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Collegiate Esports Participation and its Perceived Effects on Student Experience: A Phenomenological Study of Collegiate Esports Teams

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COLLEGIATE ESPORTS PARTICIPATION AND ITS PERCEIVED EFFECTS ON STUDENT EXPERIENCE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF COLLEGIATE ESPORTS TEAMS

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ABSTRACT

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In an increasingly competitive higher education marketplace, institutions are seeking innovative strategies to grow or maintain their existing student populations. As student interests shift over time, institutions must stay informed of the rise and decline of various sporting activities and the impact those activities have on the student body. As more institutions look to utilize esports as a tool for recruiting and retaining students, the purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research study was to create new knowledge on the phenomenon of collegiate esports participation and its perceived effects on student experience.

This study had 11 participants who were active undergraduate members of institutionally recognized collegiate esports programs in the United States. Qualitative data was obtained through individual semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis was conducted to generate five themes to describe the phenomenon. Participants described positive aspects of esports participation such as student development benefits, strong bonds with teammates, and a welcoming and inclusive esports environment. However, participants also perceived limited follow-through in institutional support for esports and an overall lack of understanding of, and respect for, collegiate esports within the greater campus community.

Collegiate esports appears to be a viable sport activity that can be used to help diversify university programming and extracurricular activities. The experiences of participants indicate

that esports shows promise at increasing student involvement and improving student socialization and well-being. These benefits can positively affect the student experience the same as more traditional intercollegiate, club, intramural, or recreational sports programs have done previously. This study may help college administrators in assessing the feasibility of integrating esports programs into their campuses. Additionally, it may serve as a foundation for future research into the potential advantages of collegiate esports participation.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Although sports competition has traditionally been conducted in the physical environment between human opponents, increasingly, "the trend of competition is shifting more and more towards digital platforms," (Block & Haack, 2021, p. 2). The growing use of electronic technology in modern life has followed the rise of competition in an electronic format (Filchenko, 2018), leading to what is now referred to as "electronic sports" or "esports." In general, esports refers to competitive video gaming (Bihari & Pattanaik, 2024; Clavio, 2017; Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017; Jenny et al., 2017) conducted on a variety of electronic platforms such as personal computers, gaming systems, and mobile devices (Block & Haack, 2021). As gaming technologies evolve, esports continues to grow and become more relevant in the field of sport management as it becomes "increasingly interwoven into the fabric of sport organizations in attempts to broaden market appeal," (Cunningham et al., 2018, p. 5).

In the same way that people engage in conventional sports from the recreational to professional levels, video gaming exists at a variety of competitive levels and intensity of play. With gaming hardware such as computers, game consoles, and smartphones becoming more affordable, esports is also becoming increasingly accessible worldwide (Block & Haack, 2021). Combining the increased accessibility with the inclusivity of competition in an electronic format, millions of people are regularly engaging with video games around the world.

In 2023, the global video gaming market was projected to generate $187.7 billion with 3.38 billion active players (Newzoo, 2023). These numbers are expected to continue to rise worldwide with an estimated 4.3% increase in compounded annual growth rate for player

numbers. Within the United States alone, 65% of Americans, or approximately 212 million people, report playing at least one hour of video games per week (Entertainment Software Association, 2023). 62% of all adults and 76% of all children in the U.S. play video games. Seventy-five percent of video game players in the United States play at least 4 hours of games per week, with 12.8 hours per week being the average.

In 2022, total U.S. consumer spending on video games was $56.6 billion (Entertainment Software Association, 2023), while 2021 U.S. revenue, related specifically to esports, was $243 million (Gough, 2023). Although the figure for esports revenue in the U.S. is low compared to overall consumer spending on video games, the United States leads the world in active esports competition players at 3,731. The growing popularity of esports competition "is evidenced by the amount of participants, spectators, and media coverage, as well as organizers considering esport for inclusion in major sport competitions," (Cunningham et al., 2018, p. 1). In some instances, esports has managed to eclipse conventional sport viewership, as seen when the 2016 League of Legends World Finals drew 12 million more viewers than the 2016 National Basketball Association (NBA) Finals (Clavio, 2017).

Although the popularity of video gaming in the general population has increased rapidly since 2010 (Block & Haack, 2021), esports has a long history with college students (Cranmer et al., 2021; Kelly & Leung, 2021; Reitman et al., 2020). With each new generation, video gaming engagement increases, and gaming becomes more mainstream (Newzoo, 2023). It was a college campus in 1972 that hosted the first recorded video game tournament, introducing the culture of competitive video gaming into the college experience (Baker, 2016; Jin, 2021, Kane & Spradley, 2017; Li, 2017). Over time, what began as informal video games rivalry between groups of college students has turned into a more serious and structured form of competition through

student clubs and collegiate esports programs (Kauweloa & Winter, 2019). Paralleling its movement from the amateur to the professional level, esports has grown on college campuses, maturing from student-led clubs to official university programs (Hennen, 2019).

In 2014, Robert Morris University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania became the first university to classify esports as an official varsity sport under its athletics department (Jenny et al., 2017). This move included offering tuition and room and board scholarships for the institution's esports competitors. The University of Pikeville in Kentucky followed shortly after, becoming the second university to recognize esports as an official varsity sport. Adoption of esports by these institutions helped to legitimize video gaming as an official collegiate sporting activity. This shift paved the way for other colleges and universities to similarly recognize esports, leading to its rapid growth in higher education across the United States.

In 2019, over 94% of all varsity esports programs in the United States were members of the National Association of Collegiate Esports (NACE) (National Association of Collegiate Esports, 2022). As of 2023, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) has no role in governing esports in the United States (National Collegiate Athletic Association, n.d.), but the NACE has a membership of over 240 higher education institutions with more than 5,000 student-athletes. In addition to the growing number of varsity esports programs, there were also at least 500 collegiate esports clubs in the United States in 2019 (McCarthy, 2019). Additionally, apart from official, university-affiliated esports programs, "many college students have some interaction with esports," (McCarthy, 2020, p. 5) in some way, shape, or form, even though they do not view themselves as esports competitors.

In the world of collegiate video gaming, varsity esports refers to video gaming competition in which competitors are members of official teams that represent their college or

university (National Association of Collegiate Esports, 2023a). Esports teams from peer higher education institutions compete against one another and receive institutional support for their competitive activities in the form of money, facilities, equipment, and scholarships.

Amidst a declining population of traditional-aged college students, higher education institutions are adjusting their recruiting strategies by identifying sub-populations of students that were not targeted in the past (Giroir, 2022). One such sub-population of potential students are enthusiasts of esports which is "…increasingly being positioned by university administrators as attractive tools for recruiting and retaining students – particularly in STEM fields" (Taylor & Stout, 2020, p. 452). The rush to create viable esports programs on college campuses has led university administrators to look towards traditional intercollegiate sports as a framework to better understand this new and unfamiliar activity (Jin, 2021; Taylor & Stout, 2020). Athletics and student affairs professionals are turning to "the structure, resources, imagery, and branding of athletic departments, as well as aligning esports with the existing values associated with sport, to address the challenges surrounding the integration of esports," (Pizzo et al., 2019, p. 186).

While university administrators use the intercollegiate sports conceptual framework to position esports on their campuses, it is still unknown if collegiate esports yield benefits to the institution as an intercollegiate sport or as a recreational, club, or intramural sports activity. Although some schools may view esports as a potential revenue generator for their institution (Gostlin, 2021; Jenny et al., 2017), some critics caution that there is no guarantee of any income in this space (McCarthy, 2019). Considering how athletics programs are not profitable at most institutions (Fulks & National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c), it may be overly optimistic to consider addition of an esports program to fill institutional coffers directly.

Since it is uncertain if esports can be directly profitable to an institution, administrators may want to consider its potential learning and student development benefits instead (McCarthy, 2019). Improvements in learning and student development may yield secondary advantages for an institution's enrollment and retention objectives (Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1987), but little is known as to what, if any, benefits are perceived by student esports participants. These potential secondary advantages are not trivial, considering that tuition is a primary source of revenue for many higher education institutions (Mitchell et al., 2017). In the rush to capitalize on what administrators hope will solve enrollment shortfalls, institutions are moving into the esports space with little information to justify their decisions.

Considering esports for collegiate inclusion follows the examination of esports to be regarded as an actual sports activity (Jenny et al., 2017; Reitman et al., 2020). By viewing esports as sport, it can be further examined through the lens of student development models, such as student involvement theory, which has been historically applied to competitive and recreational collegiate sports participation (S. Forrester, 2015; S. A. Forrester et al., 2018). Utilizing this theory, esports can be explored for its potential benefits to the campus community in the same manner as more familiar intercollegiate or recreational sports on college campuses.

In the perspective of student involvement theory, sports are a form of student activities programming that an institution uses to affect students' investment of physical and psychological energy into the college environment (Astin, 1984). The greater the degree of student involvement attained, the more learning and personal development occur. With a student population of diverse backgrounds and interests, conventional sports activities may not appeal to all segments of the study body. Jenny et al. (2017) suggests that the inclusion of esports within university athletic departments has the potential to improve student-athlete diversity, particularly in respect

to increasing the number of Asian participants. Furthermore, conventional sports activities may not be accessible to students who have physical limitations that prevent, or hinder, participation.

To reach a wider range of students, more creative programs should be used (Hernandez et al., 1999). Introduction of more niche sports activities, such as esports, may be able to provide the novelty to attract disaffected college students, increasing their levels of involvement, thereby improving their student experience and likelihood of retention (Sidle & McReynolds, 2009). Heere (2018) suggests that traditional forms of sport may not "serve as the most effective hook," (p. 24) for certain audiences and that esports may serve as an effective alternative sport activity. However, while esports may still be considered a niche or alternative sport activity on college campuses, the "massive audiences in esports suggest that the word "niche" is not the right way to describe it anymore," (Block & Haack, 2021, p. 3).

If collegiate esports can generate student development benefits in the same way as more conventional sports programs (Murray et al., 2021), a large advantage is that it may be able to do so with relative cost-efficiency. In contrast with conventional sports programs, the average startup costs of an esports program are low (Giroir, 2022). Hennen (2019) estimates collegiate esports program startup costs at $43,000 while the National Association of Collegiate Esports (2020) estimates startup equipment costs of $60,000 to $90,000 and team apparel expenses ranging from $3,000 to $4,000.

In 2018, the University of Akron announced that it would open the largest dedicated university esports space in the world (Pettit, 2018). While this type of spending may be on the high-end of collegiate esports, the University of Akron's institutional investments were only $1.2 million in facility construction and operating costs with an annual esports budget of $500,000. From a sport administration perspective, the current collegiate esports environment presents an

opportunity for institutions to capitalize on the relatively low cost of entry into the market while also providing the student body with a potentially productive source of student involvement that may have the ability to positively affect the student experience. Whether or not collegiate esports has the ability to influence student experience is still unknown, but investigation into how student participants perceive their collegiate esports experience is a fundamental step towards obtaining that information.

Research Background

The global esports industry was predicted to reach nearly $1.38 billion in revenue by the end of 2022 (Newzoo, 2022). However, this figure is relatively small compared to the global video gaming market with 2023 revenues estimated at over $187 billion (Newzoo, 2023). In 2021, live streaming of esports reached an audience of nearly 810 million people with almost 20 billion live gaming hours watched via Twitch streaming platform and 4.7 billion live gaming hours watched through YouTube Gaming (Newzoo, 2022). The gaming industry is expected to grow with an estimated compounded annual growth rate (by 2025) of 13.4% in revenue and 8% growth in audience. Every year, since 2011, the video game industry has generated more revenue than the movie and music industries combined (Mangeloja, 2019). As an emerging industry with strong staying power, more traditional sports will eventually be challenged by esports in terms of sponsorship and revenue generation (Gawrysiak et al., 2020).

Prior to COVID-19, the gaming industry was steadily moving towards a hyper-connected, online competitive environment (Kelly & Leung, 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the digital nature of esports allowed gaming competitions to rapidly transition to an online format while conventional sports shut down due to social distancing requirements (Block & Haack, 2021; Cranmer et al., 2021; Gault, 2020; Ke & Wagner, 2022). COVID-19 lockdowns

generated conditions which created significant growth for esports streaming and online gaming (Block & Haack, 2021; Cranmer et al., 2021).

The growth of esports, during COVID-19, allowed for successful sport brand extension into the esports market, but also created a disruptive influence that may continue to force sport organizations to innovate in the future (Ke & Wagner, 2022). Bihari and Pattanaik (2024) suggest that the disruption of conventional sports during the COVID-19 pandemic helped to increase research interest in esports as 2020 marked the beginning of an increase in the number of esports studies produced. However, even with the increase in publishing volume, most studies involving esports were "found to have focused on the health and physiology of gamers than on pro-gamer practices and work culture," (Bihari & Pattanaik, 2024, p. 130).

Whereas video gaming had once been regarded with prejudice as a senseless and juvenile activity (Pietersen et al., 2018), esports has earned itself legitimacy in consumer culture, as "video gaming now dominates the entertainment industry and there are hundreds of millions of players worldwide," (Kim & Thomas, 2015, p. 185). In the more mature esports market of South Korea, esports competitors enjoy prestige and status that resembles the celebrity afforded to traditional athletes in other countries (Kim & Thomas, 2015). As conventional sports enterprises are now venturing into the world of esports, the industry is now set to transition from niche to mainstream (Block & Haack, 2021).

In recent years, esports has gained the attention of colleges and universities across the United States as they struggle with a changing student population. Higher education institutions across the United States are facing a worsening decline in student enrollment (Astin, 1975; Nadworny, 2022; Nadworny & Larkin, 2019; National Center for Education Statistics, 2020; Nietzel, 2022). Between 2009 and 2020, total undergraduate enrollment at degree-granting

institutions decreased by 9% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Adding to this decline, college enrollment fell by 1.4 million students since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (Nietzel, 2022). During this time, many institutions moved to online instruction and the traditional college experience was significantly changed (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020).

In 2019-2020, the average cost of tuition, fees, room, and board for a first-time, full-time college student enrolled in a public, 4-year institution in the United States was $25,487 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Whether they live on campus or not, each new college student brings in new revenue while each student retained maintains their institution's revenue (Astin, 1975). In general, students that are retained from year to year can represent a sizable amount of income to their institution while students that depart can represent a substantial loss of revenue.

The problem with comparing an enrollment increase to an enrollment decrease is that these two events are not felt the same budgetarily. Increases in enrollment are generally not accompanied by comparable increases in operational expenses. Therefore, new student enrollment can generate a considerable amount of discretionary funds (Astin, 1975), if the school's business model allows higher enrollment to translate to increased revenue. On the other hand, a decrease in enrollment is generally not accompanied by a proportionate decrease in expenses. Decreases in the student population can quickly create a budgetary crisis for an institution.

Traditionally, public institutions received the majority of their income through state appropriations (Astin, 1975; Marshall, 2019). Over time, public funding for higher education has decreased through years of reductions in state and federal contributions (Nora, 1987). Between

2008 and 2017, state funding for higher education had decreased by nearly $9 billion, after adjusting for inflation (Mitchell et al., 2017). The reduction in state funding reflects policy decisions that disproportionately rely on budget reductions rather than examining ways to increase revenue.

While total fall college enrollment has decreased 2.8% between 2014 and 2019, the enrollment of first-time, first-year college students is remaining stable or slightly increasing (*Digest of Education Statistics, 2020*; Nietzel, 2022). Stable or increasing first-time, first-year enrollment, coupled with a decrease in the overall college student population, helps to illustrate the high rates of student attrition affecting higher education in the U.S.

The most elite schools in the U.S. experience graduation rates in excess of 90% but, on average, only 56% of students at 4-year institutions complete their degree (Symonds et al., 2011). Of the students that leave their institution, their departure is generally for one of two reasons: academic dismissal or voluntary withdrawal (Tinto, 1987). The latter cause being much more common as academic dismissal is estimated to only account for 15 – 25 percent of all student departures.

As a whole, more college students leave their institution than stay to completion of their degree (Tinto, 1987). Although recruitment of new college students has traditionally been the major tool for maintaining an institution's enrollment levels, those levels could also be maintained through efforts focused on improving the student experience (Astin, 1975). While students may leave college before graduating for any number of reasons, O'Keeffe (2013) found that students not developing a sense of belonging at their institution was a key cause of attrition. With a much larger share of student departures attributed to non-academic reasons, college administrators look for solutions to address non-academic challenges within the student

experience. While student intention and commitment play an internal role in student departure, Tinto (1987) suggests that the non-academic departure decisions hinge upon the character of a student's integrative experiences after entry to college.

Statement of the Problem

In an increasingly competitive higher education marketplace, institutions are seeking innovative strategies to grow or maintain their existing student populations. Traditionally, various forms of intercollegiate, club, intramural, and recreational sport programs have been used successfully to improve student experiences and outcomes (Kanters, 2000; Lower et al., 2013). As student interests shift over time, institutions must stay informed of the rise and decline of various sporting activities and the impact those activities have on the student body.

To meet the needs of a continually evolving student population, higher education institutions must diversify their activity offerings (Hernandez et al., 1999). A wide range of campus activities can be used to attract and retain students with niche interests but can also be used to explore new activities that have the potential to grow in time. Esports is an emerging form of collegiate sport, but a gap in the literature exists concerning its perceived effects on student experience. Considering the growth of collegiate esports programs and their potential impact, further research on esports is necessary (Schaeperkoetter et al., 2017). While collegiate esports bears resemblance to other college sporting or extracurricular activities, examining student perceptions is a vital first step towards understanding esports' effect, if any, on student experience. As more institutions look to utilize esports as a method of recruiting and retaining students (Delello et al., 2021), exploratory research on student perceptions in relation to this study's theoretical framework is necessary to guide further investigation of esports implementation.

This study provides information to help higher education administrators make more informed decisions when evaluating an esports program in terms of its benefit to the student population. Given the resources required to create and maintain student programs and facilities, along with reductions in funding for public institutions of higher education, it is critical for administrators to understand the impact that student programs have on student experience (Lower et al., 2013), and to prioritize programs that are effective and cost-efficient in this regard. If collegiate esports participation has perceived positive effect on student experience, it may provide institutions with a useful mechanism to meet the intellectual and social needs of the campus community as outlined in student involvement theory.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this exploratory study was to better understand collegiate esports participation and its perceived effects on student experience. Although there is considerable literature available on the benefits of collegiate sport, and a growing body of knowledge on the topic of esports in general, less is known about the perceived effects of collegiate esports participation. This purpose generated new knowledge about esports from the perspective of the study's participants. New knowledge can be used by researchers in the field of sport administration to expand upon the topic area.

Student involvement theory provided the theoretical framework for examination of the perceived effects of collegiate esports participation. For the purposes of this study, collegiate esports participation was defined as active undergraduate student membership, and video gaming participation, in a college- or university-recognized esports team. This study used a phenomenological approach of inquiry to obtain participant data from members of collegiate

esports teams. This study included members of multiple college esports teams in the United States, focusing on past or current team leadership.

Research Questions

These research questions were created to better understand the phenomenon of collegiate esports participation by obtaining perceptions of its effects on student experience.

Q1 What are the lived experiences of collegiate esports participants?

Q2 How does esports participation affect the student experience?

Significance of the Study

This exploratory study can help student affairs professionals to have a better understanding of the phenomenon of the perceived effects of collegiate esports participation on student experience. “The evaluation of the outcomes or benefits associated with sport participation during college continues to be an important administrative and managerial function,” (Lower-Hoppe et al., 2020, p. 54). On college campuses, esports has not typically been viewed as an activity that aligns with the mission of higher education; however this perception is largely due to a lack of knowledge on the subject (Pizzo et al., 2019).

Following a call from the U.S. Department of Education for colleges and universities to be more accountable concerning the use of funding and student success outcomes (Spellings, 2006), the effects of esports participation should be examined closely. By uncovering participant perceptions of collegiate esports participation, this study provides more information on the potential effects of esports in the university setting. This study also provides insights on collegiate esports and may help student affairs professionals to consider if esports implementation might be useful for their institutions. Additionally, new knowledge on collegiate esports participation may initiate additional opportunities for future research on the topic.

Delimitations

This study intentionally limited participation to undergraduate students at four-year higher education institutions in the United States that were current, active members of a college- or university-recognized esports team. For the purposes of this study, active members of a college- or university-recognized esports team were students who had participated in at least one of their institution's esports team events or activities during the previous 12 months. Due to time and resource constraints of this study, the sample size was kept intentionally small in order to generate a rich description of the participant experience (Lopez & Whitehead, 2013) and could range in size between three to fifteen individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2016) or until a saturation point was reached in data collection (Parker et al., 2019). Resource constraints also necessitated the use of a video conferencing platform to conduct research interviews, potentially excluding participants who were unwilling or unable to use video conferencing technology to participate in the study.

List of Definitions

Bridling – A research concept that involves reflecting on what is being investigated and how it is interpreted by the investigator (Stutey et al., 2020). Understanding of a subject is constrained so that the phenomenon is not understood too quickly or carelessly (Dahlberg & Dahlberg, 2003).

Constructivism – A theory that individuals seek to understand the world in which they live (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2016) by constructing subjective meanings for experiences (Creswell & Báez, 2020; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2016; Crotty, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Convenience Sampling – A sampling method that recruits study participants "with regard to access, location, time, and willingness," (Lopez & Whitehead, 2013, p. 124).

Delimitations – Systematic bias intentionally introduced into a study that affects the interpretation and generalizability of the findings (Price & Murnan, 2004).

Esports – Direct competition between human players using video games on various devices and digital platforms under defined rules (Block & Haack, 2021) where outcome-defining activities occur in electronic or computer-mediated environments, but outcome-defining activities are coordinated and operated by humans in the real-world, physical environment (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017).

Exploratory Study – Research conducted to obtain a better understanding of a topic, often used to gather preliminary data for future research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Limitations – Uncontrolled constraints of a study that can affect the interpretation and generalizability of the findings (Price & Murnan, 2004).

Phenomenology – The study of the essence of a phenomenon (Merleau-Ponty & Bannan, 1956). A theoretical guideline to allow researchers to understand a phenomenon from the standpoint of subjective reality (Qutoshi, 2018).

Purposive Sampling – A sampling method that recruits study participants according to predetermined selection criteria (Lopez & Whitehead, 2013).

Semi-Structured Interviews – A data collection format in which a research participant is asked open-ended questions so they can provide in-depth responses about their understanding of an experience (Jackson et al., 2007).

Snowball Sampling – A sampling method that recruits study participants based on the referral of existing participants (Creswell & Báez, 2020; Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Student Development - Increasingly complex growth and holistic development, experienced by the student, within the postsecondary educational environment (Evans et al., 2009).

Student Experience – A variety of academic, social, and environmental factors that shape a student's experience through college (Tinto, 1987).

Student Involvement Theory – A theory that suggests that the more students are involved in academic and extracurricular activities, the more likely they are to achieve positive student development and learning outcomes (Astin, 1984).

Trustworthiness – The concept of providing context to an audience that increases their belief that research findings are truthful, applicable, consistent, and neutral (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Summary

The first chapter introduces the topic of study, the research background, the purpose of the study, and the significance of the study. The first chapter also introduces the research questions that the study seeks to answer along with a list of definitions used. Chapter II will contain a review of the literature relevant to the study and Chapter III will provide the methodology used for this study.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this literature review is to examine the theoretical framework for this study. The theoretical framework is composed of theories and concepts that inform the study and is derived from the orientation of the researcher (Maxwell, 2012). The framework provides the underlying structure for a study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) by guiding the way in which the research is conducted and understood by supporting "…the rationale for the study, the problem statement, the purpose, the significance, and the research questions," (Grant & Osanloo, 2014, p. 12). Maxwell (2012) states that the conceptual concept, or theoretical framework, of a study:

> is a formulation of what you think is going on with the phenomena you are studying – a tentative theory of what is happening and why. The function of this theory is to inform the rest of your design – to help you assess your purposes, develop and select realistic research questions and methods, and identify potential validity threats to your conclusions. (p. 25)

For this study, student involvement theory provides supporting rationale for how participation in collegiate esports programs may affect perceptions of student experience. Additional literature supports student involvement theory by considering the aspects of student well-being and socialization, highlighting their influence in shaping perceptions of the college student experience. Exploring esports within this framework extends the consideration of what may be considered collegiate sport activity and how those activities may influence student involvement. Consequently, this further examination takes the evolving nature of student

involvement into consideration, which includes the expanding presence of technology and digital spaces in higher education.

Student Involvement Theory

Student development theory is a "collection of theories related to college students that explain how they grow and develop holistically, with increased complexity, while enrolled in a postsecondary educational environment," (Evans et al., 2009, p. 6). Student involvement theory (Astin, 1984) is a student development theory that explores student growth as a function of their degree of engagement with the college environment. In student involvement theory, student development is examined through both the quantity and quality of physical and psychological energy the student invests in their college experience, which encompasses participation in academic, social, and extracurricular activities.

The underlying principle of involvement is similar to the Freudian concept of cathexis where people invest their own psychological energy into people, ideas, and external objects (Astin, 1984; Pontalis & Laplanche, 2018). Astin (1984) asserts that this theory is useful because it incorporates divergent principles and concepts to account for most of the research regarding environmental influences on student development. Additionally, Tinto (1987) reinforces the environmental influence on student development by highlighting the importance of student social integration, including participation in extracurricular activities and peer group interactions.

The concept of student involvement arose from Astin's (1984) observation that institutional policies and programs served as forms of environmental inputs on students while various student achievement measures (e.g., grade point average, standardized test scores, etc.) served as outputs. While the input and output explanation provided cause and effect, there was

no understanding of the mechanism of how the institutional input affected the output of student achievement and development.

To explore this mechanism, Astin (1984) linked three traditional pedagogical theories to student development outcomes:

1. Subject-matter theory places importance on content and equates subject expertise with teaching ability but places the student into a passive role in the learning process.
2. Resource theory suggests that the accumulation of adequate resources will facilitate student learning and development, but this results in a zero-sum game with other resource-seekers and places emphasis on the acquisition, but not the use, of those resources.
3. Individualized theory attempts to identify content and methods to meet the needs of each individual student, but the individualized nature of the theory makes it difficult and expensive to implement.

Each of these theories appeared to be popular with groups that tended to align with the ideology of a given theory. Subject-matter theory was favored by professors, resource theory was favored by higher education administrators, and individualized theory was favored by developmental and learning psychologists (Astin, 1984).

Student involvement theory expands upon these three pedagogical theories by conceptualizing the mechanism in which environmental inputs result in student development outputs by examining the active role of the student in the learning process (Astin, 1984). In reference to the three pedagogical theories mentioned, exposing the student to superior educational content, providing adequate resources, or individualizing the educational experience is only meaningful if it causes the student to invest physical and psychological energy into the

educational process. If the environmental input generates higher levels of student involvement, that input subsequently increases the amount of learning and personal development experienced by the student.

Astin (1984) proposed five basic postulates to student involvement theory. The last two postulates are important because they can be used to create more effective educational programming. Additionally, they are subject to empirical proof and are the focus of most research on student involvement.

1. Involvement refers to the investment of physical and psychological energy into various objects related to the student experience.
2. Involvement occurs along a continuum. Different students have differing degrees of involvement in different objects, at different times.
3. Involvement has quantitative and qualitative features.
4. Student learning and development are directly proportional to the quantity and quality of involvement in an educational program.
5. Effectiveness of educational policies and practices are directly related to their capacity to increase student involvement.

In social science research, a theory is a set of ideas that attempts to explain a phenomenon in the social world (Patton et al., 2016). Theories of student development, such as student involvement theory, attempt to explain various phenomena related to student developmental processes of learning, growth, and personal development in post-secondary education. Student involvement theory provides a framework to explain a phenomenon related to student developmental processes in terms of the interaction between that phenomenon and levels of student involvement.

Student Involvement Theory: Impact On Student Experience

Student involvement theory can be applied through institutional policies and practices by student affairs personnel and higher education administrators (Astin, 1984). These staff members should be working to build environments that use creative means to foster student involvement (Hernandez et al., 1999) as greater involvement is related to positive student experiences (Sidle & McReynolds, 2009). These policies and practices affect levels of student involvement, thereby influencing student developmental processes.

Positive impact on student developmental processes generates more learning and personal development for the student (Astin, 1984; Chapman & Pascarella, 1983; Endo & Harpel, 1982; Kuh, 1993, 1995), creating a positive secondary effect on the student experience (Tinto, 1987). Student involvement theory has been useful in research of student outcomes by providing a structure that allows educational policies and practices to be evaluated in terms of their ability to increase or decrease student involvement (Astin, 1984). Furthermore, it allows college staff to evaluate the effectiveness of their own activities in relation to their effect on student involvement.

In a longitudinal study of college students, Astin (1975) found that virtually every positive factor in the student experience was likely to increase student involvement, while every negative factor reduced student involvement. Highly involved students spent considerable time and energy on academic work, being physically present on campus, participating in student organizations, and interacting with students and faculty. In contrast, uninvolved students expended little time and energy in those same areas.

When considering the term “involvement,” most synonyms are behavioral in meaning, implying a behavioral component to this theory (Astin, 1984; Milem & Berger, 1997).

Involvement is the behavioral manifestation of motivation, and while motivation is an important factor in student engagement, it is the behavioral component of involvement that is critical (Astin, 1984). The action of the individual, rather than the motivation, is what identifies student involvement.

Student involvement, however, is not an objective in, and of, itself. As the mediating mechanism between environmental inputs and student outputs, high student involvement is an indicator of student development, which is correlated with more positive student outcomes (Astin, 1984; Chapman & Pascarella, 1983; Endo & Harpel, 1982; Kuh, 1993, 1995). The various ways that a student is involved with the educational experience are the expression of a student's motivation and the means for facilitating student development. Operationally, the behavioral aspects of student involvement are easier to observe and measure than the psychological concept of motivation (Astin, 1984).

Interaction within the campus environment influences student behaviors, attitudes, and values, largely through student participation in extracurricular campus activities (Astin, 1984; Chapman & Pascarella, 1983; Kuh, 1993, 1995). Students report that involvement in activities outside of the classroom have significant impact on their learning and personal development (Kuh, 1993, 1995) and high levels of student involvement predict gains in learning (Tinto, 1997). Students that are highly involved with the campus environment experience greater amounts of contact with peers and faculty, and report more learning over the course of their time in college (Endo & Harpel, 1982).

Extracurricular activities encourage students to learn skills and attributes that are often necessary for participation in the activity. This allows students to benefit from the experience if sufficient time and energy are invested (Kuh, 1995). More time and energy spent on an

extracurricular activity yields more learning and personal development for the student. Greater learning and acquisition of skills, during extracurricular activity, are correlated with satisfaction and success after college (Kuh, 1995). To better understand the impact of extracurricular activities, Kuh (1993) suggests that studies should be conducted that attempt to link extracurricular activities with specific outcomes. This information would be useful to college administrators so costs and benefits of extracurricular programs can be evaluated.

However, not every extracurricular activity affects student involvement in the same way. Collins et al., (2001) found that activities of low importance may not positively affect students' self-esteem. Activities and circumstances that are more engaging are better able to increase student involvement, leading to improved student development. In turn, increased student development can generate institutional secondary effects such as improvements in student satisfaction with the college experience. It is because of these secondary effects that college administrators may see value for institutional investments into extracurricular programming that facilitates student involvement.

Student Involvement Theory: Impact On Student Well-Being

Student well-being is a multi-dimensional concept that involves the interconnection of physical, economic, social, developmental, emotional, psychological, occupational, life satisfaction, and domain specific satisfaction (Travia et al., 2022). However, Ryff (1989) developed a model of well-being that specifically examined the psychological aspects in terms of six dimensions: self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth. Travia et al. (2022) defined well-being as "the presence of positive emotions and moods, the absence of negative emotions, satisfaction with life, fulfillment and positive functioning," (p. 7), while the United States Centers for Disease

Control explains, “In simple terms, well-being can be described as judging life positively and feeling good,” (Centers for Disease Control, 2022, para. 2). While there is no universally accepted definition for well-being, previous research indicates that involvement in the campus environment plays an important role in affecting the well-being of college students (Astin, 1984; Boulton et al., 2019; Bowman, 2010; Kanters, 2000).

Astin’s (1984) student involvement theory suggests that active participation in campus life plays an important role in affecting the various dimensions of student well-being including increased self-esteem, greater satisfaction with their institution, more success in extracurricular activities, greater contact with others in the college environment, and stronger identification with, and attachment to, college life. Supporting this idea, Bowman (2010), discovered “…a positive relationship between involvement in campus experiences during the first year of college and psychological well-being,” (p. 1043). Campus involvement, particularly through cocurricular organizations, was a predictive factor for psychological well-being metrics including personal growth, positive relationships, and purpose in life. Research by Boulton et al. (2019) similarly found a positive correlation between student engagement and happiness, but also uncovered a negative correlation between engagement and academic outcomes. Boulton et al. (2019) goes on to suggest that the relationship between engagement and well-being is still not well understood in higher education.

Researchers (Brooker & Woodyatt, 2019; Thorley, 2017) state that the impact of negative student psychological well-being should not be underestimated. The rising concern for psychological well-being seems appropriate, as American college students are increasingly experiencing mental health challenges such as depression, anxiety, and self-harm behavior (American College Health Association, 2014; Knifsend, 2020), while college students in the

United Kingdom are similarly experiencing increased incidences of mental illness, mental distress, and low wellbeing (Thorley, 2017). Low wellbeing is reported to have "…a substantial harmful impact on student performance and course completion," (Boulton et al., 2019, p. 3). Boulton et al. (2019) goes on to state that increased student engagement and improved well-being are positively correlated suggesting that a possible feedback loop between the interactions of engagement and well-being increase the effects of both factors.

Kilgo et al. (2016) states that "…the role of student involvement in influencing psychological well-being is of considerable importance," (p. 1044). However, it is not necessarily the action of involvement that is important, but the psychological benefits that involvement brings (Kilgo et al., 2016). By better understanding how involvement contributes to student well-being, institutions can more effectively develop strategies to support and encourage student involvement, thereby influencing the positive feedback mechanism suggested by Boulton et al., (2019).

While student involvement may exist in a variety of forms, intramural sports and student organization involvement were shown to have a positive effect on psychological well-being (Kilgo et al., 2016). Rook (1987) found that psychological well-being improved among individuals who enjoyed companionship with others in shared leisure activities. Of the six dimensions of psychological well-being studied by Bowman (2010), the quality of interpersonal relationships with other students positively affected all six dimensions, suggesting that well-being is highly correlated with interpersonal relationships. These findings highlight the importance of social contacts in building an environment that fosters student well-being.

Previous research demonstrates the positive influence of student involvement on well-being in higher education. Along with influencing levels of student development, as outlined in

student involvement theory, greater levels of student involvement also impact psychological, social, and emotional components of student well-being. Involvement in campus organizations and activities can provide a setting for fostering the development of skills, relationships, and experiences that shape the feelings and emotions associated with positive well-being. As college is a period of unfamiliarity and uncertainty for many students, positive psychological well-being is "a potentially important resource for successfully accomplishing this life transition," (Bowman, 2010, p. 180) which should be encouraged through the use of programming that increases student involvement.

Student Involvement Theory: Impact On Student Socialization

Student involvement theory suggests that student learning and personal development are directly proportional to the quantity and quality of physical and psychological energy a student invests into the college experience (Astin, 1984). Students who are highly involved in campus life direct considerable time and effort towards studying, spending time on campus, participating in student organizations and activities, and interacting with faculty, staff, and other students. Astin (1984) explains that most synonyms for the verb involvement are behavioral in meaning, which characterize involvement as an activity or action rather than a feeling. Merriam-Webster (2024) supports this definition by stating that involvement is "the act or an instance of involving someone or something," (1st definition).

By defining involvement in this way, by extension, the act of student involvement is inherently interactional and requires engagement with external elements such as people, environments, or resources. The college environment itself is a socializing medium for students (Chapman & Pascarella, 1983), with greater involvement bringing about increased opportunities for socialization. "Beyond the concern for keeping students enrolled is the commitment of most

college educators to provide for the personal and social development of students," (Chapman & Pascarella, 1983, p. 320). In the context of student involvement theory, greater involvement not only indicates increases in student personal development and learning but also provides a backdrop for increased social opportunities, facilitating personal and educational growth through the enhancement of social skills.

In college, socialization manifests as a recurring process of interaction between a student and others who seek to influence them (Clausen, 1968). In becoming socialized, the student succumbs to some degree of external pressure from individuals and groups within the college environment during this interactive process (Weidman, 1989). The primary agents of this socialization process include not only faculty and administrators but, also, and perhaps most importantly, other students (Chapman & Pascarella, 1983). These interactions, occurring through both formal and informal campus activities, significantly contribute to the student's development and adaptation within the college environment. Vreeland and Bidwell (1965) emphasize this by noting that student involvement with peers "accounts heavily for the extent of change," (p. 248), highlighting the role of peer relationships in the socialization process during college. Furthermore, social interaction, particularly through participation in extracurricular activities, makes it more likely for participants to look to peers and staff within those environments, facilitating the adoption of social norms (Weidman, 1989).

Overall, sport activities have traditionally held a socializing influence in society with many claims about the value of sports participation focusing on sport as a medium of socialization (Frey & Eitzen, 1991). "Sport is typically encouraged by parents, school administrators, and community leaders because this activity is viewed as a very effective setting for learning acceptable values and beliefs and for acquiring desirable character traits," (Frey &

Eitzen, 1991, p. 506). While sport activity in general was found to have a socializing influence on students, Lower-Hoppe et al. (2020) found no significant differences in the perceived social benefits of sport between intercollegiate and club sport athletes. Astin (1984) and Jolly (2008) both note that intercollegiate student-athletes' high level of athletic involvement could cause them to be isolated from the larger student population, potentially insulating them from the socializing effects of the overall college environment.

The socializing effects of athletic team influence was seen by Potuto and O'Hanlon (2007), who found that college student-athletes more frequently reported receiving social and emotional support from their teammates as compared to roommates, other friends, and non-athlete college classmates. This is not surprising though as "the groups with which students interact most are an important influence on the nature of the students' socialization and, in turn, on many aspects of their personal, nonintellective development during college," (Chapman & Pascarella, 1983, p. 320).

Jolly (2008) suggests that the time demands of athletics and the tightly controlled schedules of student-athletes creates a different social environment than that experienced by non-athletes. This exclusionary social environment may contribute to some obstacles in overall campus integration for intercollegiate student-athletes. Conversely, within the less demanding environment of college club sports teams, participants reported spending less time on team-related pursuits, providing them with "…more discretionary time to integrate with different peer groups," (Lower-Hoppe et al., 2020, p. 53). The expanded access to greater campus integration allowed student club athletes additional social benefits compared to their classmates on intercollegiate sports teams.

The variation in time commitment for the two different levels of sporting activity highlights how the intensity and structure of the activity can influence the students' ability to engage with others in the campus community. In a study of the effects of social integration on anxiety, Bolger and Eckenrode (1991) found that social contacts did buffer against increases in anxiety. However, the buffering effects against stress were observed among relationships that involved discretionary forms of social integration. These discretionary social relationships involved contacts with friends, neighbors, and leisure groups whereas non-discretionary social relationships in work and school environments did not buffer the effects of stress. If sports activity is to be used as a means of facilitating student involvement and socialization, this underscores the importance of finding an appropriate balance for athletic commitments; one which permits discretionary social integration within the campus community, allowing for improved student well-being and personal development.

Whether students interact primarily with teammates or others in the campus community, satisfaction with the college experience is influenced through socialization and building relationships (Astin, 1993; Belch et al., 2001; Hall, 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1977). Belch et al. (2001) states that student interaction can be facilitated through sport programs, and Dalgarn (2001) suggests that the goal of recreational sports in college should be to provide additional opportunities for student interaction. These interactions help to foster greater learning, personal, and social development for the students (Artinger et al., 2006) while also helping them build a network of friends and acquaintances through shared leisure and other companionate activities (Rook, 1987).

The link between student involvement and socialization suggests that extracurricular activities, such as sports programs, can be useful tools in enriching the student experience by

helping students develop relationships with others. Aside from the acquisition of group norms through socialization, forming relationships around shared leisure and recreational activities provides the added benefit of companionship, which provides intrinsic satisfaction to the involved parties (Rook, 1987). Rook (1987) suggests that "people who reported that they have many friends or get together with friends often may, in effect, have been indicating that they were actively involved in shared leisure or other companionate activities," (p. 1138). Due to the limited availability of individuals' leisure time, the companions that they choose to share this time with are generally held in high regard and the shared activity reflects genuine enjoyment of the company (Rook, 1987).

Iso-Ahola and Park (1996) found that among taekwondo practitioners, "leisure-generated friendship and companionship interact with life stress in a manner consistent with their being buffers against the adverse effects of life stress on physical and mental health," (p. 182-183). Furthermore, the moderating effects of leisure companionship were not affected by the level of participants' involvement in the activity. This suggests that the stress moderating benefits of leisure companionship may be similar at different levels of a given sports activity, which is important to note when comparing the student involvement benefits of collegiate sports at the intercollegiate versus recreational, club, or intramural levels.

Since the college student population is not a monolith, engagement in sports activities requires accommodation through diversity of sport offerings. Belch et al. (2001) states that "diverse programmatic offerings based on student, faculty, and staff needs can serve as a dynamic community and in so doing establishes an expectation of engagement and belonging by students," (p. 265).

Student Involvement Theory: Relation to Esports

Student involvement theory states that the achievement of developmental goals is a direct function of the time and energy a student invests in the college experience (Astin, 1984). More student involvement leads to positive student development outcomes, resulting in a more positive student experience. As a means of increasing student involvement, "sport is an activity that commands a degree of primary or secondary involvement unsurpassed by other institutionalized settings," (Frey & Eitzen, 1991, p. 504). In relation to student involvement theory, sport programs that utilize esports as a focus, could be used to facilitate increased student participation rates and sense of connection with the institution (Gostlin, 2021).

Tinto (1987) states that:

> There appears to be an important link between learning and persistence that arises from the interplay of involvement and the quality of student effort. Involvement with one's peers and with the faculty, both inside and outside the classroom, is itself positively related to the quality of student effort and in turn to both learning and persistence. (p. 71)

Student integration appears to be related to student involvement and effort, with these factors contributing interdependently to the student experience. "For years collegiate recreational sport administrators have maintained that student participation in recreational sport and fitness participation contributes to the learning, development, and persistence of college students," (Belch et al., 2001, p. 255).

When students participate in sports activities, the relationships developed with other students play an important role in their satisfaction with the college experience (Astin, 1993). Conveniently, both student involvement and the quality of student socialization are affected by conditions in the student's educational environment and can be influenced through institutional

programming. The use of esports may be valuable in positively affecting the educational environment as Freeman and Wohn (2019) found that the formation of esports teams allowed players to form meaningful bonds with one another through online communication and real-world interaction. With traditionally offline collaborative work activities increasingly adopting a combination of in-person and computer-mediated actions, esports may be a useful sport activity for facilitating continued interpersonal relationships in an online, hybrid, or in-person, educational environment.

According to Astin (1984), more learning and student development occur as a result of greater student involvement. Greater student involvement also appears to have positive effects on student well-being (Astin, 1984; Boulton et al., 2019; Bowman, 2010; Kilgo et al., 2016) and socialization (Vreeland & Bidwell, 1965). Based on the interconnection of these ideas, it seems to follow that greater student involvement, which leads to more learning and student development, improves factors related to an improved student experience, such as student well-being and socialization. Therefore, "it behooves such institutions to do what they can to encourage the development of on-campus communities whenever and wherever possible" (Tinto, 1987, p. 193) so that the educational environment is one that fosters student involvement.

An educational environment that encourages involvement can use a variety of programmatic offerings to allow for more opportunities to build new relationships. New relationships increase the likelihood of successful socialization and integration into one or more campus communities (Gennep, 1961). While the variety of student activities allows for increased opportunities for socialization, Milem and Berger (1997) suggest that the various behaviors of student involvement "will influence students' perceptions regarding the degree to which students think the institution supports the academic and social aspects of their experiences" (p. 390).

As a corollary to student involvement theory, Bloland (1987) suggests that assisting students to make "purposeful and positive leisure choices will result in educationally desirable consequences, including developmental gains" (p. 292). Astin (1975) found that leisure activity spent in non-academic ways, within the campus community, contributes to student involvement and is negatively related to dropping out of college. As students will inevitably have time available for leisure, directing them towards organized student activities allows for more productive use of leisure time as a means for student development.

A broad definition for leisure or extracurricular activity allows institution-associated sports participation to be added to the list of potential activities for student development. Jonasson and Thiborg (2010) state that, "organized sport is regarded as an important socialization arena, where adults are given the possibility to affect children's social, physiological and psychological development in a positive way." Astin's (1975) study of college dropouts found that participation in sports, particularly intercollegiate sports, had a significant effect on student persistence. However, interpreting this finding through student involvement theory, it may not be the sporting activity itself that has a direct impact on persistence, but the improved student experience aspects associated with sport involvement that play the major role. Intercollegiate athletics involvement resulted in numerous benefits to the students, including satisfaction in college, overall engagement, and leadership development (Astin, 1984; Murray et al., 2021).

While there are benefits to intercollegiate athletics participation in college, given the prominence of intercollegiate spectator sports, maintaining the appropriate balance between sport and education objectives may be challenging for some institutions (Gayles & Hu, 2009a). Although intercollegiate sports participation has positive effects on health, leadership, and

satisfaction with student life, these benefits can come at the expense of academic performance as seen in lower standardized test scores (Astin, 1993; Pascarella et al., 1995). Male intercollegiate football and basketball players were found to have significantly lower degree attainment and degree aspirations (Briggs, 1996), than athletes who played other intercollegiate sports.

Poor test performance, along with diminished degree attainment and degree aspirations, cast some doubt on the positive impact of intercollegiate sports programs for student athletes. "Unfortunately, the tensions between athletics and academics give rise to negative perceptions about student-athletes among many students and faculty," (Jolly, 2008, p. 147). This tension is palpable to student-athletes as Potuto and O'Hanlon (2007) found that 49.2% of the student-athletes in their study reported feeling that faculty members discriminated against them due to their sports participation.

For the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), the educational experience of student athletes has become an increasing concern (Gayles & Hu, 2009a). Considering athletics scandals, misconduct, and poor academic performance, public criticism of traditional intercollegiate athletics has grown. While these condemnations are not applicable to every intercollegiate sport, institutions still look to justify their investment in athletic activities as being in the interests of the student. Still, despite these criticisms, sport is seen as something that contributes to society, receiving state support and strong perceived legitimacy (Jonasson & Thiborg, 2010).

Fortunately, student engagement through some form of sports activity has proven to be beneficial to the general student population. Gayles and Hu (2009b) found that the effect of student engagement on cognitive outcomes depends on the type of sport that the athlete participates in, suggesting that there are differential effects for athletes in different sports. While

participation in certain intercollegiate sports may have time and energy demands that negatively affect learning and personal development benefits, intramural and recreational sports can provide students with an alternative form of sport activity that serves the purpose of increasing student involvement.

Sports participation has been shown to have a variety of positive effects on student health and the student experience (Astin, 1993; Kanters, 2000). Kanters (2000) found that collegiate recreational sports participation had a buffering effect against stress, as students who participated in recreational sports reported lower exam period anxiety, and less anxiety during stressful events, than non-participants. Students who reported having high levels of social support also experienced lower exam period anxiety, which Iso-Ahola and Park's (1996) research seems to support with their finding that leisure-generated relationships have buffering effects against life stress, regardless of the level of activity participation.

Hall (2006) found that campus recreational program participation, which included intramural sports, helped students develop a stronger sense of community at their institution. Similarly, Belch et al. (2001) observed that "recreational sport programs, particularly intramural sports, provide a powerful medium for student interaction" (p. 265). However, in a comparison of perceived benefits of participation between collegiate group fitness, intramural sport, and sport clubs, Lower et al. (2013) found that sport clubs reported the greatest perceived social, intellectual, and fitness benefits. Within a college "sport clubs are designed to be an opportunity for a greater number of students to participate in competitive sport games" (p.70).

If recreational sports programs can foster student interaction and build community, then those programs are increasing student involvement. Although recreational and intramural sports programs often feature conventional sports such as basketball and soccer, by extension of the

definition of sports, it is possible for esports to be included as a potential collegiate sports activity for further examination. In order to apply the definition of sport to esports, Wagner (2006) modified Claus Tiedemann's definition of sport to propose:

> "Sport" is a cultural field of activity in which people voluntarily engage with other people with the conscious intention to develop and train abilities of cultural importance and to compare themselves with these other people in these abilities according to generally accepted rules and without deliberately harming anybody. (p. 2)

The modification of Tiedemann's definition of sport allowed Wagner (2006) to define esports as "an area of sports activities in which people develop and train mental or physical abilities in the use of information and communication technologies" (p. 3).

Even as video gaming has become one of the leading forms of digital entertainment today, an official, unified definition for esports remains elusive (Cranmer et al., 2021; Jenny et al., 2017). The term "esports" lacks an officially recognized global definition, but different esports organizations and researchers have put forth various descriptions. As stated by Block and Haack (2021), eSport-Bund Deutchland e.V. adopted a definition of esports that:

> Esports is the direct competition between human players using suitable video and computer games on various devices and on digital platforms under defined rules. The comparison of sporting performance in eSport is determined by the interaction of a purposeful operation of the input devices in direct reaction to the game sequence depicted while at the same time tactically mastering the overall game action. The reference object of sports activities are video games whose structure and mode of operation meet the requirements for determining sporting performance, which do not leave the success of the

> game predominantly to chance and which offer a reproducible game framework for comparing the performance of the players. (p. 2)

This definition recognizes esports as the competitive play of video games (Bihari & Pattanaik, 2024; Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017; Jenny et al., 2017), between human opponents, on various electronic devices and gaming platforms, under a set of defined rules (Block & Haack, 2021). Through this perspective, the play of esports is comparable to more conventional forms of competitive sport and recreational sport activities. However, regardless of definitions, Heere (2018) states that esports manifests sportification, in which an activity can be viewed, organized, or regulated in a way that resembles sport and allows for an environment in which individuals can compete and compare performances to one another. In this context, esports can be further explored to determine if the social and developmental benefits of conventional sports activity also apply to esports on college campuses.

With many forms of student activities available on college campuses, Kuh (1993) suggests that those activities be studied to link the activity to specific outcomes. However, additional consideration needs to be given to those activities' contributions to learning and personal development. The necessity for additional examination leads to the exploration of student involvement theory, particularly in its application towards extracurricular activities in the areas of collegiate sports and campus recreation. Student involvement theory has been used in studies related to sports and recreational programs for college students (Artinger et al., 2006; S. Forrester, 2015; S. A. Forrester et al., 2018), with student involvement theory suggesting that learning and personal development are affected by the student's level of involvement. Studies on sport and recreation activities on college campuses may examine direct benefits to the student (Artinger et al., 2006) or benefit to the institution as a result of improved student outcomes (S. A.

Forrester et al., 2018). However, as esports is a burgeoning new activity in collegiate sport and campus recreation, the possibility of its inclusion as an intercollegiate, club, intramural, or recreational sport activity should first be examined as to how it affects perceptions related to the student experience.

While there may be potential for esports to positively affect specific student or institutional outcomes, it is relatively unknown as to how well esports will take to the rigid and bureaucratic environment of higher education (Bailon & Holden, 2021). As quoted in McCarthy (2019), George S. McClellan said that "because of the demonstrated connections between engagement, mattering, mentoring, meaningful connections, and retention, it makes sense that esports can boost enrollment, recruiting, and retention by attracting more students with particular interests" (p. 6). However, with few institutional examples to follow in the world of collegiate esports, university administrators are following the framework of traditional intercollegiate sports (Taylor & Stout, 2020). Nevertheless, if student interests are framed in the context of student involvement theory, perhaps creating an elite group of student intercollegiate esports athletes may not be optimal for affecting student development in pursuit of improved student experience objectives.

Summary

Based on the current gap in the literature, further research should be conducted on collegiate esports participation and its perceived effects on student experience. This exploratory study sought to learn more about how participants experienced collegiate esports and their opinions of those experiences. This included examining the well-being and socialization aspects that esports participation may foster among college students. Using phenomenology to explore

the shared experience of esports participants, we can begin to identify themes within participant perceptions that align with the theoretical framework of student involvement theory.

Exploring these student perceptions may enhance our understanding of the role of esports in higher education and also enhance the development and implementation of collegiate esports in a way that increases student involvement, well-being, and socialization. Although determining the direct effects of collegiate esports participation upon students is not the focus of this study, uncovering thematic alignment between the data and theoretical framework may allow for later expansion of this subject, providing further insight towards the development of effective institutional strategies that employ those themes through implementation of esports programs.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Phenomenology

The specific research methods selected for a study are dependent upon the type of data sought by the researcher (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Qualitative research methods allow us to examine "questions of meaning, examine institutional and social practices and processes, identify barriers and facilitators to change, and discover the reasons for the success or failure of interventions," (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007, p. 1372). Rather than testing hypotheses and theories, qualitative research seeks to inductively build them (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). It focuses on how people interpret their experiences within the world they live and aims to understand "the behaviors, perspectives, and experiences of people in their daily lives," (Sparkes & Smith, 2013, p. 14). In this study, a qualitative phenomenological approach was used as it was an appropriate method to examine phenomena that were perceived or experienced (Flood, 2010). Starks and Brown Trinidad (2007) stated:

> In phenomenology reality is comprehended through embodied experience. Through close examination of individual experiences, phenomenological analysts seek to capture the meaning and common features, or essences, of an experience or event. The truth of the event, as an abstract entity, is subjective and knowable only through embodied perception; (p. 1374)

Phenomenology can be used to examine research problems by identifying participants within a culture-sharing group (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) and attempting to define the

meaning and essence of the participants' experience (Merleau-Ponty & Bannan, 1956; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The essence of the experience is distilled from the analysis of comprehensive descriptions of personal experiences obtained by the researcher (Moustakas, 1994). In this study, the essence of the phenomenon were the student perceptions of the effects of collegiate esports participation on student experience; the shared experience being participation in organized collegiate esports.

Phenomenology "describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon" (Creswell & Poth, 2016, p. 121). The lived experiences of the phenomenon were relayed to the researcher who then described the essence of the experience for multiple individuals (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Qutoshi, 2018; Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). The qualitative aspects of a phenomenological study allowed for creation of a descriptive account of the world as experienced by the participants, preceding analysis and explanation (Merleau-Ponty & Bannan, 1956; Qutoshi, 2018). The thick description of the lived experience was then used to understand how meaning is created through perception (Sokolowski, 2000). Through these descriptions, I attempted to learn the logic of the shared experiences so that "the meanings and actions of the participants become clearer to us," (Sparkes & Smith, 2013, p. 14).

To obtain information about lived experiences, phenomenological studies commonly use the interview as the method of data collection (Moustakas, 1994; Qutoshi, 2018). For this study, the long interview was useful because the perceptions of esports participants could not be observed directly. Furthermore, since the study sought to obtain perceptions of participants, any information provided in the interview would have already been "filtered through the views of the interviewees," (Creswell & Báez, 2020, p. 239). The interview method in this study was semi-

structured and aimed to create an atmosphere in which the research participant would respond honestly to share the full experience of the phenomenon. In a qualitative study of the effects of recreational sport activity, Hall (2006) suggested that interview questions should be "intended to garner information regarding the constructs of recruitment, retention, satisfaction, and benefits of participating in a campus recreation program" (p. 44).

Through the phenomenological approach, this study sought to obtain individual viewpoints on participation in collegiate esports to refine the essence of its perceived effects on student experience (Flood, 2010).

Limitations of Phenomenology

In phenomenological study, the researcher is the primary instrument for collection of data. Descriptions of the phenomenon are obtained by the researcher, who will attempt to "set aside any prior thought, conceptions or judgement they may have so they can be open to the description," (Flood, 2010, p. 10). However, the use of the researcher as the instrument of data collection will still create some limitations due to researcher bias (Hall, 2006).

To limit the effects of bias, I followed qualitative thematic analysis guidelines to strive for openness and to be "reflective and critical towards the data, as well as how to understand meanings from the data" (Sundler et al., 2019, p. 735). This involved questioning my own understanding of the subject area to look for preconceived ideas and being aware of personal experiences and assumptions that may impact the data collection and analysis. Although I have my own limited experiences with collegiate athletics and video gaming, I do not have direct personal experience with esports or collegiate esports participation at the intercollegiate, club, intramural, or recreational levels. My experience with gaming is relatively limited, so conversations with esports participants were helpful in obtaining a rudimentary understanding of

gaming and esports culture and practices. To further reduce the influence of personal bias when collecting and analyzing the data, trustworthiness procedures of triangulation, expert review, and member checking were also used (Creswell & Báez, 2020; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Bridling

Qualitative research is subjective and under the influence of the assumptions, values, interests, emotions, and theories of the researcher (Tufford & Newman, 2012). As the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, I must be continuously aware of my own perspectives, preexisting thoughts, and beliefs (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007) when interacting with study participants and collected data.

Bridling is a concept that involves reflection on what is being investigated and how the phenomenon is interpreted by the researcher (Stutey et al., 2020). As meaning is being produced through understanding the phenomenon, the researcher's understanding must be examined introspectively (Vagle, 2009). Compared to the technique of bracketing, in which the researcher attempts to set aside any previous understanding or perceptions of the phenomenon (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007; Vagle, 2009), bridling allows for pre-understanding to be constrained so that the phenomenon is not understood too quickly or carelessly (Dahlberg & Dahlberg, 2003).

My knowledge of collegiate esports, and competitive esports in general, is limited. I have never participated directly in collegiate sports, collegiate esports, or competitive esports. Although I have recreationally played various forms of video games for most of my life, I have only recently been introduced to the environment of competitive esports. Prior to beginning this study, I was unaware of the scale and popularity of the esports industry, and I believed video games to be a casual, recreational undertaking for participants.

Throughout my graduate education, I obtained extensive experience with student organizations at my university, having founded, and served as faculty advisor for, several student clubs. These experiences allowed me to obtain a greater appreciation for the student development and community-building aspects of student organizations, particularly with competition-focused organizations.

Despite my limited exposure to collegiate esports, my personal perception is that competitive video gaming is growing in popularity and presents an exciting and inclusive category of student activities or sport programming for higher education institutions. My experience in student affairs leads me to believe that student activities structured around sport or competitive activity are similar to purpose-driven student organizations which have focused, measurable objectives to accomplish. When given the resources and support for a student organization to be competitive, in an achievable scope of activity, I believe that student development benefits are better able to manifest. However, my experiences with a pilot study on collegiate esports participation led me to believe that esports team participants are cognizant of the level of institutional support they receive and can be highly critical of their institution and administration if they deem that support to be insufficient.

Researcher Bias

Due to my limited knowledge and connection to the phenomenon being studied, I do not have an appreciable emotional investment or personal stake in the use of esports in the higher education environment. I believe that exploratory investigation of the perceived effects of collegiate esports participation is necessary to inform future research on the integration of esports into higher education. Through greater understanding of the esports experiences of

college students, we can gain valuable insights into the potential benefits of utilizing esports to affect student development in ways that have a positive effect on the student experience.

As a researcher, I recognize that I may be biased towards identifying, collecting, and interpreting data in ways that support the theoretical framework used in this study. As a researcher in the field of sport administration, I bring experiences and education into the research process that may influence how the data is interpreted. This bias includes preconceptions that sporting activity is an important part of higher education, and that finding ancillary uses for the application of sport activity is beneficial for the field of sport administration.

While I strove to maintain objectivity in this research, I recognized that my own subjectivities and preconceived notions may influence my understanding of the phenomena under investigation. Although data and analysis that support the theoretical framework may be favorable to me, I attempted to remain detached from the findings of this research. I attempted to remain continually aware that I am striving for a thorough description and analysis of the phenomenon, regardless of what direction the research took. To mitigate the impact of potential biases, this study implemented several methodological practices which are further described in this chapter.

Theoretical Perspective

A theoretical perspective for a study is a philosophical stance that informs the study's methodology, providing context for the research process and grounding the study's logic and criteria (Crotty, 1998). This research used constructivist epistemology to study a phenomenon among individuals who have shared an experience. In the constructivist theoretical perspective, the meaning of an experience is constructed through engagement and is "primarily an individualistic understanding of the constructionist position," (Crotty, 1998, p. 58). In

constructivism, knowledge accumulates through the composition of meaning with more informed and sophisticated iterations created through dialectical exchange between varying constructions (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). By adopting a constructivist theoretical perspective for this study, I attempted to "describe, understand, and interpret," (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 12) how students make sense of their experiences as collegiate esports participants.

Since each of the study's participants has engaged with the activity of collegiate esports participation, they have each constructed an independent interpretation of the experience, which was uncovered by research (Creswell & Báez, 2020). Rather than relying upon meaning making from a collective group, as in constructionism, constructivism focuses on meaning generated by the individual mind (Creswell & Báez, 2020, 2020; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Through examination of individual, and potentially conflicting constructions of meaning, common themes were identified to generate information on the phenomenon of interest.

Constructivist theory states that individuals seek to understand the world in which they live (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2016). Subjective meanings are constructed for experiences and the researcher relies on the participants' interpretations of the phenomenon being studied (Creswell & Báez, 2020; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2016; Crotty, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). As this study sought to examine individual viewpoints derived from lived experiences, constructivist theory was an apt theoretical perspective to utilize. From those individual viewpoints, codes and themes were inductively constructed (Creswell & Báez, 2020; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2016).

While the theoretical perspective guided the study's specific methodology, it also elaborated on the assumptions the methodology brought to the research (Crotty, 1998). This study assumed that each research subject was willing and able to use memories of past

experiences to construct and understand their own interpretation of reality related to the subject matter. Constructivism also assumes that multiple versions or understandings of reality can exist concurrently due to the subjective nature of how individuals interpret their lived experiences (Crotty, 1998).

Institutional Review Board

To help ensure that this exploratory study met ethical research standards, it was submitted for review by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University of Northern Colorado. As part of the IRB review process, study materials and paperwork were submitted. These documents included an informed consent form (Appendix A), recruitment materials (Appendix B), interview guide (Appendix C), and debriefing materials (Appendix D). After receiving IRB approval, I was able to begin recruiting study participants and collecting data.

Research Questions

Research questions were created to better understand the phenomenon of collegiate esports participation by obtaining perceptions of its effects on student experience. This study was guided by the following research questions:

Q1 What are the lived experiences of collegiate esports participants?

Q2 How does esports participation affect the student experience?

Data Collection

The data collection methods for this study were selected for their compatibility with phenomenology. As suggested by Creswell and Creswell (2018), decisions in the data collection process include establishing boundaries for the study, selecting data collection methods, and determining the protocol for recording data. These data collection methods were chosen for their ability to contribute to a comprehensive description of the lived experiences of study participants

(Qutoshi, 2018). The ability of the research methods to obtain an accurate depiction of participants' lived experience was essential for the authenticity of a phenomenological study (Merleau-Ponty & Bannan, 1956).

Participants

In phenomenological research, the basic requirement for study participants is that they must have experienced the phenomenon of interest (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). For this study, additional criteria for participation was established to find individuals that could contribute to greater understanding of the problem and the research questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). To find these participants, I interviewed active undergraduate student members of official, university-recognized esports programs at multiple higher education institutions in the United States. As undergraduate student members, these study participants had direct knowledge of both the activities of their institution's esports program as well as their personal experiences as university students. Additionally, this study interviewed student members who hold, or have held, administration or leadership positions within their respective esports programs. Further qualifying conditions for the study were that participants be 18 years of age or older and must have participated in at least one of their esports program's events during the previous 12 months.

To help ensure participant confidentiality, pseudonyms were used in place of real names. Each participant could opt to provide their own pseudonym for use in the publication of this research. The use of pseudonyms helped to protect the privacy of research participants by keeping their identities confidential and offering a degree of protection when providing information that could be considered sensitive or stigmatized (Kaiser, 2009). Efforts to increase

participant confidentiality may also have helped to improve the accuracy and validity of the data collected by helping to strengthen trust and rapport with study participants (Baez, 2002).

Recruitment of Participants

When recruiting participants for this study, it was desirable to purposefully select participants that could best help me to understand the research questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). While this research may have benefitted from recruiting randomly sampled participants from a broader population, "much qualitative research involves the use of purposive sampling," (Shenton, 2004, p. 65). This study required careful selection of participants that fit specific criteria and were knowledgeable in the subject matter (Benoit et al., 2005). Without the use of random sampling, a study's generalizability is limited. However, since the generalizability of phenomenological research is typically limited anyway (Benoit et al., 2005), disregarding random sampling was acceptable in this instance. After conducting a pilot study of esports participants, I was able to outline the type of information I wanted to obtain, and it was decided that a purely random sampling of participants might not be the most effective. As a result, the recruitment methods used were convenience, purposive, and snowball sampling.

Sampling

For this study, esports club participants from higher education institutions were selected for interview through non-probability sampling using convenience, purposive, and snowball sampling methods. The convenience sampling method was used to invite participants into the study "with regard to access, location, time, and willingness," (Lopez & Whitehead, 2013, p. 124). Purposive and snowball sampling allowed me to contact participants who have all experienced the phenomenon in question (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007) and could contribute to development of the essence of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Although random

sampling could help to reduce selection bias, it could be a disadvantage in this study "since the researcher has no control over the choice of informants, it is possible that quiet, uncooperative or inarticulate individuals may be selected," (Shenton, 2004, p. 65).

Because the study required participants that met specific criteria within the college student population, purposive sampling allowed me to select research subjects that met the criteria. After meeting with research subjects, they were asked to recommend additional subjects that met the research criteria and might also be willing to participate (Parker et al., 2019). Additionally, I attempted to contact student affairs officers, such as esports program advisors and coaches, at different institutions to solicit assistance in identifying potential student participants for this study (Kuh, 1993).

Since qualitative research does not establish a specific number of participants for adequate sample size (Lopez & Whitehead, 2013), the snowball sampling process continued until a reasonable number of research subjects were contacted and interviewed. While increasing the sample size of this study may have provided a larger range of data from which themes could be distilled, data collected from a small number of individuals can be sufficient for extracting the core essence of the phenomenon (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007).

Creswell and Poth (2016) state that phenomenological studies seek a group of participants "that may vary in size from 3 to 4 individuals to 10 to 15," (p. 124). "Given that an individual person can generate hundreds or thousands of concepts, large samples are not necessarily needed to generate rich data sets," (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007, p. 1374). For this study, interviews continued until a saturation point was reached in data collection (Parker et al., 2019). Additionally, due to the extensive time commitment required for transcription, Creswell and Báez (2020) recommend limiting the overall number of interviews, while Braun

and Clarke (2006) state that small sample sizes in qualitative research are due to the time-consuming nature of reviewing the data. While the sample size of this study may have been limited, qualitative studies can opt to intentionally keep sample size small in order to achieve the phenomenological aim of generating a rich description of the participant experience (Lopez & Whitehead, 2013).

Purposive and Snowball Sampling

"Snowball sampling is one of the most popular methods of sampling in qualitative research," (Parker et al., 2019, p. 3), and is frequently combined with purposive sampling. Existing study participants can provide referrals to other potential research subjects that also meet the study criteria and have been deemed as information-rich by the referrer (Creswell & Báez, 2020; Creswell & Poth, 2016). The use of purposive sampling allowed me to recruit study participants according to "pre-selected criteria relevant to a particular research question," (Lopez & Whitehead, 2013, p. 124). The combination of snowball and purposive sampling are recommended for studying hard-to-reach populations (Benoit et al., 2005). As the subjects required for this study were members of a specific subset of university students at different institutions, the combination of snowball and purposive sampling allowed me to access willing and knowledgeable participants.

Sampling Limitations

As a non-probability sampling technique, convenience sampling involves selecting the most readily available individuals to participate in a study (Lopez & Whitehead, 2013). While convenience sampling offers cost- and time-effectiveness, there are certain inherent limitations to this sampling procedure due to the subjective nature of participant selection (Etikan et al., 2016). A major limitation of convenience sampling is that it can under or over represent certain groups

within the population, introducing bias into the research findings (Etikan et al., 2016; Lopez & Whitehead, 2013).

With snowball sampling, a random sample of an overall population is often not possible. This can lead to selection bias as snowball sampling relies on the initial study participants to identify additional participants (Delello et al., 2021). This can also lead to an overrepresentation of study participants that share similar characteristics and affiliations. Purposive sampling similarly contains an inherent risk of selection bias. Bias introduced through these sampling methods can create a lack of external validity, generalizability, and representativeness in the study (Parker et al., 2019). However, given the specific population required for this study, a combination of purposive and snowball sampling were used (Benoit et al., 2005). Participants were initially selected for their ability to contribute to answering the research questions, but supplementing purposive sampling with snowball sampling methods allowed the pool of participants to be expanded beyond individuals identified through purposive sampling alone.

Recruitment Process

Recruitment was conducted by contacting the leadership of various university esports teams via phone or email and communicating who I am and the type of study I wanted to conduct. Initial contacts were made using the member institution directories available through the National Association of Collegiate Esports (NACE) and the National Esports Collegiate Conferences (NECC). For the purpose of this study, institutional membership in the NACE or NECC was not required for participation. Institutional membership within the NACE or NECC is not restricted to institutions of any particular size, region, public/private status, NCAA division, or NAIA membership within North America. By limiting participation to only NACE or NECC member institutions, the pool of potential study participants would have been reduced without

providing the benefit of increasing participant specificity in a way that distinguished those participants from students at non-member institutions. By way of the study's existing participation criteria, I contacted student members who met the basic membership requirements of either organization, without specifically restricting participation to members of any overarching organization. This allowed the study to collect data from student members, identified through purposive and snowball sampling methods, at institutions not named in those directories, if necessary.

Contacted programs were asked to recommend current members that met the study participation criteria, were willing to participate in the study, and could best contribute to the research. Once a list of prospective study participants had been created, those individuals were contacted via email and directed to complete an online Qualtrics survey that obtained qualifying, demographics, and contact information. Each participant could also provide a pseudonym to be used in place of their real name. Aliases or pseudonyms are often used in qualitative research to protect the identities of participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Following completion of the Qualtrics survey, each participant automatically received an electronic copy of the study's informed consent form. The informed consent form outlined the purpose and description of the study, as well as the nature of the interview, allowing participants to agree to the provisions of the study before providing any data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Confidentiality was addressed in the consent form and participants were assured that their real identities would be kept confidential and only used for the purposes of identification by the researcher in this study. Foreseeable risks and participant compensation were also covered, and participants were given the contact information for the Office of Research at the University of

Northern Colorado. The recruitment email and informed consent form are available in the Appendix section of this document.

After completing the online Qualtrics survey, individuals that qualified for participation in this study were contacted via email to schedule an interview at their convenience. Following completion of the interview, participants were asked to make recommendations of any additional qualified individuals that they felt could contribute to this study. If additional study participants were needed, recommended individuals were contacted by email to undergo the same qualification process as the original participants.

Research Instrument: Semi-Structured Interviews

The one-on-one, semi-structured interview was the format of data collection in this study. The constructivist perspective focuses on meaning created by the individual (Creswell & Báez, 2020; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2016; Crotty, 1998), and the assumption that the individual defines the world in unique ways is consistent with the use of a less-structured interview format (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The interview format aimed to obtain "nuanced accounts of different aspects of the interviewee's life world… precision in description and stringency in meaning interpretation correspond to exactness," (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, p. 15) although exact quantification is not the objective of qualitative study.

The semi-structured interview format is conventional in phenomenological investigations (Moustakas, 1994) and was used for its advantages over written data collection methods, which are more impersonal, impose greater cognitive burden on the participant, and are subject to less interviewer control (Bowling, 2005). The semi-structured interview is also viewed as an appropriate method for collecting people's perceptions and opinions (Kallio et al., 2016), allowing for greater focus on issues that are meaningful to the participant (Cridland et al., 2015).

In the semi-structured interview, open-ended questions allowed participants to provide "in-depth responses to questions about how they have constructed or understood their experience," (Jackson et al., 2007, p. 23). Broad and general questions were used so participants were able to construct meanings of situations (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Furthermore, the one-on-one, semi-structured interview was an appropriate choice for data collection because the topic was not sensitive to the participants, and I did not want individual responses influenced by a group setting (Creswell & Báez, 2020) as "focus groups explicitly use group interaction as part of the method," (Kitzinger, 1995, p. 299). Focus groups were omitted from this research due to their lack of congruence with the constructivist theoretical perspective. In focus groups, individual perspectives are not fully formed and are shaped by the social setting of the group environment, creating the tendency for group discussions to often reproduce normative discourse (Kitzinger, 1995).

The semi-structured interviews in this study were conducted with an interview guide using primarily open-ended questions that allowed each research participant to provide a detailed account of their lived experience regarding the phenomenon (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). For this study, I conducted interviews through a video conferencing medium. Video conferencing interviews are beneficial for qualitative study because they allow the researcher to observe body language, view facial expressions, and hear vocal inflections to allow greater insight into the participant's message (Creswell & Báez, 2020).

Since this study sought to obtain data from multiple individuals in different higher education institutions in the United States, all interviews took place via video conferencing medium. Video conferencing offered several benefits over in-person interviews, primarily in being more flexible for scheduling purposes while also being cost- and time-efficient compared

to in-person travel (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). Furthermore, the participant's right to withdraw from the study at any time (Shenton, 2004) was better retained through video conferencing since an interview could be ended with the click of a button (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014).

Interview Guide

An interview guide was created using questions adapted from Hall (Hall, 2006), Gostlin (2021), and Artinger et al., (2006). Artinger et al. (2006) conducted a study which sought to examine the social benefits of intramural sports participation for undergraduate students. Questions from this study were adapted to fit the narrower framework of exploring perceived effects of participation for a specific recreational sport. Hall's (2006) study explored the role of a campus recreation program in student retention, and while my study does not examine retention, questions from Hall's study were adapted to examine perceptions of the effects esports participation has on student experience. Finally, Gostlin's (2021) study looked at collegiate esports programs and sought to understand the reasons for their creation, how they were created, athlete recruitment and training, and operational differences between programs. This study provided guidance for interview questions to explore the lived experiences of collegiate esports participants.

The questions created in the interview guide were open-ended, and broad in scope to allow participants to more freely construct the meaning from their experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Since there is no requirement for a precise number of questions to be used in a research interview (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), this study used 17 open-ended questions that were organized in the interview guide to correspond with the research questions they sought to answer. The interview guide was relied upon to direct interview questioning to provide a degree of uniformity and consistency to the interview process between different participants.

Interview Structure

After individuals were selected and contacted for participation in the study, an appointment was made to meet at the participant's convenience. All interviews were audio recorded using both primary and backup digital audio recording devices. The audio recording was necessary so the interview could be later transcribed, reviewed, and analyzed.

Each interview began with personal introductions with audio recording initiated immediately before or after the introductions. Introductions were followed by a brief social conversation. This conversation was "aimed at creating a relaxed and trusting atmosphere," (Moustakas, 1994, p. 96) prior to the actual interview.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted, and each interview lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes. Prior to, or at the conclusion of the interview, each participant was given a document of debriefing information that contained the purpose of the study, data storage and analysis procedures, and trustworthiness procedures. Participants opting to receive compensation for their involvement were given an Amazon gift card and the University of Northern Colorado tax notice to study subjects (Appendix E). The debriefing information and tax notice to study subjects are available in the Appendix section of this document.

Transcription

Since this study involved collecting verbal data in the form of interviews, "the data will need to be transcribed into written form in order to conduct a thematic analysis," (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87). Following each interview, the primary recording was uploaded into Otter.ai software for transcription. The software provided an initial transcript of the interview proceedings which were then reviewed for accuracy and ability to answer the research questions. Each interview recording was listened to multiple times in conjunction with transcript review

(Sundler et al., 2019). The initial transcription process aimed to create a complete, verbatim transcript of the data (Sundler et al., 2019) with each speaker's statements clearly labeled.

Once the verbatim transcription was finalized, the transcript and audio recordings were reviewed again, so that the transcript could be cleaned up, making it easier to read, more grammatically correct, and free of portions that went off-topic (Carlson, 2010). This provided a partial transcript that only contained data that would be used for analysis (Carlson, 2010). Furthermore, transcripts were reviewed and edited to remove information that could directly identify individuals, however contextual identifiers from individual accounts would remain in the transcripts, and be used in the description and analysis, at my discretion (Kaiser, 2009). After cleaning up the transcripts, each version was read again several times (Tuckett, 2005) for greater understanding. Multiple readings were used to "achieve familiarity with the data through open-minded reading," (Sundler et al., 2019, p. 736) while searching for patterns and meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Additional Limitations

In a qualitative study, validity, reliability, and generalizability are not equivalent to quantitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The data being sought involves perspectives of experiences that have been filtered through the lens of the participant, therefore not occurring in real time, nor in the natural setting of the experience (Creswell & Báez, 2020; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Furthermore, the mere presence of the researcher may bias responses (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) and the researcher also brings their own expertise and personal bias into the interview setting and analysis process which may affect the results (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Although the participants may have provided a large amount of information about the phenomenon, the limited number of participants confines the generalizability of the study (Jackson et al., 2007). In a similar study of esports perceptions, Delello et al. (2021) stated that perceived data introduces bias into the study since not all participants answered every question. Similar bias was anticipated in this study as the semi-structured nature of the research interviews resulted in participants answering various questions to differing degrees. Additionally, the data collection and interpretation process of this research were subject to the communication skills of both participant and researcher.

This research was also limited by time and resource constraints which prevented potential research subjects from being accessible or willing to participate in the study. Although some participant compensation was available in this study, the compensation amount may have been insufficient to recruit or compensate all potential research subjects. Finite time and resources also constrained the ability of the researcher to collect and analyze data, limiting the scope and scale of the research to a level that was financially feasible and realistically obtainable.

Data Storage

To ensure the confidentiality and privacy of the participants, the data collected from the study was securely stored in password-protected cloud storage, with access granted only to myself (Tuckett, 2005). The use of pseudonyms instead of real names in written descriptions and analysis further safeguarded the confidentiality of the participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

To further protect the participants' privacy, full transcripts of the data will not be published, and interview recordings will not be released publicly. Within three years from the date of each interview, the recording will be destroyed. These practices will help to ensure that participant data cannot be accessed or used for any purposes beyond those outlined in this study.

Data Analysis

After data was collected from participants, I was able to create a detailed description of the shared experience from the perspective of each individual. It was my intent to interpret the meaning that participants had of their perceptions of collegiate esports to provide a rich description of the experience (Creswell & Báez, 2020; Creswell & Creswell, 2018), which is consistent with the constructivist research orientation (Creswell & Báez, 2020). Participant descriptions were examined through a six-phase thematic analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Naeem et al., 2023) in which the data was reviewed for patterns of meaning in the descriptions of participants' lived experiences (Sundler et al., 2019). In this process, open and axial coding was used to identify and categorize patterns of meaning that emerged from the participants' unique understanding of their personal experiences.

"Codes," were identified in the data as grouped descriptions of lived experiences that were related to the research questions (Sundler et al., 2019). Codes "can be found on the basis of understanding the meaning of keywords used by participants," (Naeem et al., 2023, p. 2). Initial codes were examined through an inductive process of axial coding to create a more coherent and interconnected arrangement of the data. The axial coding process grouped and organized codes into patterns, and eventually, themes (Sundler et al., 2019). Broader themes derived from the data could then be used to construct generalizations or theory about the phenomenon (Creswell & Báez, 2020; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The first phase of the data analysis process began with transcription of the research interviews, which were then cleaned up and reviewed multiple times to obtain a general sense of the data and to reflect on its overall meaning (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Sundler et al., 2019). Each individual interview represented a data item within the overall data set of all interviews for

this study (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After becoming familiar with the data set, the second phase of data analysis involved generating an initial list of data extracts, which were individual chunks of data, "identified within, and extracted from, a data item," (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

During this phase, repeated readings of interview transcripts were performed and descriptions of lived experiences that were relevant to the research questions were identified, extracted, and annotated. The data extracts were pieces of data that were interesting to the analyst (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For this study, these extracts identified features of the data that could contribute to answering the research questions. The excerpts of these lived experiences were noted and annotated, representing the first attempt at coding the data (Tuckett, 2005).

Annotations were used to help generate initial ideas for further categorizing these data extracts during the analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Sundler et al., 2019; Tuckett, 2005). Relevant information was separated from irrelevant information based on how the data related to the topic and research questions (Fayyaz, 2023). Additionally, this open coding phase was aided by identifying or designating keywords, derived from the data, that "encapsulate the participants' experiences and perceptions," (Naeem et al., 2023, p. 4).

Once an initial list of data extracts was created, axial coding was used to further group, separate, or sub-divide those extracts while generating possible categories, or codes, for similarly grouped data extracts. Further review of the interview transcripts allowed supportive data to be added to the initial list of codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During code generation, relevant data was examined and divided in an attempt to get each data extract to represent a specific thought (Fayyaz, 2023).

Following initial coding, phase three of data analysis involved taking the complete list of codes and sorting them into potential themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Naeem et al., 2023;

Sundler et al., 2019) which could offer insight into the research questions (Naeem et al., 2023). Each theme represented a particular meaning of the phenomenon as it was experienced (Fayyaz, 2023). Relevant transcript data would also be incorporated into the list of themes, creating a consolidated list of overarching themes with supporting data. By the end of phase three of data analysis, I had created a tentative list of potential themes and sub-themes organized with segments of interview data to support each (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In phase four of data analysis, the list of potential themes was reviewed to look for commonality (Fayyaz, 2023). Themes with insufficient supporting data may have been reorganized or consolidated with other themes while themes with more data may have required division into separate themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The reorganization and consolidation process involved reviewing all supporting data for each theme to evaluate their ability to contribute to a pattern (Creswell & Báez, 2020; Donovan & Blake, 2000). If the data did not form a pattern that could be used to support the theme, then the theme could be reorganized, or the data excerpts could be reevaluated for their fit with their assigned theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Following the reorganization of data and themes, the entire data set was examined again to assess the overall fit of the remaining proposed themes and to assign any additional data that may not have been coded earlier in the data analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

With a more finalized list of themes established, phase five involved identifying the essence of each theme and naming it appropriately (Braun & Clarke, 2006). “The explicit naming of the themes must describe the meanings of lived experiences in the actual context,” (Sundler et al., 2019, p. 736). Each theme was described with meaningful text (Sundler et al., 2019), containing relevant portions of interview data along with a summary of why the data is important.

Phase six involved a final write-up of the overall thematic analysis to provide an account of the story derived from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes were then compared to the literature (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Naeem et al., 2023) on student involvement theory. This written account aimed to provide a rich, thick description of the phenomenon. "A description is rich if it provides abundant, interconnected details, and possibly cultural complexity, but it becomes thick description if it offers direct connection to cultural theory and scientific knowledge," (Stake, 2010, p. 49). By providing a detailed description of the shared experience and then establishing themes for comparison to the theoretical underpinnings of the study, I was able to explain what was experienced and how it was experienced by the participants, generating the essence of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, the researcher "makes all the judgements about coding, categorizing, decontextualizing, and recontextualizing the data," (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007, p. 1376). Due to the subjective nature of qualitative research, appropriate trustworthiness procedures are necessary to help ensure the quality of the findings. Trustworthiness aims to provide context to assure the audience that the findings of a study are truthful, applicable, consistent, and neutral (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Trustworthiness procedures were implemented in this study to increase the reader's confidence that data was "appropriately and ethically collected, analyzed, and reported," (Carlson, 2010, p. 1103).

Trustworthiness Procedure: Triangulation

To help ensure the validity of data, multiple sources were used (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Shenton, 2004). Triangulation involves the examination of data from different sources to validate the accuracy of the information obtained (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Miller, 2000).

"Data may be collected from different people or groups, at different times, and from different places," (Carlson, 2010, p. 1104). By using multiple individuals as data sources, "individual viewpoints and experiences can be verified against others and, ultimately, a rich picture of the attitudes, needs or behavior of those under scrutiny may be constructed," (Shenton, 2004, p. 66).

For this study, the source of data was participant interviews. When a code was identified in the data, additional data sources were examined to establish corroboration for further development, or consolidation, of the code into a theme. By substantiating data from different sources, it is more likely that the conclusions will be trustworthy (Carlson, 2010; Maxwell, 2012; Shenton, 2004). Additionally, this study used site triangulation by obtaining data from individuals at different higher education institutions in the United States. Site triangulation can help to reduce potential local effects that may be particular to any one institution used in the study (Shenton, 2004). Similar findings that occur in multiple sites, among multiple individuals, can help to increase the credibility of the data analysis (Shenton, 2004).

Trustworthiness Procedure: Expert Review

Expert review for this study involved an examination and critique by "someone who is familiar with the research or the phenomenon explored (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 129). The expert reviewers examined the study's research questions and interview guide, helping to refine the study methodology and interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). An external reviewer can bring a fresh perspective to the research, which is necessary when the primary researcher's familiarity with the research can inhibit the ability to view the work with indifference (Shenton, 2004).

Expert review of the research questions and the interview guide helped to increase the credibility of the study by addressing concerns about internal validity (Maxwell, 2012). Internal

validity refers to the degree to which a study "measures or tests what is actually intended," (Shenton, 2004, p. 64). Since this is a qualitative, phenomenological study, experts in qualitative research methods were consulted to help ensure that the research questions were appropriate, given the purpose of the study. Additionally, the qualitative experts reviewed the interview guide to ensure that the interview questions were appropriately aligned with the research questions so they could gather the intended data from the research participants.

Expert reviewer #1 was Maria Lahman, Ph.D. from the University of Northern Colorado. Dr. Lahman is a professor of Applied Statistics and Research Methods with over 20 years of experience, specializing in qualitative research methods, early childhood education, research ethics, and diversity. Expert reviewer #2 was Alan Morse, Ph.D. also from the University of Northern Colorado. Dr. Morse is a professor of Sport Administration with over 15 years of research experience and a background in qualitative research methodology. Dr. Morse is also the Director of the Sport Marketing Research Institute. Expert reviewer #3 was Dannon Cox, Ph.D., also from the University of Northern Colorado. Dr. Cox is a professor of Community Health Education in the Colorado School of Public Health and specializes in qualitative research.

Trustworthiness Procedure: Member Checking

Lincoln and Guba (1985) state that member checking is "the most critical technique for establishing credibility" (p. 314) in a study. The member checking process in this study involved submitting transcripts (Carlson, 2010), analyses and interpretations to participants for review (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2016). "Commonly, participants are given transcripts or particles from the narratives they contributed during interview sessions and are asked to verify their accuracy," (Carlson, 2010). Following transcription of each research interview, participants were able to review the transcript and submit corrections or clarifications

to increase its accuracy. Each participant was emailed a copy of their interview transcript and given one week to confirm its accuracy (Cox, 2020).

Following the data analysis process, research participants had the opportunity to provide feedback on interpretations, helping to reduce the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning and perspectives in their data (Maxwell, 2012). When provided with a summary of their interview analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), participants were asked if the codes made sense, "whether they are developed with sufficient evidence, and whether the overall account is realistic and accurate" (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 127). Involving the participants in the data analysis process allows the interpretations of data to more accurately represent their authentic perceptions rather than relying purely on the researcher's interpretations (Dockett et al., 2009; Jackson et al., 2007; Shenton, 2004).

Providing feedback to participants also acknowledges their commitment to participation in the research process and may contribute to a more positive experience overall (Cridland et al., 2015). Similar to transcript verification, each participant was emailed a copy of the analysis of their interview and given one week to confirm its accuracy. While member checking, participation was limited to a review of the transcripts and early interpretations (Carlson, 2010), stopping short of allowing participation in development of conclusions, implications, policy suggestions, and further research suggestions.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to understand, rather than to explain (Jackson et al., 2007), the lived experiences of collegiate esports participants. With this objective in mind, a phenomenological approach, utilizing the constructivist theoretical perspective, was appropriate for this study. Methodology consistent with phenomenology and constructivism was used to

obtain detailed descriptions of participants' lived experiences and the individual meaning they have created for those experiences. Chapter III provides the procedures that were used for this dissertation along with an overview of the theoretical perspective that the research methodology was organized around. Chapter III also provides information on the data analysis process, a discussion of research limitations, and trustworthiness procedures.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this chapter is to provide new information into the phenomenon of collegiate esports participation and its perceived effects on student experience. The findings from this study and the discussion of this phenomenon can help higher education administrators gain a deeper understanding of how collegiate esports participants perceive and make meaning of their experiences, and how those experiences affect perceptions of their student experience.

Chapter IV will present and explain the findings of this phenomenological exploratory study. Participants were recruited through convenience, purposive, and snowball sampling methods following contact with various collegiate esports programs in the United States. Data was collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with current undergraduate esports program members at colleges and universities in the United States. The students selected for this study reflected a population of participants that esports program members, coaches, student affairs staff members, and/or faculty advisors felt could contribute insightful and well-informed data to the study. Participant identities were protected using pseudonyms, selected by the participant, or assigned by the researcher. Personal information was aggregated to help protect confidentiality. Tables 4.1 through 4.7 show participant demographic and student information. Table 4.8 displays the games participants played within their esports program.

Table 4.1

Gender

Gender	Number of Participants
Female	1
Male	10

Table 4.2

Age

Age	Number of Participants
19	2
20	4
21	3
22	1
23	1

Table 4.3

Ethnicity

Ethnicity	Number of Participants
American Indian/Alaska Native	1
Hispanic/White	1
Japanese	1
Middle Eastern	2
White	6

Table 4.4

School Location

U.S. Region	Number of Participants
Midwest	1
Northeast	4
South	3
West	3

Table 4.5

Major

Major	Number of Participants
Accounting	1
Biology	1
Criminal Justice	1
Computer Engineering	1
Computer Science	2
Marketing and Business	1
Meteorology	1
Neuroscience	1
Premed	1
Undeclared	1

Table 4.6

International Students

International Students	Number of Participants
Yes	0
No	11

Table 4.7

First Generation Students

First Generation Students	Number of Participants
Yes	5
No	6

Table 4.8

Games Played

Games	Number of Participants
Brawlhalla	1
Overwatch 2	1
Rainbow Six Siege	1
Rocket League	2
Valorant	7

*One participant played both Valorant and Rocket League

The data obtained in this exploratory study was used to analyze the shared experience for each individual using thematic analysis. In the thematic analysis approach, data obtained from participant interviews was examined for patterns of meaning in the descriptions of the participants' lived experiences (Sundler et al., 2019). Open and axial coding were used to identify and categorize patterns of meaning, from the participants' descriptions of lived experiences, as those experiences related to the research questions. Unique and similar codes were identified among the different participants' interview transcripts.

During the open coding process, patterns of meaning were identified through the usage and knowledge of keywords found in descriptions of lived experiences (Naeem et al., 2023). Axial coding was then used to examine the initial list of codes and arrange them through an inductive process that interconnected the data, grouping similar codes into patterns and themes (Sundler et al., 2019). For this study, recurring patterns found in a minimum of one third of the participant interviews were considered for consolidation into themes (Larkin et al., 2012). The goal of the thematic analysis was to categorize the data into themes that could describe the perceived effects of collegiate esports participation on student experience in higher education.

The research questions were:

Q1 What are the lived experiences of collegiate esports participants?

Q2 How does esports participation affect the student experience?

To answer the research questions, a phenomenological exploratory study was conducted with student members of officially recognized esports programs at higher education institutions in the United States. Data was collected through individual, semi-structured interviews with the researcher acting as the data collection instrument. Each interview was audio recorded with the permission of the participant. Participants were asked to describe their experiences as they related to the research questions.

The interview guide expanded upon each research question with related queries and topics for the participants to discuss. Participants were also free to address related experiences and topics, as they saw fit, throughout the interview. Following each interview, the audio recording was downloaded to password protected cloud storage and transcribed by the researcher with the use of Otter.ai transcription software. After interviews were transcribed, thematic analysis was conducted to determine the results presented in this chapter.

The first round of analysis was conducted through a review of each interview transcript (Donovan & Blake, 2000). Specific statements within each transcript were identified as meaningful descriptions of the participant's lived experiences. These identified statements were assigned codes to summarize and categorize the essence of that experience. Each transcript was read multiple times to identify additional meaningful experiences and clarify existing, or assign additional, codes to the data. Table 4.9 provides the initial list of codes from the first round of analysis.

Table 4.9

First Round of Analysis

Identified Codes
Administration Wants Success
Administrative Responsibilities
Business and Administration Skills
Communication
Community
Competitiveness
Confidence
Early Exposure to Video Games
Enriching
Esports Unknown
Esports Misunderstood
Friendship
High Importance of Esports
Leadership
Meeting Others
Mental Toughness
Need Adequate Institutional Support
Prior Competitive Esports Experience
Strong Personal Relationships
Team Bonding
Time and Energy Investment
Value of In-Person Environment
Welcoming and Inclusive

During the second round of analysis, all extracted statements were examined again for coding accuracy. Quotes and their assigned codes were compared to one another to determine if code consolidation, or reclassification, was warranted (Donovan & Blake, 2000; Tuckett, 2005). Table 4.10 provides a condensed list of codes from the second round of analysis.

Table 4.10

Second Round of Analysis

Identified Codes
Administrative Responsibilities
Communication
Community
Competitiveness
Confidence
Esports Not Well Understood
Leadership
Mental Toughness
Social Engagement
Strong Personal Relationships
Supportive but Lack of Follow-Through
Team Bonding
Time and Energy Investment
Welcoming and Inclusive

Following consolidation of quotes and codes, each code was examined with its associated quotes to develop more descriptive themes to address the study's research questions. Quotes were assessed to interpret them in relation to what participants experienced and how that affected their overall student experience. Table 4.11 provides a list of themes following the third round of analysis.

Table 4.11

Themes

Themes
Theme 1: Student Development
Theme 2: Administration Verbally Supportive, but Lack of Follow-Through
Theme 3: Esports not Understood, Respected, or Legitimate
Theme 4: Team Bonding
Theme 5: Welcoming and Inclusive

Theme 1: Student Development

Esports participants engaged in a variety of activities that contributed to their program's competitive video gaming success. Some activities were tied directly to video gaming, including the learning, development, and enhancement of gameplay skills and strategies necessary for high-level esports competition. Other activities were indirectly related to video gaming success, typically involving administrative responsibilities that supported the coordination of successful esports teams and advanced the objectives of the overall esports program. These administrative responsibilities included activities such as team management, scheduling, accounting, marketing, and communications.

While these administrative duties were not directly related to the improvement of gameplay, they played a critical role in facilitating a program environment conducive to success in the highly competitive world of collegiate esports. Unlike conventional college athletics teams who enjoyed professional coaching staff and administrative support provided by the institution, most study participants admitted that they themselves often acted as esports program

administrators. While the added administrative responsibilities created additional workload for esports participants, these administrative responsibilities also created development opportunities where students could grow and mature in a variety of areas. Table 4.12 provides supporting data to describe participants' experiences with administrative responsibilities along with areas of student development associated with those responsibilities.

Table 4.12

Supporting Data Theme 1: Student Development

Theme 1: Student Development		
Participant	**Supporting Data**	**Student Development Areas**
Dimitrius	I handle all external communication… I maintain all of our sponsors, and I'm the one who draws up our packages… I also handle all of our social media… wherever we're posting content, I oversee that. And I handle all of our marketing…	Communication Leadership Marketing Problem Solving Stakeholder Management Strategic Planning Time Management
Jeff	We just got a new gaming lab, so we've been working out hours for that, working schedules for that, trying to match everything, make sure that everyone has an opportunity to use the new gaming lab... I don't have a manager, so I've been also doing those roles too… That entails scheduling everything, scheduling practice time, scheduling scrim time, keeping up with all of the players… reaching out to other teams, other colleges, trying to practice with them.	Communication Leadership Networking Organization Problem Solving Project Management Time Management
Luck	We do scheduling, we'll cooperate with the media team to figure out what the posts are going to be… We'll also talk to recruits and such… Setting up a [arena] schedule...	Communication Leadership Networking Organization Problem Solving Project Management Teamwork
Sterling	…we're always trying to put up an event for our community, and I think we do about three or four a year and try and get above 100 people each. So, I'm sort of leading teams into creating these events, promoting these events, managing these events… I'm making sure that… the last person walking out the door is [contented] and happy. That's sort of my job.	Communication Financial Management Leadership Marketing Networking Project Management Teamwork Time Management

Table 4.12, continued

Participant	Supporting Data	Student Development Areas
Wow	I'm kind of the one that runs the events, runs the teams, makes sure people are following the rules. If we are planning to travel somewhere, it will go through me and I'm the one that books things or talks to my overhead… I'm kind of the guy to make the decisions.	Communication Critical Thinking Ethics Financial Management Leadership Project Management Teamwork Time Management
Zee	…I tell the team what the schedules are... I set up the practices. I set up the tournaments. I set up the meetings… I'm also trying to find coaches… So, I'm the head manager...	Communication Confidence Leadership Networking Organization Problem Solving Time Management

Theme 2: Administration Verbally Supportive, but Lack of Follow-Through

In establishing, building, and/or maintaining their school's esports program, participants interacted with institutional administrators to acquire the space, funding, and support that they needed. While a few participants reported that they experienced strong support from their administration, most programs perceived that success was desired, but not supported to the degree necessary for success. Administration's lack of follow-through towards esports implementation in higher education, and an unfamiliarity with the industry, were common perceptions among participants who felt their programs lacked sufficient institutional support.

Within the programs that did experience administrator enthusiasm for esports, it appears that their programs' success may have preceded the institutional support that was now being lavished upon them. This demonstrates the possibility that esports programs may need to have competitive success and student engagement first before institutional support increases.

Programs may also fail to consider that administrators might be evaluating esports programs through other metrics, such as improved student outcomes. Table 4.13 provides supporting data to describe participants' perceptions of their institution's administration and their enthusiasm or reluctance in supporting the esports program.

Table 4.13

Supporting Data Theme 2: Administration Verbally Supportive, but Lack of Follow-Through

Theme 2: Administration Verbally Supportive, but Lack of Follow-Through		
Participant	**Supporting Data**	**Summary**
Dimitrius	…I think most [administrators] recognize [esports'] potential, but very few of them are willing to tap into it... They think maybe 10, 15 years it's going to be a big thing… I think they view it in a positive light overall, there's just hesitation… I think it could be really big for [administrators] to endorse [esports] on a higher level than just verbally telling us that they support us.	Administrators view esports positively and see potential for future growth but hesitate to actively engage or invest in esports at the present time.
Felix	I think all the administrators that I've talked to, they're like, 'Yeah, let's get esports. Yay, it's gonna be a great thing.' But then, when I was thrown in charge of it, they just kind of threw me out there because they're like, 'You can take care of it.' I'm like, 'Okay, I'm just one guy. I'm not getting paid for any of this, and I have to manage nine teams.' I don't think that's very fair for the president of the club to deal with...	While administrators verbally express enthusiasm for collegiate esports, the actual support provided is incongruent. The students feel abandoned by administration when they have to bear all responsibility for the coordination of a large esports program.
Jay	…a lot [of administrators] think it's good because of the amount of engagement we get from other students… because of the amount of students that are interested and want to compete, they see the need for it, but I don't know if they fully grasp what it is. They're just putting a budget.	Administrators fail to understand that esports programs require budget and administrative support like conventional college athletics teams.
Jeff	…[esports is] not necessarily viewed the same way football would be, like basketball would be… there isn't really any incentive for [college administrators] to view it as anything… I think the only way to actually make them think about it is to actually win a big tournament, because once they see collegiate teams starting to actually win, they're like, 'Now we actually need to focus on it.'	Disparity in recognition between esports and traditional sports among college administrators. Esports current profile does not warrant greater institutional support, until greater success is achieved.

Table 4.13, continued

Participant	Supporting Data	Summary
Luck	…they're not really willing to do much for [esports] just yet. It seems like they were very interested… but they weren't super excited to actually help provide, or donate money to the program… I think it's more how new it is to them.	Unfamiliarity with esports caused administrators to be enthusiastic about the student response, but hesitant in providing actual support for the program.
nghtwng	…a big thing that a lot of schools miss is that they think that the school will back them if they just win… The school wants to see numbers, they want to see student retention. They want to see, 'Hey, the esports program is making good students that are getting jobs out of college that are representing what a [school name redacted] student looks like.'	Administrators are less interested in winning, and more interested in tangible student outcomes that provide evidence that esports programs contribute positively to the educational experience.
Sterling	a year ago… [college administrators] don't even recognize [esports]… But, because [company name redacted] and [company name redacted] sponsored a gaming lounge here, now, it's the only thing that they can talk about… They pretty much neglected us… and then they put a lot more money into football and whatnot. And now they're showing up at our events, saying that, 'Oh, we're gonna give a lot of funding to these esports players.'	The esports program was neglected by administrators until corporate funding helped build a campus gaming lounge. Now, the same administrators are enthusiastic about esports, now that they've seen the money it generates.
Wow	…we're one of, if not the biggest program at the school… So, we get looked upon like, 'Yo these guys are rockin' right now. They're doing great.' So, I think a lot of these administrators, they kind of view it more positively… and our administrators, they give us more of a budget as well because of how positive and how many people we have.	The esports program has a large student membership prompting administration to provide more support. With more resources, the esports program can recruit and retain more members.

Theme 3: Esports Not Understood, Respected, or Legitimate

Participants report assigning a high degree of importance to their esports activities. This is reflected in the time and energy invested into their esports programs and the betterment of their gameplay skills. While participants' dedication reflects their values, they express a sense of

frustration concerning the general sentiment towards esports that they perceive among administrators and the larger campus community. Students external to the collegiate esports program appear to be unabashedly vocal in expressing their skepticism and dismissal of esports as a legitimate competitive activity or worthwhile pursuit.

The overall lack of knowledge regarding esports and the esports industry's scope and scale are juxtaposed with the knowledge and prestige of more commonly known, traditional athletics. This may lead to an unfair comparison between esports and traditional sports, with esports falling behind in comparison due to the lack of public awareness and knowledge. Table 4.14 provides supporting data to describe participants' perceptions of how esports is not understood, respected, or legitimate in the minds of the overall campus community.

Table 4.14

Supporting Data Theme 3: Esports Not Understood, Respected, or Legitimate

Theme 3: Esports Not Understood, Respected, or Legitimate		
Participant	**Supporting Data**	**Summary**
Dimitrius	…there's always going to be those people that are like, 'Oh, esports it's not real sport,' or, 'It's not worth the time you put into it,' or, 'It's not a real thing. It's just for fun.'	Poor understanding and lack of respect for esports competition is reflected in being dismissive and stating that esports lacks legitimacy.
Felix	…people just think you're just sitting there being lazy. 'Oh, esports is not really a sport." The biggest issue that I see is external students thinking that collegiate esports is a joke.	Participants experience frustration regarding public perception of esports and the perceived lack of legitimacy.
Jeff	I would assume most of them probably don't even know that it exists. Most people probably don't even think about it, because esports, especially at the collegiate level, isn't a huge thing. So it probably isn't even a thought in their head.	Esports, particularly at the college level, lacks widespread awareness and significance among the general student population.
Luck	They don't understand how there's teams within the team... and then also the overall… how you compete against each other, how different leagues work… A lot of the time, there's one off tournaments or qualifiers to get into those playoffs or tournaments... And also, to make it even more complicated, usually, every game is different.	The complexity of esports competitions and variance between leagues and game titles adds to the public's lack of understanding. This sense of bewilderment may be off putting to external parties.
Sterling	I think what they're missing is that it is a sport. I think right now… there's sports and then there's gaming, and there's not intersectionality… And I think it's really, really difficult to separate the two for them.	The general public sees a clear distinction between conventional sports and gaming. It is challenging for people to recognize the similarities between the two.

Table 4.14, continued

Participant	Supporting Data	Summary
Winslow	…there's just a lot of stigma around wanting to play [video] games professionally, and not even professionally, just wanting to play games, as opposed to a physical sport… I'm afraid to be like, 'Yeah, I want to play this game professionally.'	Lack of awareness and interest for esports, compared to traditional sports, creates stigma for esports competitors.
Wow	One of my teacher assistants… said, 'Hey, are any of y'all involved with esports at all? I don't really get it.' He didn't really see the appeal… [he would] rather just use it casually… He didn't really get it.	Students perceive the sentiment expressed towards esports is one of misunderstanding and lack of interest. Video games are viewed as a leisure activity rather than competitive sport.
Zee	I think they don't know what it is. I think a lot of it is they're just like, 'Oh, you're just gaming,' but they don't understand what gaming is when it comes to esports itself, because people game all the time. But I don't think they understand we play to win. We play to get our tournaments, get our money.	While gaming is popular among the general population, they equate gaming with esports and don't understand the difference between the two.

Theme 4: Team Bonding

Participants reported that they experienced a profound sense of team bonding while involved with their esports program. The high value participants placed on esports, combined with intense competitiveness, fostered strong interpersonal relationships based on shared interests and the necessity of cooperation and mutual support. By having close personal bonds and a thorough understanding of one another, teammates developed a level of camaraderie and trust that were essential for high level esports competition and program success.

For esports participants, the professional relationships they developed with teammates transcended gameplay and evolved into supportive and caring friend groups and personal relationships. These experiences help to illustrate the transformative nature of the esports

experience in higher education, helping students to create and develop relationships with others, improving their overall student experience. Table 4.15 provides supporting data to describe perceptions of how the student experience was affected by team bonding through esports participation.

Table 4.15

Supporting Data Theme 4: Team Bonding

Theme 4: Team Bonding		
Participant	**Supporting Data**	**Summary**
Felix	…you and your team have to be one. You guys have strengths and weaknesses, and you all have to work together. I think esports is one of the only sports that really [does] require a very fundamental level of understanding your teammates, how they play, how can we make or break it on our team… that teamwork and dynamic is really, really important.	Unity and collaboration are critically important to the success of an esports team. This involves a deep understanding of, and familiarity with, fellow teammates.
Jay	I really enjoy being part of a team… It's kind of like being part of something bigger than just yourself. So one of the reasons I also joined esports at my college is I broke my knee during my first semester, and I normally play baseball. So not having that camaraderie kind of made it hard to learn, without an outlet.	Teamwork and being part of a group are important components of a positive college experience. The move from baseball to esports highlights transition to a parallel competitive activity.
Luck	So my teammates are [student name redacted] and [student name redacted]. [student name redacted] is the teammate that I've had since freshman year, and he's one of my best friends at school. He's like my ride or die. We'll go through anything together.	The participant experienced a deep sense of camaraderie and loyalty to his teammate that has endured over his college career.
nghtwng	Community like [the Overwatch team], it's engaging. They're always wanting to play with each other outside of practice time and games, it's always like, 'Hey, you want to duo later?" It's more or less just like this tight knit family that, once the games and everything is done, they still communicate, they still chat, they stay in contact.	The participant experienced strong engagement and camaraderie among team members, noting that interactions extended beyond purely professional relationships.

Table 4.15, continued

Participant	Supporting Data	Summary
Three	…the five that we have right now including myself are like brothers because we've known each other for a year and we're not afraid to tell each other what we need to improve on to become the number one team… it's like a brother where I can talk to them outside the game, and as a friend.	Team members shared a brotherly bond characterized by open communication and mutual support. Good professional relationships extended into close personal relationships.
Winslow	I feel that we're bonded, both by growing as a team and wanting to improve as individual players…	Close bonds with team members were created through shared objectives and individual growth.
Wow	What I felt through esports… I feel way more tightly knit friendships… The esports guys, it's way different. Because if it's through the game… we kind of bond [with] each other. We already have something to bond over with each other in terms of the game.	There was a strong sense of camaraderie within the esports community, with shared interests helping to facilitate meaningful relationships.
Zee	…seeing my teammates play and stay committed, it kind of drives me more to be like, 'I'm gonna do more for you. I'm gonna help you more. I'm gonna get you where you want to be.' I had all the support of every other coordinator for Overwatch, all these other teams... They're like, 'You got this. If you need anything, I got you. We're a team. We got this together…'	Dedication from teammates sparked motivation to contribute more to meeting the team's objectives. Support was interconnected between teams within the overall esports program.

Theme 5: Welcoming and Inclusive

Participants were overwhelmingly positive when recounting the welcoming and inclusive nature of their collegiate esports experience. The esports environment was comfortable and home-like, allowing a diverse array of students to find like-minded others to develop a community of their own. The broad array of demographic characteristics present in the various esports programs serves as an example for organizational diversity in higher education, predicated on a shared competitive interest that is widely inclusive. Table 4.16 provides

supporting data to describe the welcoming and inclusive environment of campus esports programs experienced by study participants.

Table 4.16

Supporting Data Theme 5: Welcoming and Inclusive

Theme 5: Welcoming and Inclusive		
Participant	**Supporting Data**	**Summary**
Dimitrius	One of the great things about esports is that anyone can really do it. Your height, or your weight, or your coordination, your balance, your athletic ability, none of that, it doesn't really have much of a factor in esports… We get a very, very, very diverse group of people, in terms of ethnicities, background demographics, hometowns, whatever it may be.	Physical attributes don't significantly impact one's ability to compete in esports. This led to the program having a diverse group of participants, highlighting the broad appeal and inclusivity of esports.
Felix	…there's people, they like video games, they like coming in [the esports room] and playing. It feels like home to them… Anyone who comes to that door, this room, this room is family. This room is designed to be a second home…	The participant found comfort and familiarity within the esports environment and encouraged that sense of belonging to be shared with anyone else that came to the esports room.
Jay	[Esports is] pretty diverse, surprisingly, at our school. Most people would expect a lot of [esports members] not to do physical sports, but for my first three semesters, every single person that was on an esports team was also a part of a physical sport… It's a very mixed group.	The participant was surprised to find that the esports program was composed of students who all competed on conventional sports teams alongside esports.
Jeff	…one thing that is being pushed for very heavily in esports is equality. So yeah, we have a girl on our team. On the Overwatch team right now, there's at least a couple of girls. So yeah, I think that we do focus on trying to do that.	There was a positive and proactive attitude towards promoting equality and inclusivity in the esports program.
Luck	…this year it's actually gotten way more diverse. There's quite a few woman now on various teams and rosters… These past two years it's kind of picked up a lot.	Gender diversity on esports teams has increased over time with more women becoming involved with the esports program.

Table 4.16, continued

Participant	Supporting Data	Summary
Sterling	I think we're definitely one of the biggest clubs for diversity… [school name redacted] gaming is… a lot of people who are LGBTQ+, a lot of people who actually have marginalized genders... There's a lot of people from different backgrounds, ethnicities, races at our club… Anyone can do esports. It doesn't matter if you're 18 or 55. It doesn't matter if you're male or female. If you weigh 100 pounds or 300 pounds.	The esports program provides campus with an example of organizational diversity and inclusivity, encompassing gender, sexual, age, physical, and ethnic diversity into their membership.
Winslow	I feel like we're pretty welcoming and pretty inclusive. And our gaming stuff, not just esports, even tabletop stuff like D&D, everybody from everywhere comes to play our games. I feel like we're just excited to have people to share our stuff with.	The campus gaming community fosters an open and welcoming environment based on shared enthusiasm for various gaming platforms.
Wow	I came into college, very anxious, very stressed. Not knowing if I [would] find my people and my friend group. I remember going to an esports event, finding the [school name redacted] guys… and they really just took me underneath their wings, and I ended up having my own community, things to look forward to… Having that group and that community there to be like, 'Hey, we're here for you. We'll take you in,' that definitely skyrocketed my college experience, and I was also able to make a whole lot of best friends out of this.	The welcoming nature of the esports program guided this participant into the campus community, offering a sense of belonging that enhanced the student's college experience.
Zee	I can definitely see where I belong. I belong in this esports club because it's like home for me because of the people that run the esports room and just the energy that esports gives off. It's very homey and it's very respectful.	This participant experienced a strong sense of belonging with the esports program, initiated by the program's warm and welcoming environment.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that there are several major themes within the lived experiences of collegiate esports participants. These themes, in turn, affected perceptions of the overall student experience. These themes included: 1) student development benefits that were

generated through esports-related administrative responsibilities, 2) a lack of follow-through from institutional administrators, who were verbally supportive of esports, 3) a feeling that among administrators, and the larger student population, esports lacked understanding, respect, and legitimacy, 4) a strong sense of team bonding experienced by participants, and 5) a welcoming and inclusive environment within the esports community. The following chapter will expand upon how these themes affected the participants' student experience, as well as discuss possible practical implications and future research opportunities.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Phenomenon of Collegiate Esports Participation and its Perceived Effects on Student Experience

The phenomenon of collegiate esports participation and its perceived effects on student experience is something that must be monitored as the gaming and esports industry continues to grow. Colleges and universities must continually diversify their programmatic offerings to adapt to the needs of an ever-changing student population (Hernandez et al., 1999) in the increasingly competitive higher education marketplace. Like other intercollegiate sports, club sports, and recreational sport programs in colleges and universities, collegiate esports has the potential to create benefits for student integration, development, and ultimately, the student experience (Artinger et al., 2006; Belch et al., 2001).

Although esports may have considerable potential to influence the student experience, the data suggests that implementing a collegiate esports program is not as simple as merely designating one in name. Like other new collegiate athletics or student affairs programs, esports must be shepherded onto college campuses and supported in ways that allow the beneficial aspects to be realized while minimizing the potential negatives. This chapter will discuss the phenomenon of collegiate esports participation and its perceived effects on student experience. Practical implications and suggestions for college administrators will also be discussed, along with suggestions for future research on this topic.

The purpose of this study's qualitative methodology was to better understand "human beings' experiences in a humanistic, interpretive approach," (Jackson et al., 2007, p. 21). The

qualitative approach allowed participants to provide in-depth descriptions of personal interpretations of their experiences within collegiate esports. The research in this study was conducted within the context of a specific environment which allowed for detailed descriptions and themes to be developed. However, due to the highly individualized and interpretive nature of the data collected, a phenomenological study of this type is typically not generalizable to larger populations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The constructivist approach was employed for this study to facilitate a comprehensive exploration of participants' unique experiences and interpretations. This approach allowed me to obtain a deeper understanding of how participants individually constructed meaning for themselves. To learn more about the participants' experiences, the following research questions were used:

Q1 What are the lived experiences of collegiate esports participants?

Q2 How does esports participation affect the student experience?

The research questions were addressed through open-ended interview questions to uncover specific details, and the essence of, each topic. Five main themes were developed through analysis of the data. These themes contributed to developing an overall picture of collegiate esports participation and a better understanding of how its effects on the college experience were perceived. Themes are provided in Table 5.1.

Table 5.1

Themes

Themes
Theme 1: Student Development
Theme 2: Administration Verbally Supportive, but Lack of Follow-Through
Theme 3: Esports not Understood, Respected, or Legitimate
Theme 4: Team Bonding
Theme 5: Welcoming and Inclusive

Many of the findings in this study were congruent with ideas related to student involvement theory. In general, with greater levels of student involvement in the campus community, there is greater student development (Astin, 1984), an improvement in factors that increase student well-being (Astin, 1984, 1993; Boulton et al., 2019; Bowman, 2010; Kanters, 2000), and a higher degree of socialization as the student becomes more immersed in the community of the institution (Astin, 1984; Chapman & Pascarella, 1983). The combination of these elements contributes to a more positive student experience.

Theme 1: Student Development

By considering esports as sport, in the scope of this study, student development models can be applied, allowing esports to be evaluated through the model of student involvement theory (S. Forrester, 2015; S. A. Forrester et al., 2018). Astin's (1984) student involvement theory suggests that student activities programming can be used to influence the amount of physical and psychological energy a student invests in the college environment. With collegiate

esports being inextricably linked to the college environment, student energy invested in collegiate esports is therefore invested in the college environment.

With greater levels of student involvement, more student development occurs (Astin, 1984). In this context, student development refers to increasingly complex growth and holistic development, experienced by the student, within the postsecondary educational environment (Evans et al., 2009). Therefore, fostering an environment that facilitates active participation and student engagement is crucial for maximizing student development.

Within the campus community, non-academic leisure activities contribute to student involvement (Astin, 1975). When leisure activities align with student development outcomes, the impact of leisure activity becomes even more profound. For participants, the esports program was a source of non-academic leisure activity. However, to coordinate esports programs, activities, and competitions, additional student effort was required in the form of administrative responsibilities.

Frequently lacking institutional backing in terms of administrative support, student members assumed various leadership roles and managerial duties to contribute to the growth and success of their esports programs. These responsibilities included tasks such as strategic planning, scheduling, budgeting, and marketing. Participation in extracurricular activities often requires students to learn skills that are necessary for participation (Kuh, 1995), but in the case of collegiate esports programs, additional skills were required to facilitate the coordination of esports activity itself.

These duties and responsibilities helped to impart student development benefits upon the participants that exceeded what they might typically be exposed to in a regular college classroom. For participants, the administrative responsibilities that facilitated esports program

success were beneficial beyond typical recreational activity in that they offered the college student “an opportunity to develop and enhance his or her physical, mental, or emotional capacity,” (Collins et al., 2001, p. 38). While these responsibilities were often challenging, and occasionally overwhelming, they pushed students into positions of intense learning and growth. This resulted in student development most commonly in areas such as leadership, communication, and time management. Although these administrative responsibilities were not directly related to the gameplay, techniques, or strategies required for competitive video gaming success, they were aligned with positive student development outcomes in which students grew and developed holistically within the college environment (Patton et al., 2016).

As participants already placed a high value on esports, and considered esports as one of their primary activities, once in the college environment, it appeared natural for them to channel that enthusiasm into working for greater success of their esports program. This resulted in a significant investment of each participant’s time and energy into the administrative responsibilities that supported their program. Participants appeared to readily engage in administrative duties when there was a clear connection between the activities and the benefits to the program.

Astin (1984) suggests that student involvement theory is useful in providing a structure for educational practices to be evaluated for their effectiveness in relation to their ability to affect student involvement. In this study, participants responded to the needs of their program which was effective in generating student development opportunities through administrative duties driven by the desire for organizational success. A lack of institutional guidance and administrative support seems to have placed esports programs into an operational situation which necessitated a level of student involvement that generated student development benefits for

participants. Participants found that they grew personally and professionally through these administrative duties that, while taxing, were ultimately rewarding. Having experienced meaningful student development as a result of greater student involvement through esports participation, the overall student experience, in turn, was improved (Sidle & McReynolds, 2009).

Theme 2: Administration Verbally Supportive, but Lack of Follow-Through

Astin (1984) found that athletic involvement was associated with satisfaction in institutional administration, indicating some isolation from peer group effects. Similarly, Jolly (2008) suggests that high levels of athletic involvement may isolate student-athletes from the larger campus community, insulating them from those socializing influences. Esports participants may have experienced the same peer group isolation as college athletes, as the esports team engaged in competitive activities that mimicked the practice and competition demands of traditional college athletics. However, unlike athletes in traditional intercollegiate sports, the participants in this study appeared to have slightly negative perceptions of institutional administration.

Study participants were aware of the amount of institutional support and guidance their esports programs received. Positive perceptions of institutional support generally cause greater student involvement and social integration (Berger & Milem, 1999), but a perceived lack of institutional support contributes to negative attitudes towards the institution, which is harmful for outcomes such as student integration and academic performance (Bean & Eaton, 2001). Perceived deficiencies in institutional support appeared to be attributed to administrators failing to understand esports to the same degree as the participants. For participants, this lack of understanding was viewed as a reflection of administration's attitude towards esports, which was recognized largely as being verbally supportive, but lacking follow-through. While

administrators were perceived as wanting to see esports programs become successful, participants felt that institutional support was often insufficient to achieve the type of success administrators hoped for.

Without a thorough understanding of esports, most participants felt that their school administrators could see some potential, but lacked the comprehensive understanding to envision how esports could be effectively implemented in higher education. Participants believed that administrators were moderately, or reluctantly, supportive of their efforts, despite espousing verbal enthusiasm for esports. Participants did not view the duality of institutional administrators favorably as the incongruence between statements and actions was perceived as inauthentic.

The lack of institutional enthusiasm for esports appeared to be clearly felt by program members. However, participants did recognize that administrators' lack of support may be justified at the present time. As participants admitted, esports was often not well understood by both administrators and the larger student population. With more proof of esports programs' success, and value in contributing to educational outcomes, perhaps more support would be provided in the future.

Participant perceptions of lack of institutional follow-through stemmed from their interactions with school administrators. As previously mentioned, esports program participants were required to take on administrative responsibilities to ensure successful functioning of their competitive esports programs. These administrative responsibilities also involved meeting with institutional administrators to request funding and support, and to lobby for the advancement of their esports programs.

These exchanges helped to increase levels of student involvement, not only in terms of time and energy, but also in depth of connection with the college environment. Through their

administrative duties, participants were compelled to interact with faculty, staff, and administrators on behalf of their esports programs. While these interchanges were not necessarily positive from the perspective of esports participants, they undoubtedly affected student learning and development and also influenced the student experience by contributing to the social and environmental factors that shaped perceptions of students' time in college (Tinto, 1987).

Theme 3: Esports not Understood, Respected, or Legitimate

A high degree of personal investment in esports may have allowed members to perceive a lack of understanding, interest, or respect from non-members more easily. Not only did esports participants perceive that institutional administrators lacked an understanding of esports, but they also believed that many students in the greater campus community similarly possessed limited knowledge of esports.

Ignorance of esports was equated with an underappreciation of esports and esports program activities. In comparison to traditional college athletics, esports struggled to garner the same levels of respect and legitimacy, making it difficult for esports to be taken seriously. Collins et al., (2001) suggests that there are differential effects for different forms of extracurricular activity, with activities of low importance failing to positively affect students' self-esteem. The lack of understanding, respect, and legitimacy for esports made it challenging for esports programs to call for greater funding and institutional support. This perception was frustrating to participants in light of their passion for esports and the belief that esports could be of great benefit to their institutions.

A common misconception of collegiate esports is the belief that an institution is represented by a single, unified esports team, similar to traditional college athletics teams. In reality, collegiate esports programs are comprised of multiple esports teams, each specializing in

a specific game title. This misunderstanding exemplifies the larger campus community's knowledge of esports and belies their reluctance to support esports at the level required for legitimate intercollegiate competition. By believing collegiate esports to be less complex and easier to coordinate than traditional athletics, the perceived need for similar levels of funding and administrative support is minimized.

By virtue of oversimplification and misunderstanding of the intricacies of intercollegiate esports competition, the greater campus community reduces esports' perceived legitimacy, thereby reducing respect for the endeavor. The lack of respect was demonstrated by other students casually dismissing esports as a leisure activity rather than competitive sport. Esports participants perceived the campus community, and school administration, as unable to envision any overlap between video gaming and traditional athletics. The belief that sports is an inherently physical activity appeared to be the greatest obstacle towards altering this understanding.

Participants mentioned that preexisting stereotypes may also cause some negative perceptions of the esports community among the students at their institution. Although a large percentage of 18- to 29-year-old Americans sometimes or often play video games in some form (Perrin, 2018), team members felt that having a large focus on video gaming was viewed negatively by some college students. Contributing to this negative perception is the attitude that gaming is perceived to be a more childish and immature activity compared to other recreational pursuits or conventional sporting activities.

According to student involvement theory, the achievement of developmental goals is proportionate to the time and energy a student invests in the college experience (Astin, 1984). Time and energy invested into activities that show a clear, or conventional, connection to student

development benefits are seen as productive investments. Negative perceptions of esports participation may be perpetuated by the larger campus community when non-members fail to relate student development benefits to esports participation. If non-members are unable to see student benefit that is related, or proportional to, the time and energy invested in esports participation, participants' energy investment appears meaningless, and therefore without value, legitimacy, or respect.

In the case of some participants, the lack of understanding and respect for esports may cause them to retreat from interacting with the greater campus community, seeking refuge with more likeminded students within the esports program. While this may initially appear detrimental to student involvement and integration in the campus community, Tinto (1987) suggests that the college environment is not homogenous, but comprised of multiple constituent communities. While integration with the greater campus community would be beneficial, meaningful membership in at least one constituent community can improve the student experience for the better. Perhaps in this perspective, negative or indifferent campus attitudes towards esports might drive stronger membership, and sense of belonging, within the esports community, leading to more positive student experience outcomes.

Theme 4: Team Bonding

Esports participation was useful in facilitating socialization between students, contributing to their development (Chapman & Pascarella, 1983). This socialization occurred through the structured activities of esports programs, where teamwork is crucial. The nature of esports competition requires an environment in which teamwork is paramount. Effective teams are developed through long hours of coordinated practice, effective communication skills, and the creation of strong bonds between team members. These team elements contribute to the

esports experience, but also enhance the social and personal development of the students involved.

Members of individual esports teams shared a passion for competitive video gaming that exceeded casual recreational play. Intense competitiveness helped to serve as a focal point around which strong team bonds could be created. Through esports, participants formed professional connections that eventually transcended the esports environment into personal friendships. These friendships led to communication, socialization, and activities outside the context of esports and helped to create robust relationships. These strong personal ties to team members helped to establish a team environment that was supportive of both gaming and personal challenges. Yukelson (1997) states that:

> Informal activities outside of practice and competitions, such as team meals, team recreational activities, social functions, and even practical jokes that are in the spirit of fun, are important considerations in developing team unity, team spirit, social support, and personal bonding.

Strong team bonding, and the relationships facilitated by esports, created further connections between the individual student and the college environment. By increasing the number of personal relationships with other college students, opportunities to interact within the college environment also increased (Chapman & Pascarella, 1983). This appeared to generate additional investment of time and energy into social aspects of the college experience.

According to student involvement theory, this additional investment of student resources results in a proportionate increase in student development, which in turn positively affects the overall student experience (Astin, 1984). Furthermore, increased student involvement has previously been indicated as an important factor in affecting the well-being of college students

(Astin, 1984; Boulton et al., 2019; Bowman, 2010; Kanters, 2000). Not only was esports a primary driver of time and energy investment into the activity itself, but it also served as a facilitator of strong personal relationships. Bowman (2010) suggests that the quality of interpersonal relationships with other students is highly correlated with student well-being. This helps to highlight the value of team bonding in both student involvement and well-being.

Theme 5: Welcoming and Inclusive

Study participants reported positive feelings regarding the welcoming and inclusive nature of their collegiate esports experience. The college esports environment was described as accessible to a wide range of students with different demographic characteristics, backgrounds, and physical abilities. When examining the makeup of the undergraduate students in this study, ages ranged from 19 to 23 with ten males and one female. Ethnic makeup was 55% White and 45% minority with students who reported having American Indian/Alaskan Native, Hispanic, Japanese, and Middle Eastern ethnicities. Student academic majors also varied, including accounting, biology, computer engineering, computer science, criminal justice, marketing and business, meteorology, neuroscience, and premed. One student reported having an undeclared major.

By sharing a passion for esports with others, participants found themselves in contact with a diverse array of students. The participants discussed the inclusive aspect of esports, emphasizing that its reliance on mental ability, rather than physicality, allows virtually all students to be potential competitors. The love of gaming appeared to supersede demographic and academic differences between students, encouraging an environment that was welcoming by nature of its openness and inclusivity. The collective enthusiasm of esports program members

helped to foster a sense of community and belonging that provided a background of support throughout many students' college experience.

Since college student populations vary in demographics, backgrounds, and interests, institutions that provide a wide range of social groups for students allow them "to find at least one smaller community of students with whom they share a common bond" (Tinto, 2017, p. 262). For study participants, it appears that esports programs were composed of a unique subset of the student population within the larger campus environment. Artinger et al. (2006) found that "one of the distinguishing features of collegiate student recreational sports complexes is the sense of community that is intentionally introduced in the programs and services that occur within these facilities," (p. 1). Similarly, the welcoming and inclusive nature of esports programs was inviting to students who may not have felt comfortable in other campus social environments, or who were displaced from previous groups as seen in the case of former high school athletes who turned to collegiate esports as an alternative to traditional athletics.

Belch et al. (2001) noted that membership and participation in a student recreation complex increased the opportunities for freshmen to have informal interaction with other students, leading to greater satisfaction with the college experience. This was similarly the case with collegiate esports programs as newer students quickly established friendships with one another. Furthermore, more senior participants reported enjoying coaching and mentorship aspects of the collegiate esports experience, providing guidance and support to newer members.

The welcoming and inclusive tendencies of collegiate esports programs were instrumental in enhancing the college experience as they aligned with the concepts of student involvement theory. Since inclusion typically precedes active participation in campus groups, esports programs were effective in using community and belonging to establish early precedent

for greater student involvement. Again, greater involvement leads to increased student development, which yields a more positive overall student experience.

Practical Implications

This study was conducted with the goal of contributing to esports literature, offering practical implications, and providing potential considerations for future research. In this section, themes were examined in relation to previous literature and possible suggestions for higher education administrators were created. As esports continues to grow in popularity, higher education institutions can explore ways to leverage esports to increase student involvement in the campus community and to improve the student experience. Student involvement and experience both play an important role in the satisfaction of students and even minor improvements can yield benefits that have compounding effects for institutions over time.

The data suggests that esports inclusion on a college campus may be beneficial to both students and the institution. As a sport activity, esports provides a means of increasing student involvement, generating secondary benefits for socialization and well-being within the campus environment. According to student involvement theory, environmental inputs that facilitate greater student involvement increase the amount of learning and personal development experienced (Astin, 1984). In turn, increased learning and personal development have a positive effect on the college experience.

Student interaction within the campus environment frequently occurs through participation in extracurricular activities (Chapman & Pascarella, 1983; Kuh, 1993, 1995) which have major impact on personal development. These extracurricular activities can include various forms of competitive or recreational sport. As suggested by Tinto (2017), diversity of campus social groups helps to account for the diversity of backgrounds and interests present in the

student population. By establishing a collegiate esports program, institutions can diversify their campus activity programming and extracurricular offerings while also accommodating the growing popularity of esports.

This study found that esports was the primary recreational and social activity for esports participants within the campus environment. Since esports was an activity that these students already invested significant amounts of physical and psychological energy into, connecting esports activity to the university positioned the activity as an environmental input in relation to student involvement theory. Without a collegiate esports team, study participants would likely have continued with esports activity in some form, but with groups and individuals external to their institution, directing the students' time and energy away from the college environment. Without an esports program, the institution would fail to serve the recreational and social needs of this student population. Furthermore, without a direct relationship between the university and esports activity, esports would no longer serve as a school-related object of cathexis for the student population, disconnecting any personal, social, or developmental benefits from the individual's role as a college student.

In this study, collegiate esports programs allowed communities to form around the common interest of competitive video gaming, populated with college students, and grounded within the structure of the larger institution. Like conventional collegiate sporting activities, esports appeared to generate comparable social, developmental, and well-being benefits for college students. Similar to the implementation of other sports programs on college campuses, esports needs to be positioned to highlight the impacts of its program and services (Artinger et al., 2006) so that it is not considered a meaningless undertaking by individuals unfamiliar with it.

Activities perceived to have low importance do not positively influence students' self-esteem (Collins et al., 2001).

While traditional college athletics could also be simplistically viewed as students just playing games, its legitimacy stems from an acceptance by society and sharing of society's "norms, beliefs, values, and principles," (Díez-Martín et al., 2017, p. 89). The legitimacy of collegiate athletics helps to generate the levels of prestige it enjoys while esports still struggles for acceptance within the greater campus community.

All participants felt that their experience in collegiate esports had been positive. Members felt that the negative stereotypes and beliefs that other students held could likely be overcome if those students were brought into the esports community. Since esports is relatively new on college campuses, team members felt that greater education, increased awareness of the esports industry's growth, and improving the reputation and prestige of esports would be helpful to overcome the perceptions of esports being immature and irrelevant to the college experience.

For collegiate esports to be considered a worthwhile enterprise, it must first strive for legitimacy. This might be achieved by drawing attention to student development benefits along with the potential for participant compensation through scholarship awards or future opportunities in professional esports. While it is not a guarantee of success, perceived legitimacy favors access to resources and alignment with broader societal expectations (Díez-Martín et al., 2017). However, with the increasing prevalence of celebrity and wealth in the digital space, societal expectations may eventually shift in ways that further support the legitimacy of esports.

For collegiate esports to grow, there needs to be a dedicated effort to better inform college administrators and the general student population. One of the major misconceptions of individuals, external to the esports community, is that a given institution would have only a

single esports team. Collegiate esports, however, exists more as an overall program than as an individual sports team. Much like how an institution has an athletics program made up of constituent teams of individual sports, collegiate esports encompasses a wide array of esports teams, each specializing in a specific video game title. Referring to an institution's entire esports program as a "team" minimizes the complexity and scale of the esports environment within, and between, institutions.

The simplistic view of esports as one homogenous group, within an institution, overlooks the specialized skills, training, and resources required to support each constituent esports team. In the same way that a single coach does not coach all teams within an entire athletics department, collegiate esports must educate administrators that the same concept applies to esports programs. Once this understanding is achieved, collegiate esports programs' requests for coaching, staffing, administrative, and budgetary support become more credible. These resources are necessary to sustain a competitive esports program that operates more like a traditional athletics department, rather than a single student club.

Administrators may also hesitate to support esports due to team and roster fluctuations within the esports program. Felix noted:

> …when we first started the club, at least my club, we had two teams. At the end of the semester, we had nine teams. This semester, we dropped back to five, next semester could be up to 10. So it's constantly changing.

This type of fluctuation may make it difficult for institutions to provide consistency to students, staff, and competitive leagues associated with their program. To provide greater stability to an institution, esports programs may consider reducing their number of competitive esports teams until title competitiveness and roster consistency can be achieved.

To benefit from esports on college campuses, institutions should create, or continue, a competition-focused and skill-driven, officially recognized esports program that serves as an alternative to conventional intercollegiate or intramural sports programs. To maximize benefits to students and institutions, organization objectives should be established to tailor the scope and scale of the esports program to align with available player talent, institutional resources, and student administrative capabilities. Realistic and achievable objectives should be designed around elements of student involvement theory that are related to having positive effects on the student experience.

A competition-based esports environment can be constructed to resemble rigorous academic programs or intercollegiate athletics teams. In this respect, participants can be motivated to rely upon one another to improve their own skills, making the nature of personal relationships within the team interdependent. As mentioned by Tinto (2017), belonging to a community in which a student's participation is valued is essential to success in college.

In the same way that conventional college athletics requires team practices, competition, and adherence to institutional policies and procedures, these same systems can be implemented for collegiate esports. Passion for esports and a strong sense of community can be used to motivate actions that contribute to student success and improved student experience. For continued participation in the esports program, students can be required to meet grade point average minimums, make timely progress towards degree completion, and be time-limited in terms of competitive eligibility. These requirements can help to ensure that esports team members meet academic objectives that keep them on the path towards graduation.

In exchange for requiring esports participants to maintain academic and behavioral standards, membership in a collegiate esports program must convey access and benefits that

outweigh the costs of participation and are not available outside of the institution. By virtue of being a member of an officially recognized collegiate esports program, members would have access to collegiate esports leagues that they would not be able to compete in otherwise. This level of esports competition is limited to college students only, and for an organization like the National Association of Collegiate Esports (NACE), is contingent upon remaining an enrolled college student fulfilling "academic responsibilities while progressing steadily toward meeting the requirements for a degree," (National Association of Collegiate Esports, 2023b, p. 5). In addition to competitive access, institutions can also provide benefits to student esports participants just like other college student-athletes: creation of practice and competition facilities, providing equipment for competition and practice, creation of program or team apparel and other merchandise, travel funding, staffing and coaching support, and financial support including participant scholarships or other awards.

This study found that a considerable amount of an esports program's administrative responsibilities fell upon student members. While these duties were responsible for much of the student development benefits received, the scope of duties must be within the capacity of students to reasonably accomplish. It may be beneficial for institutions to provide operations and management support to assist esports programs with their administrative needs.

Creation of goals and objectives that are overly ambitious may be harmful for an esports program as they can result in disappointment, frustration, and burnout. Proper student activities or athletics department support can help to guide esports programs through activities that yield student development and learning benefits that are achievable and sustainable. Furthermore, institutional administrative staffing can contribute to greater stability and continuity for the

esports program compared to relying solely on volunteer student leadership that will eventually graduate and leave the program.

When considering implementation of a collegiate esports program, the decision that institutions face is whether to create an esports program with the necessary resources from the start, hoping that it grows, or to allow a student-led esports initiative mature until it needs institutional support for further expansion. As reported by the various students in this study, some schools adhere to the latter option, allowing student-led esports programs to grow organically while they continually lobby for greater institutional support. In contrast, other programs receive adequate institutional support, but only after their esports programs had already achieved some degree of competitive success.

The dilemma lies in the likelihood that underfunded esports programs will continue to struggle in the increasingly competitive environment of collegiate esports. Similar to traditional college athletics, adequate resources are necessary to attract and retain skilled players. Waiting for an esports program to achieve success, before they are given the necessary resources, may result in a vicious cycle of underperformance that prevents the program from reaching its full potential. Conversely, upfront institutional investments in esports can allow programs to attract high-level players and coaching talent while establishing a strong competitive foundation. While there is no guarantee of competitive success, adequate investment into a collegiate esports program helps to establish a competitive framework that enhances student engagement, facilitating the beneficial aspects of student involvement.

Future Research

This exploratory qualitative study interviewed esports program participants at multiple higher education institutions across the United States. Future research could be expanded to

collect data from additional sources in various locations. Within the United States alone, future research could examine the perceptions of esports participants at institutions of specific sizes, public or private institutions, and institutions in specific states or regions.

In a study of the social benefits of intramural sports, Artinger et al. (2006) suggested that future research should examine "if the gains, or lack thereof, in the social benefit areas differ for students who participate in intramural sports compared to those who do not." Since this exploratory study found that esports conveys some social benefits to participants, those social benefits should similarly be compared between esports participants and non-participants.

Chapman and Pascarella (1983) suggest that physical proximity to campus is related to the degree of student integration and participation in academic or social activities. Conventional recreational sports participation is almost exclusively dependent on physical attendance, whereas remote esports participation is more easily accommodated by online play. Since the participants in this study were all in-person students, it may be useful to examine the degree of collegiate esports participation among distance learning students and the effects that participation has on student experience.

Kuh (1993) states that different student activities should be examined to determine their effect on specific student outcomes. If looking at the student outcomes considered in this study, student experience could be assessed quantitatively in relation to esports participants and non-participants.

Finally, future research can further examine institutional funding for esports to determine what funding amounts, amenities, or benefits yield specific student development, achievement, or experience outcomes. This can yield information that helps institutions to make effective cost-benefit assessments when considering how much support a collegiate esports program deserves.

Conclusion

This exploratory study examined the phenomenon of collegiate esports participation and its perceived effects on student experience. The phenomenon was explained through the descriptions of individuals who participated in organized collegiate esports and had firsthand knowledge of student life at their institution. The descriptions of student experiences and perceptions appear to align with previous literature regarding collegiate sport and extracurricular activity within the framework of student involvement theory.

Collegiate esports appears to be a viable sport activity that can be used to diversify university programming and extracurricular activities. A wide array of student activities helps institutions to attract and retain subsets of the student population with specific interests. Esports shows promise as an effective means of providing a niche competitive sport activity that can improve student involvement, socialization, and well-being. These benefits can positively affect the student experience the same as more traditional intercollegiate, club, intramural, or recreational sports programs.

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APPENDIX A

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO
Institutional Review Board

CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Project Title: Perceptions of the Effects of Collegiate Esports Participation on Student Experience: A Phenomenological Study of Collegiate Esports Teams

Researcher: David Shimokawa, Sport & Exercise Science: Sport Administration
Phone: 970-351-2086
E-mail: shim3769@bears.unco.edu

Advisor: Alan Morse
Phone: 970-351-1722
E-mail: alan.morse@unco.edu

Purpose and Description: This study seeks to learn more about student perceptions of the effects of collegiate esports participation on student experience in higher education.

If you agree to participate, you will be interviewed by the researcher. The interview will consist of a series of questions about your perceptions of the effects of collegiate esports participation. The interview will be audio recorded. Interviews held via videoconferencing services (e.g. Zoom) will be video and audio recorded. It is estimated that once qualified for research participation, the interview will take a maximum of 60 minutes to complete.

To protect participant confidentiality, participant data will be assigned using pseudonyms. When reporting data, if a specific participant's response is necessary, only the pseudonym, or demographic info will be used. Participant responses will be downloaded to password-protected cloud storage that only the researcher has access to. Interview recordings will be destroyed within three years of the survey completion date.

Foreseeable risks in this research are minimal. Risks inherent in participation are no greater than those normally encountered during typical conversation and/or tablet, smartphone, or computer use.

Following transcription of the interview, the transcript and initial portion of data analysis will be sent to the study participant for review. The study participant will have a period of one week to review the transcript and analysis for accuracy and to submit corrections to the researcher via email. If the researcher does not receive any corrections by the review deadline, the transcript and data analysis will be considered accurate.

Following successful data collection, participants will have the option to receive $50.00 in Amazon gift cards for their participation. Should participants opt to receive a gift card(s) for participation in the study, they will also be given a copy of the University of Northern Colorado's tax notice to study subjects.

Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study and if you begin participation, you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Please take your time to read and thoroughly review this document and decide if you would like to participate in this research study. If you decide to participate, your completion of any research procedures indicates your consent. Please keep or print this form for your records. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact Laura Martin, Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, Carter Hall 2008, University of Northern Colorado Greeley, CO 80639; 970-351-1907.

APPENDIX B

EMAIL TO PROSPECTIVE PARTICIPANTS

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Esports Team Participants Wanted for Research Interview(s)

Project Title: Perceptions of the Effects of Collegiate Esports Participation on Student Experience: A Phenomenological Study of Collegiate Esports Teams

Researcher: David Shimokawa, Sport & Exercise Science: Sport Administration
Phone: 970-351-2086 E-mail: shim3769@bears.unco.edu

Advisor: Alan Morse
Phone: 970-351-1722 E-mail: alan.morse@unco.edu

Greetings,

My name is David Shimokawa, and I am currently a doctoral candidate at the University of Northern Colorado. I am contacting you because I am conducting a research study on the perceptions of collegiate esports participants, and I was wondering if you would be willing to participate. Qualified participants may be scheduled to participate in a 30-60 minute Zoom interview to obtain their thoughts and perceptions on their collegiate esports experience. Participants have the option of receiving $50.00 in Amazon gift cards after successful completion of the research interview.

If you are interested in participating, please answer some initial questions and fill out your information on this brief Qualtrics form: https://unco.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_3EN1fvjqAQcTI8u

Qualified candidates will be contacted via email to schedule interview dates and times.

Thank you very much for your assistance.

Sincerely,

David Shimokawa
Doctoral Candidate: Sport Administration
University of Northern Colorado
Butler-Hancock 261F

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW GUIDE

COLLEGIATE ESPORTS PARTICIPATION AND ITS PERCEIVED EFFECTS ON STUDENT EXPERIENCE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF COLLEGEIATE ESPORTS TEAMS

QUALIFYING QUESTIONS

1. Are you 18 years of age or older?
2. Are you an undergraduate student at your higher education institution?
3. Are you an active member of your institution's esports team?
4. Have you participated in at least one of your institution's esports team events/activities during the past 12 months?
5. Have you held or do you hold a leadership/officer position within your institution's esports team?

PARTICIPANT QUESTIONS

1. First and last name?
2. What is your gender identity?
3. What is your age?
4. What is your ethnicity?
5. What is the name of your college/university?
6. What is your major/program of study?
7. Are you an international college student?
8. Are you a first-generation college student?
9. What games do you compete in (with your esports team)?
10. What fake name would you like me to use for you in the research report? Please do not choose a gaming name that is unique to you.
11. School email address?

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Research Question #1: What are the lived experiences of collegiate esports participants?

1. Tell me about your involvement with esports (or non-competitive gaming involvement) before college.
2. What initially attracted you to collegiate esports?
3. What motivates you to continue collegiate esports?
4. Describe your experience with esports team participation at your institution.

5. How do you think other college students (non-team members) view collegiate esports (in general)?
6. How do you think college administrators view collegiate esports (in general)?
7. Describe the level of competition your team participates in.
8. What is your time, energy, and financial investment into your esports team participation?
    a. How do these investments compare to your other activities outside of esports team participation?
9. Is there a difference between interactions with esports/non-esports team members? If so, describe this.

Research Question #2: How does esports participation affect the student experience?

1. Describe the advantages of participating in collegiate esports.
2. Describe the disadvantages of participating in collegiate esports.
3. What is your position within your esports team?
    a. What are your responsibilities within your esports team?
4. Are there any student developmental benefits to collegiate esports participation?
5. Do you perceive the esports team as having any impact on your student experience at your institution?
6. How do you think esports could be better utilized at your institution to improve your student experience?

Is there anything I did not think to ask about that I should know about esports and your experiences at the college/university?

APPENDIX D

DEBRIEFING MATERIALS

UNIVERSITY OF
NORTHERN COLORADO
Institutional Review Board

DEBRIEFING MATERIALS
NATURE AND PURPOSE OF STUDY

This study seeks to learn more about student perceptions of the effects of collegiate esports participation on student experience in higher education. By learning more about the perceptions of the effects of esports participation on the target population, we can better examine the feasibility of this activity as a tool to improve the student experience.

More research is needed on this topic to learn about the effects of esports participation on the college student experience. While existing research demonstrates the benefits of intercollegiate and intramural sports participation, most research focuses on conventional sports such as basketball, flag football, and soccer. Research needs to be conducted on alternative sport activities to determine if activities, such as esports, have any perceived impact on college students.

After data has been collected, interview responses will be uploaded to password-protected cloud storage that only the researcher has access to. Participant responses will be transcribed and descriptions of lived experiences that are relevant to the research questions will be identified. These experiences will be noted and annotated so they can be categorized by common themes. Coded quotes and themes will be examined for further consolidation, as necessary.

Triangulation, member checking, and expert review will be used to enhance the trustworthiness of the data collected. Use of multiple subjects, from multiple locations, will attempt to find different types of information or verify information provided. Member-checking will allow for the verification of data. Expert review will allow for external critique of the research methods to reduce researcher bias and improve ethical behavior.

APPENDIX E

TAX NOTICE TO STUDY SUBJECTS

UNC
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Tax Notice to Study Subjects

You are hereby advised that any payments from the University of Northern Colorado as incentive compensation for participation in a study is taxable income per the Internal Revenue Code, regardless of the amount of or form of the payment, including check, cash, gift card, gift certificate, money order or non-cash items. The University of Northern Colorado is required by the Internal Revenue Service to report such payments that exceed $600 per year. Because of this requirement, some study participants may be required to complete an IRS form W-9 to provide the needed identification information for such tax reporting, however participant confidentiality will be protected.