Gendering Assemblages in eSports Online Streaming: An Actor-Network Analysis of Online Media Technologies and Gender Practices

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Abstract

Esports has become one of the most rapidly growing facets of the sports industry (Cunningham et al., 2018; Funk et al., 2018; Heere, 2018). Esports online streaming, within this booming industry, has proven particularly profitable. According to Newzoo (2018), approximately 380 million people watched esports online in 2018 and the market is estimated to grow to $1.65 billion by 2021. The burgeoning commercial feature of esports online streaming, however, has concurrently grown in association with concerns about social isolation, sexism, and misogyny (Jonasson, 2010). Scholars have argued that online gaming, as a form of spectator sport, creates a platform through which gendered conversations and objectification occur (Nakandala et al., 2017). For female esports streamers, common stereotypes include ‘they should be young, beautiful, always wearing make-up’ and their streaming room usually engenders ‘topics in relation to the minutiae of their body’ (D’Anastasio, 2018). In addition, female streamers are pejoratively considered to lack gaming prowess and mastery and remain underrepresented in a male dominated hostile esports broadcasting environment (Uszkoreit, 2018).

Whist existing literature focuses on how gender norms play a considerable role in constructing a structure and legitimacy of identities of female esports players and streamers, we investigate how the interactive features in and through online media platforms (e.g. Twitch)—whereby publishers, infrastructure platforms suppliers (e.g., PC, consoles, servers), sponsors, fans, and streamers interact in the production of an integrated system of digital production and consumption—support and inculcate heteronormative stereotypes (Chikish, 2019; Nakandala et al., 2017). To do so, we employ actor-network-theory (ANT), a widely used theoretical and methodological approach in various social science and management fields (see Alcadipani & Hassard, 2010; Latour, 1996). ANT scholars posit that society and organization consists of the assembling and (de)stabilizing of diverse human and non-human entities within diffuse socio-material systems (Alcadipani & Hassard, 2010). It then provides a productive way to trace how social practices are articulated through associations/networks between agents, texts, technologies, and devices (Law, 1999). In the esports streaming context, gendered practices and gender identities are thus constituted within a unique confederation of videos, streamers/players and audiences, teams, sponsors and advertisers, messages and channels, emoticons, and community gifting.

To facilitate the analysis, we conduct cross-cultural case studies of two female esports streamers—Kaceytron on Twitch (a U.S. streaming platform) and Rita on Huya (a popular Chinese streaming platform). We collect and analyze dominant textual (messages and comments) and visual accounts of the two cases taking shape on the platforms—which elucidates how entangled textual and visual expressions involve technological features and user culture. Our ANT-inspired case studies unveil the cultural and technical assemblages involved in most episodes of misrepresentation and sexism in online esports streaming. Significant implications of this study include: 1) online media technologies create new challenges for reconfiguring gender problems in competition and consuming activities; 2) considering professional team owners and sponsors invested and involved in esports, the gender issue warrants sport management practitioners and scholars’ attention and actions (e.g. incorporation of Title IX) towards building an equal and diverse environment for long-term sustainable development.