

# Chapter 13

## Esports Fandom and the Collegiate Student– Athlete Experience: Active Audiences and Spectatorship

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### ABSTRACT

*eSports audiences have gratifications that must be met. Online gaming provides access to gamers to create community and gain virtual reality skills within the online world. Through information seeking and virtual gratifications, gamers have a need to establish relationships and learn new skills in their game of choice. The event of competitive gaming has become so popular that it is not uncommon for college students to create an organization on campus around eSports. eSports has been studied in the disciplines of audiences, college athletics, and online learning communities; however, few have examined the importance of eSports spectatorship and the student-athlete experience. Using the extension of Hall's Encoding and Decoding model of Active Audience Theory, this research will identify the effects of audiences and spectatorship within the collegiate eSports fandom experience.*

### INTRODUCTION

ESports audiences have gratifications that must be met. Online gaming provides access to gamers to create community and gain virtual reality skills within the online world. Through information seeking and virtual gratifications, gamers have a need to establish relationships and learn new skills in their game of choice. The event of competitive gaming has become so popular that it is not uncommon for college students to create an organization on campus around eSports (Doody, 2018). ESports has been

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studied in the disciplines of audiences (Edge, 2013; Nardi, 2008; Seta & Seta, 1995; Sunar & Limperos, 2013; Taylor, 2016), college athletics (NCAA; Doody, 2018), and online learning communities (Brown, 2002; Haycock & Kemp, 2008); however, few have examined the importance of eSports spectatorship and the student-athlete experience. Using the extension of Hall's (1980) Encoding and Decoding model of Active Audience Theory, this research will identify the effects of audiences and spectatorship within the collegiate eSports fandom experience.

## **BACKGROUND**

Traditionally, sports are a type of physical activity that includes cooperative and collaborative efforts between individuals engaging in a game, or zero-sum competitive challenge. Now, a new type of less physical sport has started to become increasingly popular: electronic sports or eSports, defined as competitive video gaming (Burroughs & Roma, 2015). Although many have debated whether competitive video gaming is a real sport, its popularity has proven to make more money (CNBC, 2019), maintain active spectatorship (Burroughs & Rama, 2015; Edge, 2013; Payne et al, 2017) and develop a collaborative community within the eSports franchise (Caroline, 2011; Nardi, 2008). Esports players, or gamers, have established their status, skill, and community through online gaming platforms and the help of gamer-spectators, the fans. Even amateur players have become gamer celebrities. ESports has the innate experience for all users to be involved in some way, whether watching passively or actively participating within the platform. In fact, Shaw (2015) asserted that eSports can't exist without its fandom. Online gaming "simply cannot function without a measure of activity and involvement beyond that which is required in other media" (2015, par. 6). Through the collaborative efforts of gamers and their fans, eSports supplies the means of gratification, community building, and information seeking when actively involved in the gaming process.

## **ESPORTS SPECTATORS AND FANDOM**

### **Audiences, Users, Spectators**

Many gamers have developed a fanbase and an audience through a gamer-specific platform called Twitch.tv. Twitch.tv is a live video streaming platform, primarily focusing on eSports, which includes all communities to socialize and participate (Payne et al., 2017). Twitch.tv is accessible and free for users whose experiences range from amateurs to experts. Even though Twitch.tv has had a primary focus on game streaming (Shultz, 2017), the platform has opened its doors to more non-gaming subjects, such as, university instruction (Wilmington, 2012), exercise training (McColl, 2016), and artistic content (Wang et al., 2018). The wide range of content, specifically with online gaming, establishes team cooperation and gamer relationships that encourage fans to interact through multimedia messages. For example, Twitch.tv users not only use the platform for gaming, users choose the "Makers and Crafters" or "Food and Drink" categories switching up their usually content (Khalid, 2019, par. 17). In fact, Khalid (2019) has found that regardless of the users preferred content, the "Just Chatting" feature is the primary activity on Twitch.tv (par. 18). So, whether users prefer watching passively or actively communicating through the platform, the fans feel a para-social connection with those through an online system.

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