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Advocating Netnography for Esports Research

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Abstract

Esports face numerous challenges related to marketing, psychological well-being, and gender. Toxic behavior in esports communities is a significant issue that hinders player engagement and retention. Additionally, psychological stressors impact overall well-being among players. Furthermore, the literature indicates an underrepresentation of gender diversity within esports, which hampers inclusivity. There is a need for comprehensive research that surpasses these challenges to enhance understanding of esports experiences and community interactions. This perspective advocates for the adoption of netnography as a method that can bridge these literature gaps by exploring the nuanced interactions of esports online communities. By leveraging netnography, researchers can capture the complexities of consumer behavior, psychological responses, and gender inclusivity in esports, providing valuable insights into esports community analysis and enhancing both practitioner and academic comprehension.

Keywords: netnography, marketing, psychology, gender, online communities

Highlights:

- Netnography offers a relevant method to analyze toxicity, well-being, lifestyle behaviors, health-conscious habits, gender-based harassment, and hypermasculine culture in esports communities through cultural understanding.
- Netnography enhances understanding of emotional stressors and coping strategies by immersing researchers in the lived experiences of esports players through active engagement, providing comprehension of role, identity, relationship, and belonging.
- Cultural and technological immersion through netnography fosters a deeper understanding of esports cultural contexts through spatial-temporal relations and social-material practices.

Introduction

The global popularity of esports has positioned it as a significant phenomenon within the entertainment and gaming industries. Esports have evolved into a multifaceted ecosystem that encompasses diverse aspects, including marketing and psychology, which cover barriers to overcome, such as gender dynamics. Furthermore, existing literature reveals several challenges that warrant further exploration. In the realm of esports marketing, researchers have highlighted the issue of toxicity within gaming communities (Huston et al., 2023) and a limited understanding of how esports influence consumer behavior, impacting lifestyle choices (Chan et al., 2022). From a psychological perspective, the literature indicates that emotional stressors, team dynamics, and psychological strategies are poorly understood (Leis et al., 2024). Additionally, the implications of team cohesion for performance in esports require further explanation (Gisbert-Pérez et al., 2024). Regarding gender studies, research has revealed the challenges of gender-based harassment and the exclusion of women in esports (Crothers et al., 2024), and the intersectionality of gender identity and its impact on player experiences (Piggott & Tjørndal, 2024) remains inadequately approached.

To address these gaps, this study advocates the adoption of netnography. It is argued that netnography has the potential to capture the complexities of social interactions, unraveling topics of mutual interest in inciting reactions (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024). In addition, netnographers can conceptualize notions of role, identity, relationship, and belonging in online communities through the analysis of lived experiences (Lugosi & Quinton, 2018). By considering netnography, esports researchers can understand, reflect, and overcome some of the esports contemporary challenges, ultimately leading to more effective, inclusive, and impactful strategies.

Marketing Studies

Marketing research in esports represents an exploration of consumer behavior and community management, driven by the need to understand and navigate the challenges of toxicity, engagement, and lifestyle. Toxicity that hampers engagement and creates conflicts among players within the esports community (Huston et al., 2023). Consumers are likely to have multiple roles across different networks, directing to diverse flows of interactions (Lugosi & Quinton, 2018). Netnography is considered a method whereby researchers analyze intersectional perspectives from different immersion journals, positioning diverse viewpoints, especially through immersive data analysis and interpretation (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024). This can benefit in solving complex issues such as toxicity through the esports community's social interactions among its members. Besides, there is a limited understanding of lifestyle behavior in esports communities. Studies lack diverse video gaming participation either as a player, spectator, or live stream audience to analyze esports gaming patterns associated with poor lifestyle outcomes, for example, eye fatigue or strain, and hand, neck, or wrist pain (Chan et al., 2022). In line with the previous point, netnography can be a method designed to investigate, and capture observed behavior and embodied sensations through immersive technology such as virtual reality goggles (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024). This occurs specifically during the immersion, investigation, and interaction stages where the netnographer is deeply involved in the process of collecting data, where novel findings emerge through engaging, experiencing, and reflecting elicited data.

Furthermore, effective communication is crucial for marketing efficacy, but it is often misunderstood in competitive teams, especially across different esports titles (Maier, 2024). This astringency can benefit from netnography since it is centered on the study of technology and cultural understanding that contributes to leveraging digital communication based on digital traces, online events, or immersive opportunities (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024). In addition, netnography can investigate agentic ‘artifacts’, beyond human actors, to consider the multimodal use of communication devices where people interact (Lugosi & Quinton, 2018). The contribution relies on the understanding that people interact differently according to the configuration of technological and communication devices (such as screen size, app functionality, and memory capacity). Referring to esports, this can be extended to platforms across mobile, PC, and console, audience engagement across phones, tablets, desktops, and smart TVs, and user experience through different levels of precision and device responsiveness. This generated knowledge can inform strategies to enhance team cohesion, and team mechanics by analyzing effective communication styles and demands.

Psychology Studies

Psychology research in esports represents an exploration of the emotional, cognitive, and social factors that influence player well-being, team dynamics, and performance, revealing the nuanced experiences and coping strategies of esports stakeholders. Emotional stressors and coping strategies are likely to influence esports players’ experiences, such as appraisals and gender dynamics, which are important themes for comprehending competitive esports environments (Leis et al., 2024). Stressors can include defeat, performance pressure, audience reaction, online harassment and toxicity, external judgment, etc. Coping strategies involve communication with teammates, friends, and family, not reading social media or doing interviews, utilizing humor, warm-up, etc. These approaches can be achieved during the shift from participant observation to active engagement through the immersion stage and rearranged in the incarnation stage. Active engagement in netnography refers to the centrality of the netnographer concerning their interaction within the online community, including intellectual, cultural, historical, emotional, and social engagement (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024). This can help to develop tailored interventions and support systems to enhance the overall well-being of esports players. Also, by collaboratively engaging, netnographers can gain more insights by interacting in spatial-temporal relations through social-material practices (Lugosi & Quinton, 2018).

Moreover, existing mental health strategies often lack depth across user experiences, including the perspectives of players at different levels concerning organizational support, female perspectives on health-conscious habits, and diverse countries and cultures (Hong, 2025). Players’ hesitation to adopt health-conscious habits indicates a critical area where esports psychologists can lend assistance. Virtual platforms and applications have various in-built performative capacities that provide multiple ways to filter, sort, and curate self-presentations and narrate experiences (Lugosi & Quinton, 2018). This space can provide interesting ways for netnographers to interact with or gather information. This is relevant, as psychologists must develop performance and interpersonal skills in esports players to promote strong team dynamics (Hong, 2025). Then, the process of cultural understanding in netnography is complex as it requires cautious attention to the process, origin, role, and type of data being utilized (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024). This process occurs during the data collection, which includes investigation, immersion, and interaction stages, particularly in interaction, as the netnographer connects with relevant actors, and elicit data.

Gisbert-Pérez et al. (2024) situate one central question to comprehend the improvement of performance and psychological well-being of esports teams: how can esports teams be managed and what steps are necessary for good development? These steps often follow specific procedures such as team cohesion, internal communication, coordination, and cooperation between players. Moreover, the exploratory approach to this question posits netnography as a relevant tool for understanding this gap. Netnography acknowledges that data gathering is an exploratory act that seeks to create analytical descriptions of the performative agency of actors, actions, interactions, and their consequences (Lugosi & Quinton, 2018). Further research into esports teams' structure and processes is needed to understand the roles, functions, and needs of club presidents, directors, and coaches, gender differences, and the practice of professionals based on empirical studies. For netnography, analyzing practical complexity creates theoretical complexity by conceptualizing notions of role, identity, relationship, and belonging (Lugosi & Quinton, 2018).

Gender Studies

Gender research in esports represents a critical analysis of the systemic barriers (e.g., gender-based harassment, lack of inclusivity) that women face in participating, leading, and being represented in the esports ecosystem. There are significant issues that remain underexplored in esports gender research, such as gender-based harassment and toxicity experiences of women and other marginalized genders (Crothers et al., 2024). It results in misrepresentation due to objectification and sexist comments, as well as the culture of negative behaviors from a hypermasculine culture that exists within the industry. Netnography demands that the researcher engages with different digital traces, events, and experiential opportunities (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024). The netnographer might note their emotional reactions as a result of their experiences, observations, and reflections that emerge in the context of the exploration. It implies that researchers who are imbued in this harassment or want to challenge their actual cultural background can provide interesting results in their data analysis.

Furthermore, Piggott and Tjønndal (2023) detail that strategies to make esports gender-inclusive need to provide a capacity for minorities to access esports organizations (e.g., through leadership roles). These strategies can be developed through the cultural understanding uncovered by netnography such as algorithmic coding, indexing, and a valuation that influences people to be more visible on social media, reinforcing and amplifying their power in networks (Lugosi & Quinton, 2018). It can lead minorities to pursue voices and dialogues with a massive audience by connecting powerful personal experiences.

Conclusion

This perspective article advocates the adoption of netnography as a valuable methodology to explore the complexities of the esports landscape. There are several opportunities in approaching netnography to bridge existing gaps in literature, providing a nuanced understanding of marketing, psychology, and gender challenges in esports. By capturing the depth of social interactions, the diversity of communities, and the characteristics of team dynamics, netnography can uncover more inclusive and impactful strategies to address the multifaceted challenges faced by the esports industry.

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Declaration of Interest

The author confirms no conflicts of interest.

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