The Virtual Iron Cage: Institutional Theory and Collegiate eSport

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Introduction
U.S. colleges and universities are beginning to provide support for eSport teams. The number of collegiate eSport programs has grown from 0 to 40 since 2014, and additional universities are expected to start recruiting and granting scholarships over the next several years (TNL, 2017). Compared to the professional sport context, collegiate sport presents distinct opportunities and challenges for eSport management (Jenny et al., 2016). Integrating eSport programs can lead to increased student recruitment and engagement (Keiper et al., 2017), yet many athletics departments are unfamiliar with eSport and thus administrators struggle with a variety of problems, such as the classification of eSport players as student-athletes, athletic compliance, and a lack of formal governance structures to guide program development (Funk, et al., 2018). While athletics departments seem like a logical fit to house eSport programs from a consumer perspective (Pizzo et al., in press), organizationally over half of collegiate eSport programs are currently housed by student affairs or academic departments (Smith, 2017). The prevalence of collegiate eSport continues to grow and permeate traditional fields of collegiate sport management, reconciling these issues is critical for athletic administrators. The purpose of this study is to analyze the strategic rationale for integrating eSport within athletic departments, and the opportunities and challenges associated with this process.

Theoretical Background
Institutional theory is utilized to examine the actions and processes by which athletic departments acquire social acceptance and endorsement for eSport from their larger external environment (Oliver, 1992). Institutional theory is primarily concerned with how organizations interact with the external environment. Organizations are influenced by the totality of relevant actors, and exist within larger organization fields, looking to the same environment for the best course of action (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Organizations adopt similar strategies for adjusting to environmental influences, resulting in them appearing more similar over time (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). This process is captured in the concept of institutional isomorphism, which is induced through three mechanisms: coercive, mimetic, and normative pressure.

Sport management research emphasizes the utility of institutional theory, particularly in the context of U.S. collegiate athletics (e.g., Washington & Ventresca, 2008). There are a large number of stakeholders who exert pressure of the organizational field of collegiate athletics (Washington & Ventresca, 2008), and due to collegiate athletics’ unique place in U.S. society they are influenced significantly by coercive, mimetic, and normative pressures (Cunningham & Ashley, 2001). Coercive isomorphic change involves pressures from university departments and organizations outside of athletics but upon which they are dependent. Normative pressures are influences that lead the athletics departments to conform to cultural expectations. Mimetic pressure refers to the tendency of the athletics departments to imitate another organization's structure because of the belief that this structure is beneficial. Furthermore, in their review of institutional theory in sport management, Washington & Patterson (2011) emphasize the need for sport management research to examine the creation of new sport-related activities and their influence on existing sport institutions. eSport represents an intriguing context for this type of scholarship, as the field currently sits on the tipping point of widespread change.

Existing conceptual literature suggests that the success of collegiate eSport hinges on the synergies with traditional collegiate sport management. Understanding these opportunities and challenges is essential to informing athletics administrators on the best course of action for their particular school. This study addresses these gaps in the literature by exploring the perspectives of administrators who have integrated eSport through the lens of institutional theory, both in athletic and student affairs/academic departments. Two overarching research questions guide our analysis:
1. How do the pressures of institutional isomorphism influence athletics departments’ decisions to integrate eSport,
and how does this differ from student affairs/academic departments?

2. What are the opportunities and challenges associated with integrating eSport in athletics departments vs. student affairs/academic departments?

Method - Procedure, Sample, & Data Analysis

This study adopted an exploratory approach (Silverman, 2006) using semi-structured interviews with key university personnel. A list of 50 scholarship granting institutions in the US with eSport programs was compiled, and an email invitation was sent to university personnel to participate in this research. A total of 17 university administrators participated in the research study including directors from athletics (n = 7), student life (n = 6), and academic departments (n = 2), as well as directors from student run eSport clubs (n = 2). Key components of institutional theory were used to develop the interview guide. Semi-structured interviews were conducted through Skype and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and sought to understand the isomorphic pressures, strengths/opportunities, and challenges for integrating an eSport program in athletics relative to student affairs/academic departments. The lead author analyzed and thematically coded the interview data using Dedoose, a cloud-based qualitative analysis program. Data analysis followed the seven step outlined by Creswell (2013).

Findings, Discussion, & Implications

Findings contribute to the growing debate surrounding athletic departments’ involvement with eSport, and provide empirically-based recommendations for governing eSport in the highly regulated and scrutinized sport context of U.S. colleges and universities. Findings identify that athletic departments are subject to isomorphic pressures when integrating eSport, particularly in relation to student affairs/academic departments. Salient coercive pressures on athletics departments included their need to justify the classification of eSport players as athletes. Normative pressures included pressure on athletics departments pressures to address stereotypes surrounding eSport players and competitive gaming. Mimetic pressures included athletic departments modeling their eSport programs on existing sports. Findings related to the second research question found that the integration of eSport within athletics allowed eSport programs to leverage managerial synergies between the two, while programs in student affairs/life relied on athletic departments to help with challenges previously addressed by athletic departments (e.g., recruiting). Findings also identified that both athletics departments and student affairs/academic departments face very similar challenges, yet the integration of eSport within athletics is a more difficult path, subject to heightened scrutiny. The findings are consistent with existing literature that emphasize the pressures on U.S. college athletics departments (Washington & Ventresca, 2004, 2008) as well as literature on the challenges confronting collegiate eSport (e.g., Funk et al., 2018; Keiper et al., 2017; Jenny et al., 2016). Overall, the findings contrast with research that suggests athletics may be the natural home for eSport, but are more accurately the best fit for eSport.

Future Research

Future research should explore the growing dynamic between professional sport and eSport organizations (e.g., the 76ers and Team Dignitas) to understand how and why sport organizations are incorporating eSport into their service portfolio. Furthermore, eSport is gaining increasing recognition as sport, and future research should consider the potential legitimizing effects of sport organizations on eSport.