Taking Care of Toxicity: Challenges and Strategies for Inclusion in U.S. Collegiate Esports Programs

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Collegiate esports programs are rapidly expanding across the United States, offering a meaningful location in which to study diversity, equity, and inclusion. Because educational institutions must legally provide equal opportunities for all students, collegiate esports programs may need to avoid gaming culture’s longstanding tendency toward toxic behavior and language. At the same time, it is unclear whether or how effectively collegiate programs currently promote diversity, equity, and inclusion, necessitating further exploration. Drawing on 31 in-depth interviews with collegiate esports players, program directors, tournament organizers, and members of related student support organizations, this research identifies four challenges that collegiate esports programs currently face when trying to prevent toxicity and encourage broader cultures of care and inclusion: (a) ambiguous definitions of “toxicity,” (b) its normalization, (c) unclear reporting/response mechanisms for those facing harassment, and (d) the collegiate esports community’s insularity. We discuss each of these themes and their impacts individually, then provide initial recommendations for esports programs hoping to better care for their students.

Keywords: diversity, equity, identity, in-depth interviews, qualitative methods

As esports, or structured competitive video game play, continues to make significant inroads into college campuses, it is important for programs and universities to consider how this expansion is occurring; as collegiate programs formalize, the policies and practices developed now will set the stage for the future. Colleges must consider which norms from gaming, live streaming, and professional esports cultures they want to work into their programs and where they would like to intervene in or change existing expectations. For instance, colleges and universities must consider how to work diversity, equity, and inclusion into their programs as much of broader game culture is structured in exclusionary ways. This paper specifically focuses on the question of toxicity—which we define as excessive harassment, “trash talking,” or identity-based negativity—to explore how players interpret toxic behavior, how it might be affecting the growth of collegiate esports, and how programs could manage this challenge.

Toxicity has long been a part of video game culture and is often directed at players who do not meet the stereotypical expectations of game audiences (i.e., who are not young, straight, White, cisgender, male, and able bodied) and who are, therefore, seen as “outsiders” to game culture (e.g., Consalvo, 2012; Gray, 2012, 2014; Nakamura, 2012; Ortiz, 2019a; Salter & Blodgett, 2012). Toxic behaviors restrict who has access to game spaces and communities, often dividing out women or nonbinary players, LGBT+ players, and players of color. As esports has grown out of gaming culture, issues of toxicity and exclusion also resonate throughout competitive gaming spaces (Castello, 2018; Desatoff, 2019; Kou, 2020; Smith, 2019; Türkay et al., 2020). Many scholars and industry members have, thus, called for esports and gaming culture to promote more positive forms of engagement (e.g., Gray & Leonard, 2018). This would help increase different players’ access to these spaces and their associated opportunities.

Collegiate esports presents a potential location from which to intervene in toxicity, cultivate communities of care, and promote diverse voices and greater social justice. AnyKey, a nonprofit advocacy group researching and promoting inclusion efforts in gaming, esports, and live streaming, has written optimistically about the role that colleges could play in diversifying the esports scene (AnyKey, 2016b). Specifically, they argued that colleges’ existing diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts, combined with their need to abide by Title IX expectations, meant they would have a pressing interest in crafting diverse esports programs. On the other hand, Taylor and Stout (2020) found via interviews with collegiate esports administrators that formal varsity esports programs often had less diversity than informal gaming clubs; in other words, as university support and funding for programs increased, fewer students benefited from those resources. The authors wrote, “Varsity esports programs often deliberately replicate the logics, tactics, and organizational structures of professional esports’ masculinized domains” (Taylor & Stout, 2020, p. 2). Moreover, collegiate ball-and-stick sports continue to display unequal treatment of athletes, especially across gender lines (Dellenger, 2022; Diaz, 2021). Collegiate esports may face similar challenges. These divided perspectives, therefore, necessitate further exploration.

In this article, we draw on 31 in-depth interviews with participants from nine different U.S. collegiate esports organizations to assess how these programs address questions of toxicity and harassment as they institutionalize. This data set suggests that...
collegiate esports organizations currently face many challenges in managing toxicity and harassment. More specifically, our analysis reveals four key themes that collegiate esports programs will have to grapple with to promote more inclusive communities: (a) ambiguous understandings of what qualifies as “toxicity,” (b) a normalization of negative behavior, (c) unclear reporting/response mechanisms for those facing harassment, and (d) the insularity of the collegiate community. We address these themes in our analysis, then use our conclusion to outline the significance of these challenges and offer some potential strategies for amelioration.

Literature Review

Toxicity in Gaming and Esports

Research has long recognized game culture’s tendency toward toxicity, especially in the form of harassment and exclusion. For example, in her study of players’ use of “trash talk,” or insults directed at other players ostensibly to distract them from competition, Lisa Nakamura (2012) found that, although players treated trash talk as “discursive waste” that should not be taken too seriously, they also positioned it as “a distinctive and inevitable aspect of videogame multi-player culture, and thus to be defended” (p. 4). Players resisted efforts to decrease negativity in gaming, instead seeing the management of trash talk as an individual responsibility. Affected players were expected to ignore insults, and those who could not were accused of taking trash talk too seriously.

Some players are able to ignore trash talk effectively, or even to enjoy it as a part of the gameplay experience. Groups of friends, for instance, may engage in good-natured trash talking to throw one another off their game. As games scholar Emma Vossen (2018) outlined, however, there is a big difference between agreed-upon forms of trash talk and that which is inflicted on others specifically to cause harm. She wrote:

While trash talk may sometimes be a type of pleasurable pain for all involved, if others don’t consent to this behavior then it’s violence and harassment. [ … ] many of us do not voluntarily participate in being insulted as part of gaming practice—it is forced upon us. (p. 217)

In addition, trash talk tends to include racist, sexist, and homophobic language, making it easier for some players to ignore than others (Ivory et al., 2017; Nakamura, 2012; Salter & Blodgett, 2012; Vossen, 2018). This can build systems of exclusion into gaming whereby marginalized players—women, LGBT+ players, and players of color—have to engage in more work to have positive gaming experiences. For instance, they may learn to brush off identity-based insults, avoid using voice chat to circumvent identification, or get very good at the games they play to beat harassers (e.g., Cote, 2017; Gray, 2013, 2014; Ortiz, 2019b). Excluded players have developed many strategies for managing identity-based harassment, but these strategies often require players to ignore serious insults or threats rather than changing the systems that are excluding them. Furthermore, many of these strategies require a great deal of time and energy and, therefore, may not be sustainable.

Although the game companies responsible for popular esports titles have, at times, taken steps to address negativity on their platforms, these tools have, so far, not been enough to solve problems completely (Cote, 2018; Desatoff, 2019; Smith, 2019). Game developers and publishers also tend to focus on some forms of trash talk over others. Microsoft’s Xbox Community Standards illustrate this by distinguishing trash talk, positioned as lighthearted and game focused, from harassment, which is personalized or disruptive. Their guidelines state, “A little trash talk is an expected part of competitive multiplayer action, and that’s not a bad thing. But hate has no place here, and what’s not okay is when that trash talk turns into harassment” (Microsoft, n.d., emphasis original). This builds a level of expected negativity into gaming spaces, potentially making the shift from trash talk to harassment easier. Much of the burden of addressing toxicity is still on those most affected by it, and many existing coping and response mechanisms do little to address overall structures of inequality in game spaces.

These issues, unsurprisingly, also resonate throughout esports as it has grown out of game culture writ large (Castello, 2018; Desatoff, 2019; Kou, 2020; Smith, 2019; Türkay et al., 2020). Esports players often trash talk others during competition, and this behavior regularly follows the same gendered, racialized, or sexuality-based forms common to gaming in general (AnyKey, 2015, 2019; Paul, 2018; Ruvalcaba et al., 2018; Taylor, 2012). As a result, esports has remained largely lacking in overall diversity (Ratan et al., 2015; Shen et al., 2016). When women enter esports spaces, they are often shunted to support roles rather than serving as players (Taylor, 2012; Taylor & Stout, 2020; Taylor et al., 2009). Taylor et al. (2009), for instance, mapped out how women at competitive gaming events are often there to serve as “cheerleaders” for their sons or significant others. This can marginalize women in the esports scene and mark female players, when they do compete, as anomalies. Women’s presence in esports spaces is then questioned to an extent that men’s is not. For example, when professional Overwatch player Geguri rose rapidly to the top of the competitive scene, she was accused of cheating and had to submit to an official test of her skill by Blizzard Entertainment. Overwatch’s parent company (Paul, 2018). Male players have not faced similar challenges. Harassment and sexism, thus, become expected parts of the esports scene.

Players of color are also often questioned when they enter esports and gaming spaces, although this happens in different ways for every race or ethnicity (and is, of course, intersectional with gender and other identities.) For instance, Ortiz (2019a, 2019b) and Gray (2013, 2014) have written eloquently about the racism Black and Latino/a players face in online gaming as well as how they respond to or try to ignore this harassment. Stereotypes about gamers mark Black players as outsiders to game culture. In contrast, although Asian gamers might be expected to escape this stigma due to the pioneering role played by East Asian gaming and esports cultures, they, too, become targets for harassment. As scholars like Chan (2009), Fickle (2019), and Zhu (2018) have explained, techno-Orientalist fantasies about Asians as robotic or mechanical combine with racial stereotypes about Asian masculinity and agility to ensure that Asian gamers encounter xenophobic and racial backlash as well.

These problems are exacerbated by the growing role that live streaming services like Twitch play in esports. Many esports players stream their matches online, and in the era of COVID-19, it is likely that more tournaments will occur virtually as well, even at the collegiate level (Anderson, 2020). Unfortunately, harassment occurs commonly on platforms like Twitch and Discord and is, again, disproportionately directed at women, LGBT+ players, or players of color (Nakandala et al., 2017; Taylor, 2018). As esports grows and develops, further care is needed to intervene in ongoing toxicity and ensure greater social justice and equitable opportunities for all.
Collegiate Interventions

The rise of esports in collegiate spaces may be a good platform from which to start this intervention (Amazan-Hall et al., 2018). The first varsity esports program in the United States was founded at Robert Morris University in Illinois in 2014, and the number of collegiate programs has since boomed dramatically (Bauer-Wolf, 2019; Reames, 2018). Moreover, colleges and universities have expanded esports beyond athletics or student life programs and into the realm of majors and courses of study; Massachusetts’s Becker College introduced the first full degree program in Esports Management in 2018, but several other schools followed suit (Zimmerman, 2018). Many offer individual esports courses and/or are in the process of creating their own majors. Esports is undoubtedly becoming a significant institution on many campuses.

Unlike game companies, which have only recently started to realize the benefits to be gained from inclusion efforts (e.g., Fair Play Alliance, 2018), colleges and universities already have many diversity, equity, and inclusion programs. In the U.S. context at least, they also have a mandate to abide by Title IX, the 1972 civil rights law prohibiting sex-based discrimination in education (AnyKey, 2016b, 2019). Although Title IX is often linked to athletics, this law has implications for equity and inclusion across campuses. Furthermore, as esports meets many of the standards for intercollegiate sport (Walton et al., 2020), athletics expectations may still apply even if teams are not housed within athletics departments.

As matters stand, though, it is unclear whether or how inclusion requirements are being met across different programs as the rapid growth of collegiate esports has resulted in a community in flux. Some programs are based in athletics departments, whereas others are part of student life programs or even individual departments, such as computer science (Bauer-Wolf, 2019). Furthermore, tournaments are often organized by the companies that produce popular esports games rather than by universities or overseeing bodies. There is also extensive turnover among these organizers, leading to additional instability. For instance, Blizzard Entertainment’s college branch, Tespa, used to organize tournaments for their titles StarCraft II, Hearthstone, Heroes of the Storm, and Overwatch as well as some partnered games from other producers (Reames, 2018). During the COVID-19 pandemic, however, Tespa was shuttered as a brand. Although Blizzard continued to host collegiate tournaments for some of their games, such as Overwatch, other games, like StarCraft II, lost official support. This leaves players and program directors to navigate uncertain and ever-changing waters when it comes to finding, registering for, and competing in relevant tournaments; questions of equity and inclusion may, therefore, take a back seat in terms of priorities. Many programs in the United States voluntarily register to join collegiate esports organizations, such as The National Association of Collegiate Esports (NACE), the Electronic Gaming Federation, or the American Collegiate Esports League. Just as often, however, large collegiate esports teams operate independently. Traditional athletics organizations like the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) have, so far, opted not to regulate esports (Hayward, 2019; Walton et al., 2020). Many of the forces that may encourage inclusion in traditional collegiate athletics are absent from esports.

The uncertainty of collegiate esports structures, combined with gaming’s exclusionary tendencies, likely accounts for the fact that collegiate esports currently lacks diversity (Amazan-Hall et al., 2018). NACE estimates that as many as 90% of collegiate esports players are men (Bauer-Wolf, 2019), and evidence indicates that female players still face harassment in collegiate spaces (Türkay et al., 2020). Research by Taylor and Stout (2020) even suggests that the growth of varsity collegiate esports programs may worsen issues of inclusion. Through interviews with program leaders, the researchers found that informal, student-led gaming clubs tended to be more diverse, especially in terms of gender, than official varsity programs. Varsity program leaders often chalked their lack of diversity up to questions of skill, suggesting that they would take any player who could compete at a high enough level. Unfortunately, the existing barriers to diversity that permeate gaming and esports spaces mean that very few nonmale, LGBT+, and/or players of color have had space in which to develop high levels of skill (Shen et al., 2016), and many likely opt out of esports due to cultural factors, such as not wanting to face harassment. More casual clubs, wherein pressure to compete is lower, are, therefore, more welcoming spaces. Unfortunately, “Clubs continue to carry out the work of forming esports communities [ ... ] but varsity programs are where the money’s going” (Taylor & Stout, 2020, p. 4). The economic and professional opportunities offered by growing varsity programs are not being evenly disbursed among different types of students.

Further interventions into the rising collegiate scene are needed to address the factors that prevent more diverse players from entering this space. To this end, this article draws on interviews with various collegiate esports participants to answer the questions:

a. How do collegiate esports participants define and experience toxicity?

b. How, if at all, are programs managing these issues?

c. What further changes might be needed?

Although the negative culture of gaming and esports spaces is likely only one factor behind the existing player disparity, addressing toxicity is one obvious point from which improvements can begin. Furthermore, our analysis suggests that it is currently an area in need of improvement. By assessing how toxicity is understood by players versus administrators, as well as how they see their program norms developing, we are able to ground recommendations for managing issues in the lived experiences of current esports participants.

Methods

This article emerged from a larger project regarding how collegiate esports teams develop and institutionalize. In other words, we explored how different programs are forming and growing; what norms permeate collegiate esports spaces; and what impacts these have on esports, athletics, and university communities. Our overall project also compared different collegiate esports roles (e.g., players vs. administrators) to identify points of agreement or tension between participants. Situating this article with regard to the broader project, we viewed toxicity and team management as components in collegiate esports’ broader institutional tensions. As the literature review indicated, the norms of esports and the norms (or legal requirements) of universities are often at odds. Collegiate esports programs must navigate distinct sets of expectations around toxicity and exclusion and could benefit from guidelines on how to do so effectively.

Our study of collegiate esports drew on 31 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with collegiate esports players, program directors, tournament organizers, and administrators as well as with students who were associated with esports due to their involvement in student media outlets, esports venues, or support
initiatives, like graphic design. Interviews averaged 60–120 min and were semistructured in format, allowing both researchers and participants to introduce new topics, expand on areas they found particularly interesting, or reorganize ideas as needed.

This article specifically focuses on interview sections wherein participants discussed toxicity in esports spaces, individual experiences with harassment, and how institutions manage these issues. Participants could (and did) raise concerns about toxicity throughout their semistructured interviews, but much of the data presented here emerged in response to questions such as: “What barriers do you think exist to participating on collegiate or professional esports teams?” “Have you or anyone you know encountered issues like this personally?” “Can you think of any efforts someone has made to raise awareness about any of these issues?” and “Who determines the rules and regulations that your team has to follow both locally and nationally?”

Participants came from nine different U.S.-based programs and were recruited via snowball sampling; we started with members of one collegiate esports program in the Northwest United States, then asked each interviewee to direct us to other potential sources. Interviews were conducted online, transcribed and cleaned for clarity, and then moved to the qualitative analysis program Dedoose. One member of the research team coded each interview using a grounded theory approach. Originally developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967, 2012) and then separately elaborated by each (e.g., Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Glaser, 1992), grounded theory describes a process of generating themes and theory from patterns in the data rather than existing hypotheses. Successful grounded theory develops from a systematic, cyclical approach in which the researcher “jointly collects, codes, and analyzes his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges” (Glaser & Strauss, 2012, p. 45). We collected an initial set of interviews with a small number of participants, then began data analysis. Interviews were analyzed using a combination of open and axial coding (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) whereby the researcher first carefully reads each interview and marks every line or short segment with a code that indicates its meaning. Subsequently, the researcher will reflect on unit-level codes to determine how they form wider themes or categories. The project’s research questions and patterns inherent in the data jointly motivate category development.

Grounded theory development is an iterative process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Walker & Myrick, 2006). The researcher constantly compares interviews, units, and categories to ensure that they make sense given the content of the data and, as each interview is analyzed, adds new topics to the coding scheme as needed. They then return to earlier material to apply those codes. A researcher employing a grounded theory approach may also adjust the process of data collection based on initial analysis, adding new questions to interview guides or seeking out new types of participants to broaden the data set. Our early interviews, for instance, were primarily with esports players; as they mentioned related individuals, such as program administrators or student workers, we sought interviews with these groups to cover the full array of esports perspectives.

To ensure consistency between coders, the research team maintained a shared codebook and used an “undecided” code to mark sections of data about which they were uncertain. The team discussed these sections as a group to determine the appropriate coding. Therefore, interrater reliability scores cannot be calculated for this analysis, but they are also not needed due to the research’s exploratory and qualitative nature; semistructured interviews and grounded analysis lend themselves to in-depth explorations of specific phenomena rather than generalizable claims. Moreover, we viewed the process of peer debriefing and triangulation between researchers as contributing to the trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1986) of our study and its methods. We began writing up the results of particular research questions (such as those structuring this article) once a relevant code set achieved theoretical saturation. Although saturation can be understood in several ways (Saunders et al., 2018), we defined it as the point where “no additional data are being found whereby the sociologist can develop properties of the category” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 61). Once we had a clear perspective on the range, definition, and meaning of properties within the relevant category, and found that new codes were no longer emerging, we considered that part of the data set to be saturated.

As all interviewees were located in the United States, this data set can only speak to U.S. collegiate experiences. Furthermore, and unsurprisingly for work on esports, our participants were predominantly young (mean 25.7 years, median 22, range 19–62), male (77.4%), straight (83.9%), and White (74.2%). This reflects the expected audience for many esports games (Ratan et al., 2015) but does indicate a need for future work to recruit more diverse participants. Given the small number of interviewees, the article’s focus on sensitive topics, and the close-knit nature of the collegiate esports environment, this piece will refer to participants using the gender-neutral they/them rather than linking gender or identity specifically to each respondent. Furthermore, many statements or anecdotes will be paraphrased rather than quoted directly. It is imperative that, as we address ongoing inequalities in game spaces and difficult topics such as harassment, we guard the safety of participants above all else.

Analysis and Findings

But Is It Toxicity?

The first challenge that colleges and universities face in managing and avoiding toxicity in their esports programs is the fact that “toxicity” is a fundamentally unclear concept when applied in game spaces. Although we have defined it earlier as “excessive harassment, ‘trash talking,’ or identity-based negativity,” and are attempting to address those issues, this often did not mirror how esports participants described toxic behavior. Rather, they frequently defined toxicity in terms of how players could sabotage the gameplay experience of others through malevolent play strategies rather than fully accounting for questions of identity or equality. For instance, a few players referenced throwing a game as an example of toxic behavior, describing other players who (intentionally) died repeatedly in team-based games to make their side lose. Dragging out a match that you were going to lose to frustrate your opponent was another illustration. These practices, colloquially termed “grieving” among multiplayer gamers, are oftentimes vaguely prohibited in an online game’s code of conduct, but players typically resort to varied lived experiences when prompted to describe grieving behavior and whether it qualifies as toxicity. Overall, they appear to view these behaviors as toxic when they negatively affect their gameplay experience, competitive ranking, or tournament outcomes. Participants also discussed “stream sniping,” or looking at another gamer’s Twitch stream while playing against them to gain insider information, as a problematic behavior, positioning cheating as an additional form of toxicity.

These examples mirror the results of other studies on toxicity in esports, which found that players tend to “define toxicity as
behaviors [that] disrupt their morale and team dynamics” (Türkay et al., 2020, p. 1) rather than as harassment or identity-based negativity. Kou (2020) found that “communicative aggression” (i.e., verbal or typed harassment) was only one of five common forms of toxicity in League of Legends matches. The other four included cheating, hostage holding (deliberately keeping others in an unpleasant game), mediocritizing (e.g., experimenting with new characters in a ranked match, which may give your team a loss), and sabotaging (e.g., quitting the game or dying on purpose). This taxonomy shows how we define toxicity is only part of how players define it. Moreover, toxicity can be multilayered, shifting between different forms from identity-based harassment to gameplay actions and back again. That flexibility, and conflicting understandings of what “counts” as toxicity, present an obstacle for preventing toxic behavior as players and programs can disagree on what, precisely, is allowed or not allowed.

Because players related toxicity to gameplay, many of them were willing to describe themselves as toxic, seeming to take it as a mark of their competitiveness; they excused their own bad behavior as a result of their emotions running high due to a difficult game. One participant said,

I’ve done it [been toxic] too, honestly. And it comes from seeing a player make a large mistake and a combination of you, the person who’s being the toxic person, just being in a bad place mentally after like four losses.

Frustration became an excuse to deride players who were perceived as less skilled or at fault. Another player laughingly referred to themselves as toxic but then reassured the interviewer that they primarily kept their toxicity quiet, insulting players who made mistakes under their breath to vent their feelings. Toxicity was primarily kept their toxicity quiet, insulting players who made mistakes under their breath to vent their feelings. Toxicity was kept their toxicity quiet, insulting players who made mistakes under their breath to vent their feelings. Toxicity was primarily kept their toxicity quiet, insulting players who made mistakes under their breath to vent their feelings. Toxicity was kept their toxicity quiet, insulting players who made mistakes under their breath to vent their feelings. Toxicity was primarily kept their toxicity quiet, insulting players who made mistakes under their breath to vent their feelings. Toxicity was kept their toxicity quiet, insulting players who made mistakes under their breath to vent their feelings. Toxicity was primarily kept their toxicity quiet, insulting players who made mistakes under their breath to vent their feelings. Toxicity was kept their toxicity quiet, insulting players who made mistakes under their breath to vent their feelings. Toxicity was primarily kept their toxicity quiet, insulting players who made mistakes under their breath to vent their feelings. Toxicity was kept their toxicity quiet, insulting players who made mistakes under their breath to vent their feelings.

At the same time, interviewees saw gameplay-based toxicity as a serious issue on the part of others, at times even ranking it as more critical than identity-based harassment. For instance, one participant said,

I think there’s just a lack of enforcement of player rules that happen. Like you can, you can do all of these things in League. Run, die over and over, lose the game for your team over and over, and you won’t get banned … because the thing that they look for to punish players [is] typing really, really vulgar, toxic, racist chat. So, if you are a toxic player and you don’t type in chat, you’re not going to get banned ever, because they’re not looking for that.

In other words, this participant felt that gameplay-based toxicity was a more serious issue than identity-based harassment because game companies cared less about it and were, therefore, unlikely to address it. Interviewees also pointed out that verbal or gameplay-based toxicity left fewer traces, making it more difficult to verify and address than typed remarks.

What this suggests from a collegiate perspective is first that just telling players “Don’t be toxic” is unlikely to address the problem fully as players will interpret this in different ways. They will also likely apply this rule to gameplay and sportsmanship rather than the types of communicative harassment we are concerned about here. Programs seeking to intervene in toxicity will need to employ more careful definitions in their initiatives and lay out what is acceptable or not in precise terms. Second, the challenge of addressing different types of toxicity, such as verbal versus typed harassment, speaks to a need for creative and well-thought-out interventions both within programs and at the level of game companies. Finally, these player-based definitions of toxicity show that many players are largely unaware of the issues faced by marginalized gamers, or at least of the seriousness of these issues, ranking cheating or poor gameplay on the same level as discriminatory insults because they are not personally affected by negative trash talk. This speaks to a continued need for education about inequalities in gaming.

Such education may also be necessary at the level of administrators and organizers. Although the previous paragraphs have largely focused on how esports players define and understand toxicity, our data set also lacked widespread agreement among administrators (e.g., coaches, program directors, or student life coordinators) as to what “counts” as toxic behavior, both in digital environments and in offline team contexts. Administrators identified “toxicity” as an obstacle to effective rapport between esports athletes, the institutions who sponsor them, and fans. Our interview data, however, primarily display only surface-level acknowledgement of what “toxicity” means (e.g., use of the phrase “toxic behavior” or the word “toxicity” without definition or clarification.). Only a few administrators recognized identity-based inclusion issues, such as “toxicity . . . towards women” as a specific concern. This would seem to indicate that administrators are at least aware of toxicity existing within collegiate esports, though there is no apparent consensus on what exactly constitutes such behavior: whether it is a sportsmanship issue, a gameplay issue (as referenced by player/athlete interviewees), an identity-based issue (as we define it), or some combination thereof. As with players, this uncertainty can inhibit the development of effective strategies for managing exclusion.

Normalizing Negativity

This is not to say that players and associated esports officials did not recognize extensive or identity-based harassment at all; they referenced a variety of issues they had seen in esports and gaming spaces. At the same time, they tended to dismiss or minimize the impact of these events in several ways. This shows that toxicity is somewhat taken for granted in game spaces, and players are well practiced at ignoring it. Administrators similarly displayed a degree of taken for grantedness in their discussion of harassment and concerns regarding identity-based inclusion, often seeking to minimize rather than eliminate these issues. Colleges and universities will have to institute new norms at all levels if they want to cultivate diverse voices in their programs.

When asked specifically about identity-based harassment or negativity, most players could identify relevant experiences. For example, one player discussing toxicity said, “There’s also a lot of like gender-based and race-based discrimination as well. So, are those considered part of toxic behavior? Are those kind of like their own things?” They proceeded to note individual instances of sexism and transphobia they had witnessed in their competitive gameplay. Other participants stated that they often saw female players get “badgered” (given excessive or unnecessary attention —positive or negative— due to their gender), mentioned incidents wherein users used the N-word (both in general chat and specifically directed at Black gamers), and brought up a variety of other identity-based slurs, such as when one player with a higher pitched voice was frequently insulted about their perceived age, gender, and sexuality. Participants even raised a few incidents of interpersonal harassment they or their teammates had faced at tournaments or within their programs, such as when one player faced intense online harassment (some of which took on potentially
racialized or sexualized connotations) after complaining about how a tournament was being run.

At the same time, player participants minimized these events in a variety of ways. To illustrate, some dismissed use of the N-word as the behavior of “kids” who are trying to be edgy, pointing out that online play, in particular, was always likely to have “trolls,” or players who are negative specifically to get a rise out of others (Phillips, 2015). This was a deeply normalized perspective; one participant even ignored times when opponents called them a racist, anti-Chinese slur (the participant was a biracial White/Chinese American), dismissing it as the behavior of “salty” bad losers. This interviewee and others often found themselves startled when nongaming friends complained about the language or behavior used in gaming spaces; the esports participants had grown so used to the negativity that it no longer even registered to them. Some chalked the problem up to trends in gaming in general, calling for a broader cultural change in game companies and the overall industry while deferring any immediate suggestions for esports spaces. Finally, as mentioned before, they lumped these behaviors into more general definitions of toxicity, putting them on an equal level with cheating or throwing a game. As one participant stated, “Toxicity is anything where you’re just being mean to another person.” This ignores how the forms of “meanness” that occur in esports and gaming spaces are particularly off-putting to women, LGBT+ players, and players of color, presenting toxicity as an individual issue rather than a systemic one.

Only a few student interviewees recognized how harassment and toxicity, and their taken-for-granted nature in gaming and esports spaces, could be off-putting to marginalized players. One, for example, stated,

You see people all over the esports industry, like, that don’t feel, especially females that feel like they can’t come into esports because it’s too much like a boys’ club or, you know, that’s how males imagine it. And then just some of the vile stuff they hear on communications in games like Valorant and stuff like that. [ . . . ] There’s a lot of things that the esports industry has to improve when it comes to stuff like that.

The same participant continued, “When most of your group is male, of course, it’s going to be harder for the male group to notice if something’s going wrong, or they might not even hear about it.” This participant’s serious attention to how toxicity could affect potential players was, however, unusual among our responses, most of which took negativity for granted and argued that good players could overcome or ignore these issues. In fact, the rarity with which respondents acknowledged such behavior suggests, first, a need for broader interventions, potentially at the level of game companies, to decrease negativity as it is currently normalized in gaming spaces and, second, that individual programs should prioritize educating players to inequalities so they recognize the challenges others may face.

In interviews with administrators and related esports industry workers, we found more evidence that negativity is normalized. One administrator, while discussing how they worked to help their players build soft skills, casually mentioned that “issues where there [are] potential concerns for misconduct and sexual misconduct [. . . ] will naturally happen at bigger universities.” This is not to say our participant endorsed such behavior; indeed, the interviewee continued on to discuss how they worked to address and head off problems. Still, it does reveal that behavioral conflicts are, to at least some degree, expected. The interviewee also positioned issues of “misconduct” as matters of simple misinformation between members, to be solved with individual training, rather than recognizing the potential influence of structural inequalities on these concerns.

Other program directors and administrators similarly shared their desire to minimize toxic behavior at intercollegiate esports events but, importantly, did not mention eliminating it. One interviewee, for instance, stated, “You’re working with, like 20 or 25 college varsity students, you know, 18–25 [years of] age. They’re gonna say or do dumb crap, because they’re college students.” This program director argued that their job was to manage issues rather than prevent them fully, positing that students are too immature to avoid issues completely. Another administrator noted that—as esports fandoms grow and come to resemble the fierce rivalries that exist in ball-and-stick sports—toxic behaviors may actually rise: “There are trajectories that are trending downward and people involved in them. So, the fanaticism is definitely there, some of the ugliness is absolutely apparent.” Again, in the face of this challenge, they framed their role as setting rules and expectations that would “still [allow] people to vent without losing some of the decorum and respect of what we’re trying to do [at these competitive events].” Within comments like these, we see a normalization of toxicity among and around collegiate esports organizations and even the use of ball-and-stick counterparts to justify such attitudes.

With this tacit acceptance as a foundation, even administrators who recognized the systemic issues arising from toxicity allowed a degree of flexibility in terms of their policies and expectations. One program director, for instance, argued that they took a hard line against identity-based harassment, stating,

there is a very dark side of the gaming community—not friendly, not inclusive, not nice, homophobic, racist, sexist, all the other bad things that exists—and I wanted to squash that before it can even show up. And part of that is by being a little bit extra with the rules of even cussing.

This administrator contended that their students were expected to abide by strict codes of conduct and behavior. Later in the same interview, however, the same administrator revealed that these standards were not applied evenly across the program. As mentioned earlier, typed chat was policed more heavily than spoken chat:

Voice chats are a little you know, you can kind of say what you want in voice chat. Text chat . . . within reason, right? If you start saying hateful things, you’re out. Text chat, that’s really, you know, let’s not be cussing or posting pictures or stuff that’s inappropriate. Voice chat’s a little, a little freer, because you know, there’s no “record” of that.

Individual team chats were also largely unmonitored, leaving space for negativity to creep back into esports environments.

**Reporting and Responses**

Another difficulty that collegiate programs currently face in terms of ensuring inclusivity comes from a lack of clear behavioral guidelines and reporting mechanisms for when problems occur. Of our 31 participants, only a few mentioned having codes of conduct for their players and programs. In some cases, program guidelines were extensive living documents, such as when one program director noted their code of conduct as being “over 125 pages of student-written policy that [take into account an institution’s] Student Handbook, academic handbooks and policies, the
Issues of Insularity

The final challenge that our data suggest comes from the current size of collegiate esports and its relatively high level of insularity. Although the number of programs is booming nationwide, participants seemed to know a good deal about other teams and their players. This is unsurprising given the players’ high levels of skill; few players both achieve high ranks in competitive games and play on collegiate teams, making them easily recognizable to one another. There were also some indications that tournaments tended to be regional, similar to collegiate ball-and-stick sports, and that players often interacted regularly through platforms like Twitch and Discord. Participants described reporting issues as not very straightforward and found that they were often limited to in-game mechanisms for reporting bad behavior rather than team- or tournament-based options. This can further disenfranchise victims of harassment as they must first decide whether something even needs to be reported—a challenge given the disagreements about what qualifies as toxicity outlined earlier—and then must determine who to report to and how.

Second, when issues arose at tournaments or competitions, as well as within programs or esports-adjacent spaces, like university-affiliated Discord servers, participants were sometimes reluctant to report as they felt that those participating in the harassment were potentially friends with the people in charge. For instance, tournaments are often organized by a host school whose esports teams also compete in that tournament. Therefore, the individuals to whom victims are supposed to report incidents may be teammates with a toxic player and unlikely to take action against them. A student organizer’s supervisor may not be present or visible during an event, leaving victims of harassment with no real recourse. This can also be an issue within esports programs. Although some of these have official team managers or coaches, many are still largely student led, meaning that one might be reporting harassment to a peer rather than a supervisor. Similarly, players are often tasked with moderating their program’s Discord, allowing interpersonal relationships to influence how rules are applied in online spaces as well as in-person events. These issues may be worsened by COVID-19 as budget cuts may drive programs to cut funding for supervisory roles and rely on students instead (Cote et al., 2022).

Finally, the few times our participants encountered issues of harassment and did report them—either in esports contexts or in gaming more generally—they felt that reports were not always acted on. Because in-game reporting mechanisms were often the only clear option when players faced harassment, they relied on these. Yet, game companies differ in how they act on these reports, and they often do not tell reporters what action was taken against negative players (Cote, 2018). Players can, thus, feel like reports do not accomplish anything. The same may be true of reports within tournaments and programs; the lack of clear codes of conduct also leads to a lack of enforcement mechanisms or means for removing problematic players.

On the administrator side, our interviews revealed a worrying level of uncertainty in how equipped people felt to address issues in context. In some cases, administrators described attempts at incident reporting and resolution as being more of an off-the-grid affair. Reports often came through back channels following events. As one program director recounted,

Our teams have been accused of [racial and gender-based issues] and a third party has come to me and said, ‘Hey, uh, your team was at our event, and they were doing these things. I just want you to be aware.’

This behind-the-scenes approach can make it difficult for program directors or overseers to head the behaviors off, plan and institute appropriate penalties, or even determine the veracity of reports. Interviews also revealed a lack of consistent protocol for addressing these situations when they arise. Some administrators expressed a desire to discuss issues among the teams, whereas others sought aid from faculty or other university personnel to help address incidents. In both cases, administrators indicated that responses to incident reporting were largely reactive, not proactive or preventative. Further guidelines for esports participants and administrators are clearly needed.
with or reporting another participant. This could put them at risk for retaliation. Indeed, in one of the few instances where a participant discussed and reported harassment they had faced, rumors about it spread quickly through the program. Although they did not face further harassment because of this, they found this free flow of information to be concerning. Had problems worsened, the only solutions would have been to leave the esports organization or transfer schools; either decision would mean a severe loss of opportunities.

It is also important to recognize that participants might not report or discuss toxicity widely because of their love of esports and desire to support their programs. All our participants were excited to see esports grow and expand at the collegiate level, both because of the opportunities it offered for them to play at a highly competitive level and because they felt that it trained them for future careers. Members of student media organizations, for example, practiced their broadcasting, graphic design, and live streaming skills while promoting esports matches. Participants were hesitant to “create drama” that would make the program look bad, and program directors spoke of carefully managing their teams’ public-facing appearances, such as restricting cursing. This does not mean that negativity did not occur; private chat channels were, for instance, not restricted to the same level as public ones, and restrictions on platforms like Discord or Twitch obviously cannot stop problems from occurring in person as teams train, broadcast, and compete. But this divide speaks to a desire to keep issues, including toxicity, more private to avoid both individual and team-or program-level repercussions. Kauweloa (2022) found similar tensions in his research into varsity esports players; many of his player participants feared providing even basic feedback to their programs if it could be “mistrusted as criticism” (p. 255), and administrators were attentive to their programs’ outward presentation. Such concerns are common in collegiate esports; unfortunately, they can inhibit the development of necessary policies.

Significance and Conclusions

We should make it clear: very few of our participants reported being personally targeted for in-depth or identity-based harassment; the majority spoke of toxicity (as we define it here) as something that happened to other people. This may be because our overall sample—as well as collegiate esports in general—tended to be rather homogenous, with the majority of players, coaches, program directors, and even tournament organizers being young, straight, male, able bodied, and White. Furthermore, most of our participants mentioned witnessing toxicity in esports spaces, even if it was not directed at them, and existing research suggests that it is still a serious problem for many potential players (AnyKey, 2015; Bauer-Wolf, 2019; Desatoff, 2019; Ruvalcaba et al., 2018; Taylor, 2012; Türkay et al., 2020). As esports institutionalizes at the collegiate level, programs should, therefore, pay careful attention to supporting a diversity of players with better intervention into existing systems of harassment and toxicity.

This is important, first, for individual participants, who bear the costs of harassment and toxicity. These range from challenges to physical or mental health to exclusion from esports spaces and their benefits. Many of our participants saw collegiate esports as a launching point toward careers in broadcasting and journalism, mental health and psychology, graphic design, public relations and advertising, and more. Furthermore, as more collegiate esports programs “go varsity,” many have started offering scholarships, coaching, and other forms of support. If players opt out of esports due to cultural factors that exclude them, they potentially miss rich opportunities for advancement.

Intervening in toxicity early, before it becomes baked into existing programs, is also of key importance to colleges and universities, which have a mandate to promote inclusive and equitable access to education. Allowing unequal programs to grow on campus can not only damage student communities, but it can also put schools at risk of Title IX violations and resultant penalties (AnyKey, 2016b, 2019; Walton et al., 2020). Although we have, thus far, only interviewed members of nine programs, our analysis suggests that programs are not currently building inclusivity into their esports initiatives. Furthermore, they face potential challenges in how players define toxicity broadly, see negative behavior as a normal part of esports and gaming spaces, lack clear guidelines and reporting mechanisms, and fear personal or program-based reprisal for issues.

Drawing on these themes, we suggest the following basic starting points for programs that want to care for and encourage diverse student participants in esports. First, programs should have clear (and enforced) codes of conduct for their players, coaches, and other contributors. As other researchers have suggested, these codes of conduct should plainly lay out protected identities, specify types of behaviors that will not be tolerated, and include suggested penalties (Amazan-Hall et al., 2018; AnyKey, 2017, 2018, 2019; Føxø et al., 2019; Taylor & Stout, 2020). For team- or tournament-based codes of conduct, rules should be visibly posted in public spaces (e.g., on the walls of esports arenas.) For online tournaments, streaming services, or chat venues, such as Discord, codes of conduct should be used as landing pages so participants see them as they sign in. Ideally, tournaments would require players and viewers to read and accept these conditions prior to allowing them to access online events. Finally, codes should specify clear reporting mechanisms, to someone who is outside the immediate team, tournament, or organization, to address some of the challenges discussed earlier.

We also suggest that teams and tournaments, as well as the game companies that help sponsor them, invest in community management and chat moderation efforts. Our participants indicated that most toxicity occurred through online platforms, such as in Twitch chat while they were live streaming tournament matches or via Discord, where fans and opponents could communicate with them. Although it may seem that online platforms are unmanageable as people on them are largely anonymous, evidence suggests that negativity primarily persists in communities where norms allow for this behavior, whether people are anonymous or not (Cary et al., 2020; Chui, 2014). Clearly setting norms that do not allow for or support toxic behavior via codes of conduct, then reinforcing these through appropriate moderation, can be a meaningful intervention (AnyKey, 2016a, 2017, 2018; Brewer et al., 2020; Seering et al., 2017). Many participants already expected some degree of moderation on text-based forms of chat, suggesting that expanding rules to encompass more behaviors and more forms of engagement would be normal for players. Planning rules and interventions before they are needed can stave off problems rather than managing them retrospectively. This can protect players, fans and spectators, and programs from serious consequences.

Finally, although our aforementioned suggestions focus on forms of internal governance that could help address toxicity within individual programs or events, it is also worth briefly considering what kinds of external governance collegiate esports might need. Supervisory bodies for collegiate ball-and-stick athletics, such as the NCAA, currently do not regulate esports, and endemic esports
associations, such as NACE, are voluntary. Few of our interviewees’ programs were part of any organizing group. Many participants felt that this was a good thing, critiquing the NCAA’s historical restrictions on student athletes’ earning power and pointing to the organization’s many controversies around gender disparity, cheating, corruption, and more. These participants felt that esports had a better chance of building an inclusive environment on its own rather than via legacy institutions. Other research, notably Kauweloa’s (2022) longitudinal study of the University of California-Irvine varsity esports program, has revealed similar attitudes among collegiate esports participants.

At the same time, esports’ current lack of oversight, combined with the variety of competing stakeholders that work within the collegiate space, presents a challenge. Many tournaments are organized by the game developers that produce popular esports titles, or even by for-profit tournament hosting companies, and guidelines for appropriate behavior vary widely across different events. As several scholars (e.g., Chao, 2017; Funk et al., 2018; Kauweloa & Winter, 2019; Pizzo et al., 2019) have recognized, the lack of formal governance structures in collegiate esports has “left schools without clear guidance on several widespread issues” (Welch Suggs, 2022, p. 113), including gender equity and toxicity. Improvements and changes, when they occur, tend to be “enacted in a piecemeal fashion” (Kauweloa, 2022, p. 285). Despite participant concerns, some form of broad, external governance may be necessary for collegiate esports to reach its full potential. Specific recommendations on this front are beyond the scope of this article, but we hope to return to the topic in future research.

As mentioned earlier, this article draws solely on interviews with North American esports participants. Future research should expand to other parts of the world to provide a comparative perspective. Moreover, most participants in this study were young, male, and White; deliberately recruiting more diverse participants, or studying those who opt not to join esports programs, could provide further perspectives on structural barriers to esports participation. Finally, given the qualitative nature of this work and the lack of consistency between esports organizations, it is important to note that our conclusions provide depth and explanatory power but are not generalizable. Work that aims to draw generalizable conclusions should employ other methods, such as large-scale surveys.

Despite these limitations, our work suggests that collegiate esports is a rapidly rising realm of possibilities for players, for associated student organizations and support staff, and even for colleges and universities that are using esports teams for student recruitment. At the same time, collegiate esports programs face a variety of institutional tensions, from conflicting views regarding what programs should focus on, to disagreements about esports’ relationship with traditional university athletics, to uncertain relationships with game publishers (e.g., Kauweloa, 2022). Our focus here, on how esports seems to be carrying over many inclusion issues from broader gaming culture, is one instance of such tensions. Programs need to be careful regarding how they are institutionalizing and make efforts to ensure that diverse students have equal access to the opportunities this new activity affords. From our data, it is clear that some players, administrators, and esports-adjacent personnel are aware of toxic behavior’s general existence within the collegiate esports space, though we lack a clear agreement on what we might call the five W’s of toxicity in collegiate esports: who is affected by identity-based or game-play-based harassment behavior(s), what are their implications for the burgeoning collegiate esports scene, where do toxic behaviors take place, when does toxicity occur, and—ultimately—why does toxicity exist as a vague catch-all term for a wide array of behaviors? Paying attention to how existing players define and deal with toxicity, then setting clear behavioral expectations and response mechanisms to take care of it, is a start toward addressing future problems.

Notes

1. Each of these organizations has a unique structure and focus. Electronic Gaming Federation, for instance, focuses on Division I schools, whereas American Collegiate Esports League prides itself on being student initiated and run. These variations contribute to collegiate esports’ confusing nature.

2. It is, again, worth noting that traditional collegiate sports are not free of inclusion issues (Dellenger, 2022; Diaz, 2021). However, they do have organized reporting mechanisms and structures that are meant to provide oversight and means for redressing problems. As we will address further in our analysis, similar structures are lacking in collegiate esports.

3. Detailing potential interventions is beyond the scope of this piece, but we felt it was worth recognizing this demand. We intend to return to this in future work but suggest interested readers see Cote (2018) for an initial discussion of company-based interventions into toxicity.

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