Framing Transgender Gaming: Reddit Users’ Perspectives on Transgender Participation in E-sports

Ally Quinney, Florida State University
Hanhan Xue, Florida State University
Joshua Newman (Advisor), Florida State University

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The participation of transgender people in e-sports tournaments has emerged as a new controversial issue on social media platforms. For example, in May 2017, a group of gamers claiming to identify as transgender were banned from a women’s-only e-sports tournament for failing to provide government identification that would prove that they were women. Reports later revealed that the group was a group of men who had posed as transgender gamers as a joke (Sainty, 2017). This issue elicited controversial discussion as to transgender players’ rights to play on various social media platforms such as Reddit. As a result, the tournament organizer, ESL, announced that they will make internal policies more inclusive for all women, regardless of their sex assigned at birth (Sainty, 2017). This case presents an interesting example that shows how the media play an important role in framing and influencing issues and messages around transgender rights in e-sports communities. In this study, we thus seek to examine the ways through which the media, in particular the social media, articulate transgender participation in e-sports tournaments as well as an e-sports community’s response towards transgender e-gaming.

Literature Review

Transgender identity and e-sports have attracted increased attention from cultural study scholars. Some research has indicated that marginalized groups have encountered strong hostility and harassment in e-sports (Cote, 2017; Fox & Tang, 2017). Indeed, Fox and Tang (2017) argue that sexist comments, unwelcomed sexual advances and threats, as well as rape jokes characterize gender-based harassment in e-sports. Moreover, people who challenge these gaming social norms are often the targets of harassment and discrimination (Fox & Tang, 2017).

However, research also shows the potential therapeutic benefits of e-sports, particularly for transgender players (Griffiths et al., 2016). For example, some transgender people play e-sports as a strategy to deal with issues concerning gender identity, such as anxiety, depression, and dysphoria, and by providing an escape from daily stresses (Griffiths et al., 2016). Moreover, gender swapping in e-sports—the practice of choosing and playing with an avatar of another gender—can give some transgender people the opportunity to explore their gender identity (Arcelus et al., 2017; Griffiths et al., 2016).

More interestingly, some scholars have pointed out that transphobia is prominent in e-sports environments. It is noted that many popular games include transgender content—such as transgender characters, actions, artifacts, and traits—that tends to implicitly negatively characterize the ways in which videogames represent transgender people (Shaw & Friesem, 2016). The researchers argued that game developers choose to represent this content through “casual transphobia,” rather than “casual inclusivity” (Shaw & Friesem, 2016, p. 3885). More specifically, the dominance of casual transphobia in e-sports normalizes and reinforces harmful cultural norms in the online gaming community. Furthermore, the infiltration of transphobia into everyday practices shows how real world politics permeate even the most mundane aspects of transgender existence—a process that works to maintain the status quo. It has been argued that the media can provide a platform to influence people’s minds through disseminating news, messages, and information about specific issues (Entman, 1993). Framing has often been employed by news organizations to define and construct a social or political issue (Nelson, Clawson, & Oxley, 1997). Typically, news organizations selectively declare the underlying causes and possible results of the issue or event and then make moral judgments, as well as provide potential treatment for the issue (Entman, 1993). In this study, we extend that line of inquiry by looking at how social media, in particular the online gaming community discussion forum, has framed transgender politics in relation to e-sports and the extent to which transphobia has been a part of that discourse.

Methods

To facilitate the framing analysis, we collect all posts related to transgender identity and e-sports published on Reddit.
(an open-source platform in which people create and share their own community of interest; it has over 234 million users and unlike social media networks, such as Facebook, Reddit account names are pseudonyms, which allows for more anonymity, honesty, and, playfulness) (Massanari, 2017). The timeframe spans from May 2010 until May 2017. The data will then be analyzed through an ongoing, three step process. First, we examine the tone and position of each Reddit post to identify whether the post is pro-transgender gaming, anti-transgender gaming, or neutral. Second, we conduct an inductive coding to identify themes vis-à-vis transgender and e-sports that emerged from the Reddit posts—1) pro-transgender posts as off-topic or uninteresting; 2) trivialization of transgender concerns; 3) rationalization and normalization of transphobia. Third, we then develop frame packages by including frame positions, frame content, metaphors, roots, moral judgment, and remedies (Gamson & Lasch, 1983).

Results and Discussion
As the study is still working in progress, results are not discussed here. However, there are some significant implications the study should provide. First, we will provide an important account in which how the social media construct a mediated e-sports community and environment where transgender identity is constantly being discursively negotiated. Moreover, since greater support for advocacy can improve gaming culture (Cote, 2017; Fox & Tang, 2016), by examining the discourse around transgender identity and e-sports, the researchers of the current study seek to provide practical implications regarding diversity and inclusion in the e-sports industry and culture. Second, although whether e-sports are sports is still debatable, some leading sport management scholars have already shed light on significant connection and interaction between traditional sports and e-sports in terms of fans community, media technology, athletic performance, and team management (see Funk, Pizzo, & Baker, 2017; Hallmann & Giel, 2017; Heere, 2017). In this sense, the analysis of transgender politics and e-sports can contribute to creating new dynamics in relation to existing sport-related policies, rules, structures, relationships, and practices about transgender identity. Third, the study of transgender identity in the context of e-sports can provide a comparative account with which traditional sport management scholars who study transgender people may be able to explore new research opportunities and ways as to theorizing the phenomenon of transgender athletes (see Cunningham, 2015; Gill, 2006; Lee et al., 2014; Melton & Cunningham, 2014).