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Abstract

The esports industry has seen rapid growth over the previous decade with additional opportunities for participants to compete in competitive and casual environments. As such, the sport industry has taken notice of this increase in popularity and exposure for esports. A recent call to arms by sport management scholars suggests that the field of sport management needs to broaden research endeavors to include analyses of esports and esports spaces. To that end, this investigation serves as one of the first that investigates the playing experiences of esports participants, with a particular focus on the presence of discrimination and hostility in playing environments for men and women competitors. Previous events within the esports industry, such as the now infamous harassment of female gamers known as "Gamergate," suggest that female esports players may experience discrimination and hostility at higher rates than their male counterparts. Guided by the frameworks of hegemonic masculinity and treatment discrimination, this investigation gauged the experiences of men and women esports participants with discrimination and hostility in esports playing environments. Results indicated that female esports participants reported experiencing instances of treatment discrimination more frequently than their male counterparts, while male participants reported experiencing hostility more frequently. Results aim to assist the esports industry as well as sport management scholars in guiding new policy to create inclusive spaces for esports enthusiasts and career hopefuls

Keywords: discrimination, esports, gameplay, gender, hostility

There has been a rapid growth in esports popularity over the previous decade. As a result, Funk, Pizzo, and Baker (2018) wrote of the importance for the field of sport management to give serious consideration to esports. Additional sport management scholars have noted that the esports industry encompasses many aspects of traditional sports, such as the development and playing experiences of participants, and suggest additional research be conducted in this space (Cunningham et al., 2018; Hallmann & Giel, 2018; Kane & Spradley, 2017; Keiper, Manning, Jenny, Olrich, & Croft, 2017). Heere (2018) argued that regardless of whether esports qualify as traditional sport, this space should be examined within the scope of sport management literature. Based on these aforementioned calls, the current study aimed to expand the esports literature within the sport management space through an investigation of participant experiences.

Esports, short for electronic sports, is a catch-all term that refers to competitive video gaming and "a form of sports where the primary aspects of the sport are facilitated by electronic systems" (Hamari & Sjobloom, 2017, p. 221). Wagner (2006) offers a more holistic definition of the phenomenon of competitive gaming, writing "esports is an area of sport activities in which people develop and train mental or physical abilities in the use of information and communication technologies (p. 3)." Jenny, Manning, Keiper, and Olrich (2017) attempted to further refine Wagner's definition of esports by noting that esports contests are held online and are interactive. For the purposes of the current paper we define esports as competitive video gaming competitions that take place in person and/or in an interactive online environment. The in-person caveat is important, as competitors may be in the same room or arena but will participate in contests via a computer or gaming system.

Similar to traditional sport, the esports industry

is largely male-dominated, and females represent a lower proportion of participants, fans, and employees (Entertainment Software Association [ESA], 2018). While the proportions initially may indicate a potential lack of interest, recent inquiry has suggested growth for female participants over recent years. For example, girls aged 13-15 are more likely to both watch and participate in esports than boys of the same age group (The Insight People, n.d.). esports fandom among females steadily has been increasing over the previous years, and women's viewership of esports events grew from 23% in 2016 to more than 30% in 2018 (Interpret, n.d.). Based on these trends, it would appear that females are interested in participating in esports spaces, but their experiences in these environments are underexplored and require additional inquiry (Ruvalcaba, Shulze, Kim, Berzenski, & Otten, 2018).

Therefore, it is important to examine factors that may contribute to the lower proportions of females within esports environments, as recent events have suggested esports may be prone to instances of hostility toward female participants (Desatoff, 2018). Beyond that, men's dominance in the development and administration of esports serves to indicate that women are relatively excluded (Grindstaff & West, 2011). Findings within the traditional sport space have uncovered the existence of high rates of male dominance and hegemony, which lend themselves to a decrease in women and girl participants, leaders, and fans (Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013). Based on these previous findings and claims, the current investigation was developed utilizing the frameworks of hegemonic masculinity and treatment discrimination in order to examine the experiences of both men and women gamers.

Specifically, esports organizations, professional gaming, and casual gaming environments were created for and by men as the games and objectives themselves align with traditional forms of masculinity (Paaßen, Morgenroth, & Stratemeyer, 2017).

The development of an environment that supports and reinforces hegemonic masculinity lends itself to encounters and settings that generate hostility and discrimination toward the underrepresented and less powerful group. In the case of esports participation, the less powerful group is comprised of women and girl players. Based on the male-dominated structure of esports environments and the similarities associated with processes of hegemony for traditional sport, esports spaces require an investigation of participant experiences (Ruvalcaba et al., 2018).

Not only is it important to gauge participant experiences with hostility and discrimination during gameplay, but it also is critical to determine how players themselves may be contributing to the suggested hostility within esports environments. As seen in traditional U.S. sport, there was an increase of female participants after the passage of Title IX in 1972 (a U.S. federal policy requiring equal opportunity for extra-curricular opportunities in federally funded educational settings). Prior to the passage of such legislation, there were many assumptions that females were less interested in sport participation (Kihl, Shaw, & Schull, 2013). The dramatic growth of sport programs for females at the youth, amateur, intercollegiate, and professional ranks demonstrated the importance of equitable policy and practice to ensure females are provided both the opportunities and environments suited to encourage sustained participation in male-dominated spaces (Darvin & Sagas, 2017b; Fink, 2016). If esports are currently aligned with the damaging outcomes of hegemonic masculinity, the esports industry would benefit from a greater understanding of how their participants are experiencing these spaces so that they may work to create more inclusive environments in the future.

Additionally, the engagement of females in gaming has been shown to differ based on the type of game and level of competitiveness and suggests a large untapped market of consumers. For example, women comprise approximately 66% of those who

engage in casual gaming (i.e., logging many hours on mobile and few on PC/console devices). For PC or console games, women account only for 35% of those participating in these traditional esports spaces, and major titles such as Overwatch (26% women), Hearthstone (26% women), Counter Strike: Global Offensive (24% women), Rainbow 6: Siege (23% women), and Defense of the Ancients 2 (20% women) continually have shown low involvement from women and girl participants (Interpret, n.d.). Reports also indicate that females only account for roughly 39% of game purchasers (ESA, 2018). The significance of the current investigation centers on the long-term impacts of a low proportion of females in esports spaces.

While the low participation levels among female gamers are concerning, the low proportions of competitive female gamers and women leaders throughout esports environments further depicts the homogenous nature of the industry (Knorr, 2018). If females are not consistently seen participating or engaged in esports at the highest levels, the representation of women in esports leadership roles may continue to lag. This occurrence would result in sustained male dominance throughout the esports industry via means of homogeneous hiring and advancement opportunities (Darvin & Sagas, 2017a). Therefore, the significance of the current study likely stretches beyond gauging participant experiences, and may provide a deeper understanding of the male-dominated state of the industry overall. To address the purpose of this research, the following research questions were explored:

RQ1) To what extent do men and women esports participants experience treatment discrimination during their playing experiences?

RQ2) To what extent do men and women esports participants experience hostility in esports playing experiences?

RQ3) To what extent do men and women esports participants contribute to hostile environments in esports spaces?

Conceptual Framework

Hegemonic Masculinity

Hegemony is the cultural dynamic by which a particular group of people sustains its privilege (Dellinger, 2004). This element is accomplished through broad-based consent via the ideologies, practices, and social arrangements that are deemed natural in their current state (Dellinger, 2004). The concept of hegemony focuses on the cultural aspects of gender inequality. Specific to the current investigation, hegemony is connected to what sustains men's power in particular environments while simultaneously focusing on the large proportion of men who are then motivated to support the achievement of that power. This power is particularly evident in environments that are highly masculine in nature, such as esports (Ruvalcaba et al., 2018). According to Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), masculinities often reflect cultural values and ideologies as well as embodied practices. Therefore, the environment, sustained socialization, and practices present therein all serve to shape the forms of masculinity present as well as the displays those in power aim to reinforce.

Traditional sport previously has served as a fertile arena to address questions of hegemony in the forms of male dominance, power, and the sustainment of that power over women (Grindstaff & West, 2011). While the debate as to the categorization of esports as a sport is ongoing, the current makeup of esports environments and organizations suggests that it also falls victim to the same outcomes of hegemony as its traditional sport counterpart (Paaßen et al., 2017). Kark and Eagly (2010) assert that male-dominated industries such as sport and esports often favor men over women in both culture and structure. Additionally, an organization that maintains a culture or structure that may hinder female inclusion often is implicitly reinforced rather than intentional (Shaw & Frisby, 2006). Examinations of organizational culture within the traditional sport industry have uncovered widespread instances of masculine identities and a lack of

diversity engagement (Shaw & Frisby, 2006; Spoor & Hoye, 2013). Specifically, sport organizations operate in cultures that value similarity and historically these organizations have maintained masculine cultures and male leadership (Fink, Pastore, & Riemer, 2001). As such, these perpetuated and multi-level gendered processes that have shaped the sport industry and often discourage women from entry similarly are aligned with the makeup of the esports industry (Burton, 2015; Claringbould & Knoppers, 2008; Fink, 2016). The result of a masculine organizational culture often is negative for women, as it has been determined that the institutionalized marginalization of women is rampant throughout the sport industry.

In alignment with the tenants of hegemonic masculinity, previous research has indicated that the traditional sport industry tends to favor a more masculine culture in terms of organizational makeup (Kihl, Shaw, & Schull, 2013). Beyond that, gender stereotypes that exist within traditional sport often contribute to access and treatment discrimination, compounding the masculine culture as an institutionalized process (Aicher & Sagas, 2009). Similar to traditional sport, esports can be considered a highly masculine institution, as the industry largely has been organized by and for men (Desatoff, 2018; Ruvalcaba et al., 2018). The development and categories of esports games tend to align with what are more traditionally considered to be masculine activities such as first-person shooters (e.g., Counter Strike: Global Offensive; Overwatch) and traditional sport activities (e.g., NBA2K series; FIFA series) (Paaßen et al., 2017). Beyond that, the sexualization of women avatars within many mainstream esports games (e.g., Ultra Street Fighter 4) serves to both overtly and implicitly reinforce the status of females within these spaces (Desatoff, 2018; Ruvalcaba et al., 2018). These embodied practices and ideologies may contribute to a culture of hegemonic masculinity within esports environments and subsequently impact participant experiences.

Treatment Discrimination

While access discrimination more commonly is examined within traditional sport participation and the experiences therein, previous investigations also have uncovered treatment discrimination in these spaces. Similar to the instances of hostility experienced in esports environments for particular individuals, previous findings have indicated that people who are different from the majority in a particular setting generally are treated more poorly than their majority counterparts (Cunningham & Sagas, 2007). In esports spaces, the majority of participants are male, and esports environments similarly may be prone to instances of treatment discrimination. Beyond the gender of the participant, investigations of treatment discrimination in traditional sport environments have uncovered varying levels of participant welcoming based on race or ethnicity. Specifically, previous findings have indicated that for particular sports, individuals may feel less welcomed if they identify with a racial or ethnic minority and do not represent the majority of that particular sports racial/ethnic makeup (Bopp, Turick, Vadeboncoeur, & Aicher, 2017). For example, Caucasian athletes felt more welcomed in the sport of lacrosse than did their racial/ethnic minority counterparts (Bopp et at., 2017). Consistent with the minority/majority dichotomy, Caucasian athletes represent the majority (87%) of intercollegiate participants and the majority (94%) of intercollegiate head coaches for the sport of lacrosse (NCAA, 2018). Thus, minority participants in traditional sport spaces may feel unwelcomed based on their position as a minority group, and this outcome of unwelcomeness undoubtedly is a component of treatment discrimination (Cunningham & Sagas, 2007).

Additional investigations in traditional sport environments have uncovered that compared to their counterparts, women are more likely to experience treatment discrimination in the form of fewer networking opportunities and less return for their human and social capital investments (Cunningham & Sagas, 2007). Similar to the attributes associated with athlete

welcoming levels, women represent the minority of administrators and coaches in intercollegiate sport, once again indicating that treatment discrimination often is experienced by the minority members in sport environments (Lapchick, 2016). Previous research also has demonstrated that treatment discrimination can have a direct impact on both tangible and intangible outcomes for minority members such as job satisfaction, organizational advancement, and training and development opportunities (Button, 2001; Cunningham & Sagas, 2007). While the majority of the previous research on treatment discrimination in sport environments has focused on the workplace (e.g., Button, 2001; Cunningham & Sagas, 2004; 2007), these findings suggest that sport participants similarly may be prone to treatment discrimination if they represent the minority members of an esports space (e.g., females). Further, if minority sport employees face obstacles and differential treatment based on their membership in a social category, then it might be expected that minority non-traditional sport participants also are likely to experience these obstacles and unfavorable outcomes throughout their participation (Cunningham & Sagas, 2007).

Literature Review

The Growth of esports

Esports first gained recognition in the mid-90s with numerous professional leagues forming around this time (Wagner, 2006). In the preceding years, esports slowly grew as an area for serious academic research. Recently, the rate of this work has intensified as the size of the esports industry has grown considerably in the past few years (Jenny et al., 2018). Total revenue for the esports industry approached roughly $1 billion in 2018 as more than 380 million people around the world watched various competitions (Willingham, 2018). Experts predict that revenues could reach $1.6 billion in 2020 (Chokshi, 2018). Further, Bowles (2018) estimates there are 150 million gamers in America. People also are consuming esports in numbers that often surpass the viewership of other

sports. The 2017 Championship for League of Legends, a fantasy-based multiplayer game, attracted more than 80 million viewers, while contests in the NBA 2K League regularly pull in more than one million viewers per game (Willingham, 2018; Wolfe, 2018). The widely popular multi-player battle game Fortnite generated more than 128 million viewing hours in April 2018, with a typical Friday Fortnite contest among top competitive gamers averaging around 9 million viewers (Bowles, 2018; Geeter, 2018).

The rapid growth of esports has been spurred by an increase in the popularity of online games and the development of online platforms to broadcast those games to others (Hamari & Sjobloom, 2017). Additionally, the popularity of social networks and the rise of gaming celebrities has helped to spur the industry's growth since 2016 (Bowles, 2018; Chokshi, 2018). Bowles (2018) notes that the social aspect of many modern games has helped increase their popularity. Games such as League of Legends and Fortnite require players to communicate with each other, develop strategies, and overcome obstacles all while oftentimes streaming their experiences for others to watch (Bowles, 2018).

As the esports industry has grown, observers have noted that it has increasingly begun to mirror traditional or "legacy" sports (Chokshi, 2018). For example, major tournaments and ticket sales are common in esports, and large investments are being made in esports corporate sponsorship (Chokshi, 2018). Like traditional sports, esports also attract fans to arenas to consume the product (Bowles, 2018). Furthermore, the esports industry has created its own athlete-celebrities and popular teams. For example, Richard Blevins, also known as Ninja, reported income of more than $500,000 a month from subscribers and sponsorships in 2018 (Geeter, 2018). FaZe Clan is an esports organization, run by the former president of Capital Records, that recruits and signs young players to compete for their teams in much the same way professional sport organizations recruit and sign talent (Bowles, 2018).

Hostility in esports

Recent literature has indicated that virtual maltreatment has grown as a result of a rise in social media usage (Kavanagh, Jones, & Sheppard-Marks, 2016; Kim, 2017). It has become more apparent that virtual spaces create ideal environments for abuse to occur as individuals are provided with the opportunity to communicate instantaneously in an uncontrolled and often anonymous manner (Kavanagh et al., 2016). For example, Kavanagh et al. (2016) conducted an analysis of Twitter abuse, finding four key components of that abusive behavior: (a) physical; (b) sexual; (c) emotional; and (d) discriminatory. Similarly, Ruvalcaba et al. (2018) found women and girl gamers avoid participation in esports partially due to the sexist actions of male gamers. These instances have been known to evolve during typical gameplay experiences in which female gamers are participating on or against mostly male teams. An extreme occurrence of this hostility became apparent during the 2014 events that have been categorized as "Gamergate." Gamergate occurred after women members of the gaming industry spoke out against the lack of gender equity in esports spaces and were subsequently harassed online and in-person by male gamers (Wingfield, 2014). These hostile acts included death and assault threats directed toward the women, and their private contact information was spread via online platforms to incite additional fear. Gamergate served as a bleak reminder that the esports industry was highly male-dominated, and any efforts aimed at exposing this culture would be met with resistance.

More recently, Nakandala, Ciampaglia, Su, and Ahn (2017) demonstrated there were significant gender differences in the comments directed at streamers who use the popular esports site known as Twitch. Male streamers tended to receive more comments that were game-related, while female streams received more comments that were objectifying. Nakandala et al. concluded that "conversation in Twitch is strongly gendered" (p. 169). Similar to traditional sport, the objectification of women participants and subsequent

negative outcomes of this treatment and representation is not uncommon (Darvin & Sagas, 2017b). Therefore, the gendered nature of esports conversation is not surprising, but it is worth asking to what extent it exists in regular gameplay rather than in virtual chatrooms. Much of the video game universe strictly adheres to and reinforces gender stereotypes while the myth of gaming as incongruent with feminine identity persists (Blackburn & Scharrer, 2019; Kim, 2017; Paaßen et al., 2017)

This lack of inclusivity among esports environments largely differs from that of traditional sport. Due to the fact that many competitive settings for esports players are based within online environments with a shield of anonymity, discrimination and hostility toward females is likely to ensue (Ruvalcaba et al., 2018; Kim, 2017). The anonymous nature of online spaces, combined with a low level of gender diversity throughout esports, has the tendency to generate hostile environments for those participants that do not fit the stereotype of a traditional esports gamer. While the direct outcomes of such hostile and discriminatory acts are underexplored in esports participation, these types of interactions within traditional sports have shown to cause serious and long-term effects on female participants such as emotional distress, mental health impairment, and overall health decline (Marks, Mountjoy, & Marcus, 2012). The future of esports growth will depend on the ability of organizations to drive higher rates of inclusion and diversity throughout the industry. The negative outcomes and associations with hostility and hostile participant environments undoubtedly will have a negative influence over the potential growth of the industry in the years to come. Opportunity and equitable access will drive interest levels, and the industry will need to model their future actions after the traditional sport space to ensure females are encouraged to partake.

Method

Research Design

The current study utilized a quantitative design, particularly survey research, to examine esports participant experiences. This survey contained demographic, descriptive, and multiple-choice questions. The survey questions concerned with measuring treatment discrimination were developed using a previously established treatment discrimination scale (Cunningham & Sagas, 2007). Several examples of the treatment discrimination survey questions based on the Cunningham et al., (2007) application have been provided within Table 1.

The hostile environment questions were established based on the definition of a hostile work environment developed by the United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). According to the EEOC (n.d.), the offensive conduct that contributes to a hostile work environment may include offensive jokes, slurs, epithets or name calling, physical threats, intimidation, ridicule or mockery, insults or put-downs, and offensive objects or pictures. Participants were asked to rank their experiences using a 5-point Likert-scale from 1 (never) to 5 (always). The responses were analyzed and compared based on the demographic variables that were collected with specific interest in the participant gender and gaming experience using ANOVA analyses.

Participants

Participants were recruited via the social news platform Reddit. The survey link and participation invitation were posted to a variety of esports discussion boards on Reddit such as the League of Legends, Fortnite, and Overwatch boards, as these represent some of the most popular and heavily-played esports games. The survey also was distributed online via targeted recruitment of esports consumers on Amazon mTurk. A total of 471 individuals participated in this study. Demographic breakdowns for the participants are presented in Table 2.

Results

Results for the study are displayed in Table 1. Results for RQ1, To what extent do men and women esports participants encounter instances of treatment discrimination during their playing experiences, revealed a significant difference between groups as determined by the one-way ANOVA ($F(2, 452) = 147.32$, $p < .000$). Specifically, female esports participants identified experiencing treatment discrimination based on their gender ($M = 2.43$, $SD = 1.16$) more frequently than did male esports participants ($M = 1.09$, $SD = .41$). Beyond this finding, it also was determined that male esports participants were less likely to perceive this discrimination experienced by female esports participants, as the results of the one-way ANOVA revealed a significant difference between groups ($F(2, 451) = 17.90$, $p < .000$). Specifically, men ($M = 2.27$, $SD = 1.12$) were less likely to acknowledge that women would experience treatment discrimination during their esports participation than women acknowledged ($M = 3.13$, $SD = 1.26$).

Results for RQ2, To what extent do men and women esports participants experience hostility in esports playing experiences, revealed a significant difference between groups for the experience, "insulted by others while playing," as determined by the one-way ANOVA ($F(2, 453) = 22.84$, $p < .000$). Specifically, male esports participants indicated they were more frequently insulted while playing ($M = 3.66$, $SD = .91$) than female participants ($M = 2.85$, $SD = 1.22$). Results revealed a significant difference between groups for the experience, "other players swearing at you while playing," as determined by the one-way ANOVA ($F(2, 451) = 7.23$, $p < .001$). Specifically, male esports participants indicated that other players would swear at them more frequently while playing ($M = 3.19$, $SD = 1.08$) than female participants ($M = 2.68$, $SD = 1.18$). Results revealed a significant difference between groups for the experience, "feeling criticized by others while playing," as determined by the one-way ANOVA, ($F(2, 453) = 5.30$, $p < .005$). Specifically, male esports participants indicated they

more frequently felt criticized by others while playing (M = 3.35, SD = 1.08) than female participants (M = 2.91, SD = 1.13).

Results of RQ3, To what extent do men and women esports participants contribute to hostile environments in esports spaces, revealed a significant difference between groups based on the participant's contribution to hostile environments by means of "criticizing other gamers while playing," as determined by the one-way ANOVA (F(2, 453) = 10.09, p < .000). Specifically, male participants indicated that they more frequently criticized other gamers while playing (M = 2.76, SD = 1.16) than female participants (M = 2.13, SD = 1.18). Results also revealed a significant difference between groups based on the participant's contribution to hostile environments by means of "engaging in trash talking of other players," as determined by the one-way ANOVA (F(2, 452) = 6.21, p < .002). Specifically, male participants indicated they would more frequently trash talk other players (M = 2.53, SD = 1.19) than female participants (M = 2.03, SD = 1.19).

Discussion

This study provides some of the first gender-based evidence concerning the experiences of esports participants. Results indicate there are significant differences between the participation experiences of men and women with regard to discrimination, hostility experienced, and hostility created. In regard to discrimination, women reported experiencing higher rates of treatment discrimination than men. This finding is similar to the Ruvalcaba et al. (2018) results, which reported women experienced higher levels of discrimination in online and anonymous environments. However, it should be noted that both genders reported fairly low levels of discrimination, with men reporting that treatment discrimination was almost non-existent. This could be due to the fact that both men and women have preconceived notions about the expectations of the behavior of participants in esports and online environments. Online environments,

particularly where anonymous comments and interactions are allowed, commonly have higher levels of discrimination and incivility (Santana, 2014). Some news outlets saw success in combating this issue by linking comments to Facebook profiles in order to remove anonymity (Hille & Bakker, 2014). In order to create a civil and non-discriminatory environment for a diverse population of participants, it may be in the best interest of esports organizations to take similar actions as well.

In addition, men were less likely to report that women would experience treatment discrimination in their esports experiences. This finding further supports the premise of hegemonic masculinity in the esports industry (Desatoff, 2018; Ruvalcaba et al., 2018). Due to strong male cultural norms and ideologies, it may be difficult for male esports participants to conceptualize the experience of an underrepresented group, such as their female counterparts. Previous research concerned with treatment discrimination has established that minority groups likely will experience adverse treatment based on a misalignment with social norms (Cunningham & Sagas, 2004). Subsequently, for male-dominated spaces such as esports, hegemonic masculinity is contested when underrepresented groups are more present in power and decision-making roles (Wood, 2018). While esports is a relatively emergent field, it is imperative to encourage female leadership in all aspects of the industry. Higher proportions of women in the upper-level roles of game development, administration, and competitive events may mitigate the culture of hegemonic masculinity of which the esports environment is susceptible.

Another major finding from this study was that across multiple constructs, men reported higher levels of hostility in their environments when playing esports. Males reported they were insulted, sworn at, and felt criticized more frequently than females. Interestingly, this data contrasts previous research that identified the challenges female esports participants face in a hostile online esports space (Ruvalcaba et al., 2018; Wingfield, 2014). However, research on

women working in male-dominated fields shows they seek acceptance, inclusion, and male camaraderie amidst a sometimes hostile 'locker room' environment (Sugerman, 2018). One woman in sport business stated, "We begrudgingly accept a level of misogyny as pioneers of progress" (Antoniacci, 2016, para. 4). Similar behavior is seen in male-dominated traditional sports, where women tend to seek social acceptance (United Nations, 2007). These examples may provide support for the notion that women under-report hostile environment factors because they commonly accept a certain level of hostility when participating in a male-dominated sport context.

Additionally, the current study extends the frameworks of hegemonic masculinity and treatment discrimination to the esports space. Findings suggest that the male-dominated nature of esports likely contributes to the negative experiences of women in these environments. Specifically, women participants indicated they experienced higher levels of treatment discrimination, while men participants were less likely to acknowledge that women would experience discrimination in these environments. Further, and central to the expansion of hegemonic masculinity, is the finding that suggested men esports participants were more likely than women to contribute to the hostility of esports gameplay experiences. This result further reinforces the notion that hegemony is connected to what sustains men's power in particular environments. Specifically, the action of generating hostility in esports gameplay suggests that men are motivated to support the achievement of the power they currently maintain in this space (Dellinger, 2004; Grindstaff & West, 2011).

As esports becomes more mainstream, it is likely that discrimination and hostility will not be tolerated in the community, among both men and women (Knorr, 2018). Organizations both within and outside the industry presumably will be forced to clean up the reputation of esports to incentivize professionalism, sponsorship, and legitimacy (Dormehl, 2018; Knorr, 2018). For example, recent strides have been

made outside the esports space to combat the presence of hostile online environments, including the development of an artificial intelligence (AI) chat analysis triage tool (CATT) by researchers with Purdue University (Dormehl, 2018). This new tool assists law enforcement in monitoring online conversations and highlights instances in which adults behave in a suspiciously inappropriate way (Dormehl, 2018). These tools eventually may be utilized within esports environments to help eliminate hostility and overt discrimination, and could assist with creating an inclusive environment that encourages women to not only participate and spectate esports, but take active leadership roles throughout the industry as well.

Limitations and Future Research

Similar to other investigations of participant experiences, this study was not free from limitations and thus provides an opportunity to advance additional research in this space. First, while the participant numbers for esports gaming are high, access to these participants often can be a challenge and representative samples can be difficult to obtain. While the men to women sample split for this particular study is similar to that of other esports participant investigations, future research should seek to obtain additional women and girl participants to further gauge their experiences in this space. Second, this particular investigation did not seek to draw comparisons between specific esports games, as it instead sought to uncover experiences with hostility and treatment discrimination in these environments overall. Future research should perhaps aim to investigate individual esports games and determine whether certain games are themselves more prone to experiences of hostility and treatment discrimination for participants. Similar to traditional sport, there may be particular esports games that are more welcoming to underrepresented groups (Bopp et al., 2017). Additionally, the level of the gamer and the frequency of gameplay should be included in additional analyses of player experience. Finally, it is important to note that these are self-reported numbers, and while most men participants reported lower levels

of treatment discrimination while women reported lower levels of hostility, that does not necessarily mean they are not experiencing it in gameplay.

Conclusion

The esports industry has experienced rapid growth over the previous decade, and as such, a recent call by sport management scholars suggests that the field of sport management needs to broaden research endeavors to include analyses of esports environments. This study served as one of the first to gauge the inclusiveness of esports spaces for participants. Findings suggest that women esports participants experience higher rates of treatment discrimination during their time engaging in esports as players and are less likely to contribute to hostility in this environment. These findings should inform the esports industry to take the necessary steps to create more inclusive esports environments in the future for all participants and potential participants.

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Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations for RQ1, RQ2, and RQ3.

Item	Mean (Standard Deviation)	
	Females	Males
I feel welcomed by other players.	2.64 (1)	2.6 (1)
I try to make others feel welcomed.	3.46 (1.17)	3.34 (1.13)
How frequently have you been given positive or constructive feedback?	2.49 (1)	2.35 (.92)
How frequently do you give positive or constructive feedback during a playing experience?	2.54 (1.11)	2.76 (1.02)
How frequently are you insulted by others during a playing experience?*** (hostility)	2.85 (1.22)	3.66 (.91)
How often do you trash talk with other players during a playing experience?*** (hostility)	2.03 (1.19)	2.53 (1.19)
How often do other players swear at you during a playing experience?*** (hostility)	2.68 (1.18)	3.19 (1.08)
How often do you swear at other players during a playing experience? (hostility)	1.85 (1.05)	2.16 (1.17)
How frequently have you felt criticized by other players during a playing experience?** (hostility)	2.91 (1.13)	3.35 (1.08)
How often do you criticize other players during a playing experience?*** (hostility)	2.13 (1.18)	2.76 (1.16)
I experience discrimination playing esports based on my gender.***	2.43 (1.16)	1.09 (0.41)
Women and girls experience discrimination playing esports because of their gender.***	3.13 (1.26)	2.27 (1.12)
Men and boys experience discrimination playing esports because of their gender.	1.43 (.79)	1.22 (.58)

Table 2

Participant demographics.

		n	%
Gender			
	Male	366	77.4
	Female	82	17.8
	Did not report	23	4.9
Race/Ethnicity			
	Caucasian	324	69
	Asian	61	12.9
	Hispanic/Latinx	23	4.9
	Black	17	3.8
	Did not report	46	9.8
Age			
	18-21	238	50.5
	22-25	124	26.3
	26-29	47	4
	30-33	14	3
	34-37	16	3.4
	38+	19	4

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