Female Experiences in Esport: An Ethnographic Approach

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Esports’ popularity has significantly increased, bringing attention and comparison to traditional sport and a call for research from the sport management field (Funk, Pizzo, & Baker, 2018). As esports has grown, female participation has increased (Gainsbury et al., 2017), but the environment remains predominantly male. Tournaments are open to everyone, yet women rarely participate. It is not a lack of interest, as recent reports have indicated growth for female participation (35%) and viewership (over 30%; Darvin, et al., 2020). Women represent approximately 66% of casual gamers and roughly 39% of game purchasers (Dormehl, 2018). Women’s representation of estimated participants in the following esports environments: Overwatch (26%), CS: GO (24%), and DOTA 2 (20%; Interpret, n.d.).

The limited female representation within esports suggests a need to understand their experiences (Ruvalcaba, et al., 2018). It is important to examine factors contributing to the lack of females within esports, as previously suggested, esports environments may be inclined to cases of hostility and toxicity towards female members (Darvin, et al., 2020). Studies have examined roles women take on in esports communities (Taylor et al., 2009); professional players’ attitudes toward women, gender identity, and hypermasculine culture (Ruvalcaba, et al., 2018; Witkowski, 2013; Zolides, 2015). Although these studies suggest that gender inequality is a facet of esports (Kim, 2017), there is a gap in the literature examining the types of toxicity or harassment that female esports participants experience.

Research suggests men’s control in the facilitation and delivery of esports contributes to women’s exclusion (Grindstaff & West, 2011). Traditional sport management research has reported the consequential factors of male dominance and hegemony, in decreasing female representation (Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013). An ecosystem assisting and reinforcing hegemonic masculinity increases the likelihood of exposure and situations that breed toxicity and discrimination regarding minority and less influential groups (Darvin et al., 2020), in the current study, female participants. This study utilized hegemonic masculinity as a theoretical framework to examine participants’ experiences.

Through an ethnographic methodology, this exploratory study collected and analyzed 18 participants’ gaming experiences over a four-week period. Thematic analysis revealed eleven experiences (Banter, Flirting, Friend Requests, Instructional, Playful, Positive Sporting Behavior, Toxic, Rude, Sexist, Threatening Behavior, and Sexual Harassment) with Sexist and Toxic behavior reported most often. Most occurrences were reported by elite players, playing MMORPG’s, on Friday’s during PM hours.

Results support previous studies reporting negative consequences of hegemonic masculinity, lending support to hegemonic masculinity as a theoretical framework examining sport experiences (Darvin et al., 2020; Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013), hypermasculine culture (Ruvalcaba, et al., 2018; Witkowski, 2013; Zolides, 2015), and esports participants’ experiences of discrimination and hostility in playing environments (Darvin, et al., 2020; Ruvalcaba et al., 2018). Results from the current study contribute to the literature by responding to previous research suggesting esports would benefit from an understanding of how female participants experience various settings so that esports may create inclusive environments (Darvin et al., 2020). Noteworthy, it is not just the professional gamers that experience toxicity, harassment, or a hypermasculine culture, but also casual gamers.