

# **The Fandom Frontier: Understanding the Limitless(?) Potential of Collegiate Esports Fans**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Collegiate esports has expanded rapidly in the United States, with over 200 programs founded countrywide since 2014 (Bauer-Wolf 2019). Students increasingly participate in collegiate esports as players, broadcasters, and support staff, while university faculty and staff take on administrative and organizational roles. With this seemingly limitless expansion, research focused on collegiate esports has grown accordingly (e.g., Hoffman, Pauketat, and Varzeas 2022), addressing an array of questions regarding student esports athletes' campus role (Schaeperkoetter et al. 2017), whether esports qualify as intercollegiate sport (Jenny et al. 2017; Walton, Lower-Hoppe, and Horger 2020), and how programs engage student labor (Harris et al. 2022). Research has even discussed how to build programs effectively (Pizzo, Jones, and Funk 2019), and how to address concerns about diversity, inclusion, and Title IX, the U.S. law mandating gender equity in educational institutions (N. Taylor and Stout 2020; AnyKey 2019).

Still understudied, however, is fans' role in the collegiate esports environment. This cohort is key to understanding the limits of competitive gameplay on campuses, as they can legitimize programs to university administrations. Studies of professional esports recognize fans' role in tournament attendance and spectatorship, and in supporting esports players, teams, and brands (Pizzo et al. 2018; T. L. Taylor 2012), but less research focuses on their collegiate-level counterparts. This study thus draws on survey and in-depth interview data to ask:

- How do players, program directors, and support staff perceive the role of fans in collegiate esports?
- What are the challenges or limits that collegiate esports programs face in developing a robust fan base?
- How do self-identified esports fans view colleges with esports programs?

### **METHODS**

We conducted thirty-one in-depth interviews with collegiate esports players, program directors, and administrators, as well as with students who are associated with esports through media outlets, esports venues, or initiatives like graphic design. Part of a larger project, this specific work explores how interviewees perceive collegiate esports fans. Interviews ranged from 60-120 minutes, and participants came from nine different programs. Interviews were conducted online, transcribed and cleaned for clarity, then analyzed in the qualitative software Dedoose. One member of the research team coded

each interview using a grounded theory approach (i.e., generating themes from patterns in the data; Glaser and Strauss 1967).

The survey questioned 520 North American young adults (254 Female), 18-34 years old, who were interested in or attending college. We asked participants about their perceptions of institutions that host collegiate esports programs, using a 3-item questionnaire (adapted from Jones and Kim 2011) to measure identification with host institutions. We also asked about participants' esports consumption behavior, social media engagement, play hours, gaming expertise, gamer identity, and streaming habits (adapted from Gandolfi 2016), as well as their points of attachment to and preferences regarding specific sports, esports, and collegiate sports teams (adapted from Shapiro, Ridinger, and Trail 2013). This work provides a unique dataset comparing collegiate sports and esports fanbases.

## PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Players, student workers, and administrators felt that fans serve important roles within collegiate esports, including: promoting the university brand, legitimizing esports programs, supporting players, and helping build the overall esports industry. One administrator highlighted several of these outcomes simultaneously; describing live-streaming their teams' tournaments, they said, "The students love it when they can report that X number of people watch the tournament. [...] Or we can get some publicity in some other kind, either on the radio or publication that says, you know, so many people watch the [college esports] team beat somebody else, and you can watch a replay of the game here. So, the students love it. It, it builds our [university] name a little bit, [...] and it's going to become increasingly more important."

Participants also drew connections between collegiate esports fans and ball-and-stick sports fans, suggesting that the former could help redefine fan/athlete relationships. Several interviewees argued that esports athletes connected more with their fans than traditional athletes; "[College basketball] fans don't get to go play pickup game with the players. Well, that's totally different here. Everybody plays with everybody." Existing college affiliations also benefited esports in turn. As one esports industry worker framed it, "[collegiate esports] consumers are already organized. They're already members of a college, and they already have, [...] consumer loyalty towards their college." This sharply diverges from professional esports, which has struggled to build geographic affiliations, and provides a potential lesson in how the industry could better leverage existing fanbases.

However, interviewees recognized that esports fans were limited in number, understudied, and underutilized—what one director called a font of "unmet potential." Participants also saw game culture's historical insularity and toxicity as a potential limit to fan engagement, expressing concern about how new, non-endemic fans might react to the trash-talk and negativity common to esports spaces. This suggests programs need to develop better engagement strategies moving forward.

Comparing the perceived role of esports fans to their self-expressed data, results from multiple regression analysis of the survey dataset indicate a potential antecedent role of collegiate esports programs in shaping university brand perceptions and attracting both sports and esports fans. The model reported a correlation of  $R = .882$  and  $R\text{-square} = .779$  with 95% confidence interval  $[0.74645, 0.81155]$ ,  $F(14,505) = 126.832$ . Identifying as an esports and/or sports fan significantly affected perceptions about host universities. Esports fandom was substantially more influential than sports fandom, explaining about 31.3% of unique variance in the overall regression. Initial survey data regarding fans' *actual* impact on elements like university brand thus seems to align

with interviewees' *perceptions* of fans' role. We will present further connections and divergences at the conference following additional analysis.

This multi-method study provides an initial foray into understanding how competitive gaming relies on fans to move beyond the limits of individual entertainment to a sociocultural institution. Collegiate esports programs that cultivate fan communities will likely see several benefits, including greater social capital for students and fans, support for esports players, and university brand power. However, these initiatives will require better understanding of fans and further strategies for effective community management and moderation.

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