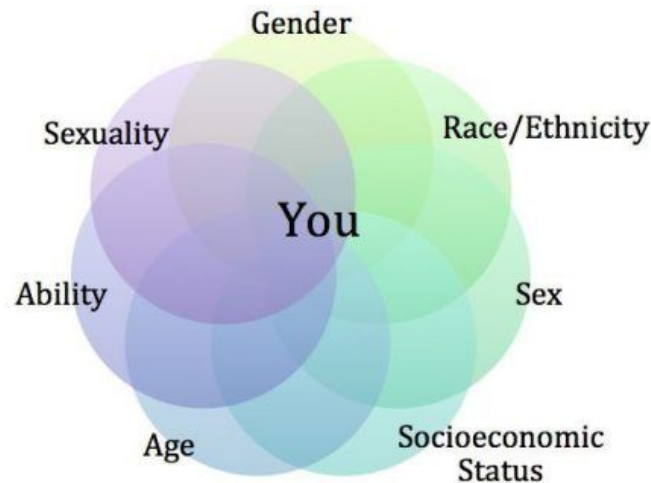


Examining the intersection of race and gender in the eSports industry

Promising technological advancements in both software and hardware blended with the competitive nature and an immense fan base turned out to be the recipe for the next sports empire - eSports (electronic sports). eSports as defined by Juho Hamari et al. "...is a form of sports where the primary aspects of the sport are facilitated by electronic systems; the input of players and teams, as well as the output of the eSports system, are mediated by human-computer interfaces" ¹. Genres swinging from Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) to First Person Shooter (FPS), the traction gained in this competitive scene is unreal, which is also portrayed statistically in the monotonic increasing graph of eSports market revenue from 2012-2018 ². The steep rise in the spectators/viewership count ^{3 4 5} due to the emergence of streaming applications like Twitch and YouTube Gaming is just another indication of how quickly this industry can flourish. With this bloom of eSports taking place rapidly, I argue that it's crucial to examine and problematize this industry with a sociologists' lens.

Looking at gender and race, individually, is like watching only the first half of a movie; it ain't the complete "picture". The interplay and the intersections amongst the various forms of social stratifications ⁶ (class, gender, race, age, religion) redefine the impacts of any one dimension of inequality in relationship with the other dimensions which is termed as 'Intersectionality' by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in 1989 ^{7 8 9}. For example, studying the inequalities in gender alone might not tell us whether the burden of this inequality is carried out equally by different caste or racial groups.



[Picture credits: [Michigan State University](#)]

One's position in this intersection of circles not only decides his/her accessibility to technology but also decides how he/she uses it. As discussed in the class, this is where the initial assumption of Meritocracy - equal opportunity - fails, if we ignore the intersectionality between these social categories. Also, another example where the concept of 'Intersectionality' and the 'Matrix of Domination' ¹⁰ play out vividly is in the movie, 'Green Book' ¹¹, which was watched in the class.

The world of eSports is popularly believed to be dominated by white, heterosexual males and hence marginalization of women, in particular women of colour, is practised heavily. My experience in the eSports world of Counter-Strike: Global Offensive (CS:GO) repeats the same story; I am yet to encounter a woman of colour in the professional CS:GO scene! There are attempts by franchises and organizations such as Unity ¹² and TED ¹³ to discuss the roles and positions of women in the video game industry, however, these discussions consistently and systemically leave women of colour out of the conversations, as pointed out by Carrie Stallings et al ¹⁴. Even the stereotypical way professional gamers are advertised - a white man in front of a digital screen with soda and chips on the table - cause a deficiency of role models for women of colour. The right question to ask, then, is: "Do women of colour even aspire to become a professional gamer?"

Misogynoir ¹⁵ performed behind the scenes of the gaming industry (game developers) ^{16 17}, I argue, makes up the cause for how women of colour are portrayed in such video games. An extensive study by Yi Mou et al. ¹⁸ and B. Mitchell Peck et al. ¹⁹ suggests that women are primarily characterized as sex objects (based upon their physical appearance) or as victims (“damsel in distress”) and very few female characters make the cut for being the protagonists. They also found out that minority ethnic groups, such as Black and Hispanic, appear less frequently in video games ²⁰.

Another aspect to look for while viewing through the lens of intersectionality in the eSports domain is online racial and sexual harassment on streaming applications like Twitch. Intersectionality, in this case, helps us to answer questions like: “Are both coloured male and female harassed online? Do they both suffer from inequality in such digital spaces?”, “How is the burden of harassment shared amongst women of different races?”, etc. Lack of such a study, with the lens of intersectionality, hindered me to analyze and answer the aforementioned questions, however, there are various studies ²¹ carried out taking in account one specific dimension amongst the inter-connected social categories.

Although usually seen as a leisure activity, I feel examining the gaming subculture is critical as it is a direct reflection of our society with amplified racial and sexist remarks which are no more subtle and covert all because of the framework of virtuality provided. It’s in-your-face racism/sexism, as Dr Kishonna Gray calls it ²².

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