E-Sports: Motivations and Life Goals

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Introduction

E-sports is traditionally defined as "an area of sport activities in which people develop and train mental or physical abilities in the use of information and communication technologies" (Wagner, 2006, p. 3). Similar to how many sports require teamwork and commitment, e-sports players primarily focus their attention on a single game in which they practice frequently with other members in their game clans, referring to organised groups of players who team up for online or LAN (Local Area Network) competitions (Griffiths et al., 2003). This is in contrast to casual players who are more likely to diversify their playtime over multiple games and are less likely to perceive joining teams as necessary (Martončik, 2015). This paper argues that people engage in e-sports primarily for the fulfilment of certain life goals, which many players deem to be unachievable in the physical aspects of their lives. This is especially apparent in the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, where involuntary social isolation and the inhibition of physical activities have wrought negative psychological effects (Pietrabissa & Simpson, 2020). We chose to establish the construct of life goals using the GOALS framework (Pöhlmann & Brunstein, 1997), which measures six facets of life goals, two of which this paper would mainly focus on: *affiliation* and *diversion*.

Motivation and Life Goals

Prior research by Bányai and colleagues (2018) found that players who engage in e-sports and LAN competitions are primarily driven by the need for *sociability*, defined as "the tendency and accompanying skills to seek out companionship, engage in interpersonal relations, and participate in social activities." (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2014). Martončik (2015) found that players desire the multiplayer nature of e-sports video games and the in-game social interactions more than gameplay alone. The increased interest in e-sports can similarly be

attributed to the social nature of video games (Bányai et al., 2018). Specifically, deepening one's sociability and interpersonal relations online also help one to fulfill the life goals of affiliation and diversion, as shown by how e-sports players scored significantly higher in these life goal categories than casual players (Martončik, 2015).

Affiliation and Diversion

The need for sociability is directly linked to the quest for affiliation and diversion. Affiliation refers to the quantity and quality of interactions between an individual and others (Bányai et al., 2018; Hofer & Chasiotis, 2003). Gaming communities for competitive games such as *CS: GO* are specifically labelled as *affinity spaces* because of the ample opportunities for players to interact and bond over their common interests in e-sports, gaming aspirations, and other game-related tasks, thus reinforcing one's affiliation and sense of belonging in the aforementioned communities (Gee, 2005; Nielsen & Hanghøj, 2019). Affiliation can also be realised in instances where one engages in e-sports alongside friends in the same team through the desire for in-group bonding or peer pressure (Bányai et al., 2018). Games with competitive factors enable players to experience greater sociability through fostering a stronger desire amongst players to outperform their opponents, encouraging strategic team coordination , thus promoting communication which facilitates social interactions amongst team members (Bányai et al., 2018).

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has stunted the growth of different entertainment sectors, but e-sport participation remains unperturbed for the most part (López-Cabarcos et al., 2020). In fact, apart from the cancellation of major LAN events in some countries (Cranmer et al., 2020),

e-sports has sustained a consistent growth despite physical social distancing measures (López-Cabarcos et al., 2020). This is supported by recent findings depicting a 75% increase in video game usage in many countries including the US since the beginning of the pandemic, alongside a sharp rise in e-sports viewership: Twitch, a major e-sports streaming platform, experienced an 83% spike in hours streamed (Verdoodt et al., 2021). For non-gamers who recently turned their attention towards video games and e-sports during COVID-19, their sudden interest can be attributed to attempts at satisfying the life goal of diversion, which refers to one's need to divert oneself from routine tasks and seek novel experiences (Martončik, 2015). As the conduct of physical activities (such as travelling) are highly discouraged or even interdicted in many countries as part of COVID-19 safety measures, many homebound people may instead turn to exploring virtual multiplayer worlds in e-sports, such as those in MMORPGs, to simulate the novel experience of travelling to new countries and meeting new people (Martončik, 2015). While the *displacement hypothesis* (Williams et al., 2008) suggests that over-involvement in technology-intensive activities (i.e electronic sports) can be intrinsically detrimental, causing players to "displace alternate activities" such as meaningful social interactions which leads to increased social isolation and negative well-being, these same technologies also catalyze the formation of strong social networks. VOIP (voice over internet protocol) technologies are an integral part of e-sports, either offered by third party softwares (e.g Teamspeak, Discord), or incorporated directly within games (e.g Valorant, Dota 2). These services enable players to communicate effectively while serving as instruments for the formation of social connections in virtual environments.

Professional e-sports gamers also switch from one game to another during COVID-19 due to the need for unique gaming experiences. Prominent CS:GO players such as Hiko, ScreaM and N0tail

have migrated to Valorant due to its potential for content creation, as well as the "more immersive gaming experience" that it offers (Krishnaswamy, 2021, p.1). Despite both being games of the first-person-shooter genre (FPS) with similar in-game economies and gunplay, Valorant distinguishes itself from CS:GO by providing its "agents" with unique sets of abilities and specific roles (Radhakrishnan, 2021). The novel gameplay experience that Valorant offers is just one amongst the plethora of evidence of the fluid nature of e-sports: the diversity and generativity of video games renders it difficult for players to feel dissatisfied, given that there are always options to divert to.

Ambition and Escapism

This paper focuses primarily on sociability in achieving the goals of affiliation and diversion, and prior research has found that it is the greatest motivator for e-sports participation. Other possible motivators for participation include ambition and escapism. Ambition can spur players to achieve better performances in their games, in some cases even making money or a career out of gaming (Bányai et al., 2020), which contributes to the attainment of other life goals such as achievement and power. Escapism can be another reason why people pursue e-sports, functioning as an avenue to relieve stress and a respite from their daily life and work (Sherry & Lucas, 2003; Weiss & Schiele, 2013). However, it should be noted that unbridled escapism is highly correlated with problematic behaviors like excessive online gaming (Kardefelt-Winther, 2014), as per the *displacement hypothesis*. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th edition; American Psychiatric Association, 2013) has even listed addiction to internet gaming as a symptom of select mental disorders, and may potentially be coined as a unique mental disorder on its own, although this is pending further research.

Conclusion

A more in-depth review of the GOALS framework would help to better elucidate the role that competitive video gaming plays in the lives of e-sports professionals. Many pathways to fulfilling affiliation and diversion needs are heavily hindered by the pandemic, and while the desire for sociability may be satisfied through engaging in e-sports, such activities are unable to entirely displace all social interactions and entirely fulfill our needs for novel experiences. We should keep in mind that e-sports do not necessarily comprise solely video games: e-sports broadly refers to any shared digital space for people to interact and conduct joint activities, similar to playing physical sports or spectating matches in the flesh. Since the present paper analyses the connection between life goals and e-sports in general, future research could study the specific aspects of different game genres in cultivating affiliation and diversion.

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