

eSports Events, the Good, the Bad and the Ugly, from a Parent's Perspective

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Abstract: eSports events in the form of tournaments are a relatively new occurrence in South Africa. Therefore, it is vital to understand this form of entertainment, the events hosted, and the perspectives of participants and spectators. A pilot qualitative study was undertaken at a local school that hosted an interschool eSports tournament event. The study focused on the parents of minor eSports participants to gauge their perspective of the eSports events hosted, the advantages and disadvantages of participating in these events, and their actual experience of the hosted event. Out of a population of 20 parents who attended the event, six parents consented to be interviewed. Findings have been made on topics such as the addiction of minors to eSports gaming, why minors participate in eSports, the advantages and disadvantages of eSports gaming, and what parents want from eSports events. The findings of this study will direct eSports stakeholders on how to improve on offered eSports events, and inform them of the views of stakeholders. The tourism industry should take note of this newly emerging type of event, which could be a catalyst for South African events as the hub for Africa eSports events.

Keywords: eSports Events, Parents, Perceptions, Motivations, South Africa

1 Background

Jenny, Keiper, Taylor, Williams and Gawrysiak (2018) and Neus (2019) describe eSports events as a global phenomenon with competitions currently hosted worldwide, especially in the United States, Europe and Asia. According to Jenny *et al.* (2018), eSports is classified as a non-traditional form of sports that utilises technology and removes the participant from the direct action. The recent advances in information technologies, internet networks that have improved and expanded, and more people having access to a computer or smartphone, have accelerated the transition from traditional games to digital media (Çavuş, 2020). Pu, Xiao and Kota (2022) mention that eSports is hailed as the “21st-century spectator sport” with a massive global fan base, and as an event type, is developing rapidly to be more professional and commercialised. Jenny *et al.* (2018) mention that most venues where eSports events are currently held were originally constructed to host other events, sports or entertainment. With the challenging times the events industry has faced in recent years, especially due to COVID-19, event facilities are challenged to host and attract popular financially beneficial events (Jenny *et al.* 2018). Leon, Hinojosa-Ramos, León-Lopez, Belli, López-Raventós and Florez (2022) describe eSports as an alternative for tourism and as a diversified event offering that can be facilitated at destinations.

Spectators form the backbone of an event by, creating the atmosphere, rooting for participants and supporting exhibitors during the course of the event. Therefore, an understanding of spectators' views of an event is vital to ensure that their needs are met and their motivations are catered for. eSports gaming is highly prevalent among the younger generation (Chung, Sum, Chan, Lai & Cheng, 2019), which then brings in the role of parents as the caregivers of minors who participate in eSports events.

2 Introduction

2.1 eSports

eSports, which can also be described as organised competitive video gaming, is on a growing curve, with an increasing need for spectators to view these events either online or in person (Jenny *et al.* 2018). The tourism industry, and especially the South African tourism industry, has started to give eSports events some attention due to the unique opportunities to be found in this sector. There has been a steady growth in eSports events in South Africa over the past few years. This is supported by developments such as the most prominent eSports arena of its kind being built at a high school in Johannesburg (Centennial Schools 2023), a total of R750 000 in eSports scholarships being made available to students (Meikie 2023) and a famous media house (Broad Media)

growing its editorial team by opening up a position for an online gaming journalist (MyBroadband 2022). Clearly, people are shifting their focus to this type of event and it is therefore necessary to understand the participants and spectators better to capitalise on this untapped market.

It is expected that the number of eSports enthusiasts worldwide will exceed 318 million by 2025 –, a massive increase from the 2022 figure of 261.2 million (Statista 2022). Pannekeet (2019) confirms that the eSports market is on a fast track, which consists of continual growth in the years to come due to both its ability to be innovative and the interest from especially sponsors and broadcasters for investment. When looking at financial figures, Gilbert (2023) listed 2020 eSports revenues of US\$947.1 million for global annual eSports events, with the 2021 global eSports income passing US\$1 billion, a year-on-year growth of 15.7%. Worldwide, eSports had 474 million people watch eSports games in 2021 (Pannekeet 2019; Pilipović 2022).

Illustrating the growing popularity of these events, Pu *et al.* (2022) mention that the 2018 League of Legends World Championship, which took place at the World Cup Stadium in Seoul, was sold out with 40 000 attendees at the tournament. eSports events, like any other events, have a definite economic impact on other industries such as wholesale, retail trade and food and beverage services at tourism destinations (Hlee & Lee 2023; Thompson, Taheri & Scheuring 2022). Mahlangu and Naudé-Potgieter (2022) identified some vital features that are required to make an eSports event successful, such as mega venues, which are equipped with fast internet speed, set up with complete computer stations of the best designs, big TV screens for the spectators' pleasure, streaming services, and food and beverage services. Due to the technological nature of these events, the challenge with eSports events is that they are continually changing and updating in terms of games, software and hardware required (Jenny *et al.* 2018). Pu *et al.* (2022) explain that eSports events create an opportunity for physical and virtual spectating to happen simultaneously. South Africa is at the forefront of embracing eSports events in Africa and therefore has the opportunity to be the leader in Africa by hosting events. Such proactive behaviour would create a massive opportunity for international events to be hosted on South African soil and a positive economic spin-off for the events industry in South Africa.

2.2 eSports in South Africa

South Africa is still in the early stages of fully embracing eSports as a new form of sport and event in the tourism industry. Thus, it is essential to obtain a better understanding of the participants, their legal guardians, and spectators. If one could identify what motivates these parties to spend money and attend an event on site, organisers could ensure that those needs are met, and the results would show in the attendee figures. Yu, Beres, Robinson, Klwarkowski and Mirza-Babaei (2022) describe these factors as spectator motivations that would result in engaged spectators.

Kim and Kim (2020) studied spectators' subjective well-being when watching live-streaming eSports events. It was found that achievement, friendship and social dimensions greatly influenced their subjective well-being (Kim & Kim 2020). Thompson, Taheri and Scheuring (2022) wanted to know what motivates spectators to attend an eSports event physically, with antecedents such as star players, loyalty towards the team and flow experiences that contributed to this motivation. A study by Neus (2019) compared on-site attendance to virtual event attendance, with social aspects motivating spectators to attend the event live, while the online spectators were more interested in the details of the game as it was played. Jenny *et al.* (2018) remind us that spectators are what drives the revenue for sports facilities (2018) and challenged facilities to be open-minded and see how they could adapt their offering to be able to cater for eSports events.

On the flip side of the coin, there are possible negative consequences of eSports participation, such as possible health issues in the forms of psychosocial, physical, cognitive, and conceivable mental health issues such as gaming addiction, burnout, or cyberbullying (Yin, Zi, Zhuang, Gao, Tong, Song & Liu, 2020). An awareness of the negative consequences of eSports participation could guide stakeholders on the improvements that should be made in the eSports event facilitation.

This study focused on the perspectives of the parents of minors participating in a high-school eSports tournament hosted at a top-of-the-range high school with a dedicated eSports facility. The parent's views about gaming addiction, advantages and disadvantages of eSport gaming, and the overall rating of the attended event were gauged. This is supported by Pu, Ciao and Kota (2022), who concluded that more information is currently needed on the reasons why spectators attend eSports events. Jenny *et al.* (2018) and Neus (2020) commented that research into eSports developments will always be a fruitful area to focus on with future research projects.

2.3 Event spectators

Pu *et al.* (2022) highlight in their study that motivation is an important topic that should be considered when looking at sport consumer behaviour. Motivation is the driving force that energises a person towards goal-orientated behaviour and influences the event's design, the gaming experience, and all the steps involved in the process of making the decision to attend a specific event (Pu *et al.* 2022).

3 Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine parent's perception of a hosted eSports event. Based on this purpose, the following aims were identified for the study:

- To explore parents' attitudes towards, beliefs about, and understanding of their children's involvement in eSports.
- To identify the advantages and disadvantages of minors participating in eSports events.
- To analyse parents' discernment of the risk of addiction among eSports players.
- To determine the expectations and actual experience of parents at an on-site eSports event.

4 Methodology

This preliminary study was conducted as an explanatory study following a qualitative research method. The researchers conducted qualitative interviews with six parents who attended an eSports event at a school in May 2023. A total population of about 20 parents attended the event, but only six parents agreed to be interviewed in the course of the morning. Interviews were conducted in a space at the school that was the choice of the parent, and the interviewers recorded the interviews. The interviews were subsequently transcribed, and the researchers who had conducted the interviews did thematic analysis. Afterwards, the researchers shared the transcriptions and the second researcher conducted a second round of thematic analysis.

5 Results

The parents of minor eSports players have definite perceptions about eSports as entertainment for their children. The following preliminary conclusions can be made about eSports and the hosted eSports event from the perspective of parents who attended it.

5.1 Addiction to Gaming

The WHO (2018) defines gaming disorder as a pattern of persisting or recurrent gaming behaviour that might be paired with impaired control over gaming, increasing priority given to gaming even if it takes precedence over other life interests, and even the continuation of gaming despite the negative consequences. This gaming disorder or addiction could have definite impacts on the gamers' private, family, social, scholastic, or other important life areas (WHO, 2018). Potenza (2012) concluded that young adults and adolescents have higher addiction rates than children and older adults. The parents who were interviewed responded that they were fully aware of the risks of their children possibly forming an unhealthy relationship in the form of addiction with eSports gaming. It was evident that such unhealthy relationship had not yet been formed, and the parent and participant duo intended managing it carefully. In reaction to this possible risk, parents were constantly vigilant by a) proactively looking out for signs of addiction, b) managing the amount of time the minors spend on eSports games by setting clear time limits on eSports practising hours, c) having regular open conversations with their children about this topic, and d) balancing it with schoolwork and/or physical participation in a sport. Evidently, the parents were fully informed about this bad habit that might form and had decided to engage proactively regarding this risk. As one parent commented, *"it is a fact, gaming is addictive."* Another parent added that, *"they are playing in a team, and to be part of team you need to be involved regularly. They have to train, know how the team works. So, I wouldn't call it addictive, because they can stop when they need to stop."* The study conducted by Chung *et al.* (2019) concluded that eSports gaming definitely contained a significant public health concern, as gamers could develop problematic gaming behaviour that could lead to gaming disorders and hazardous gaming. A suggestion would be to have training sessions available for parents on how to identify this form of addiction and to inform them of techniques for managing such behaviour.

5.2 Reasons for Playing eSports

Parents were questioned about why their children preferred playing eSports, with insightful findings made. Some of the reasons were *"to occupy herself as she is an only child"*, *"to interact with friends, even internationally"*, *"it is like an online play date, but safe in my own house and I do not have to take her anywhere"*, *"he has tried many sports; this is the one he is most skilled at"*, *"for the novelty of the game"*, *"it is nice for me to sit and see how they are doing, how they are coping with this type of environment"*, *"the excitement of being part of something, a team"*, *"he gets to do something he enjoys"*, *"because he is good in it, he feels like he is accomplishing something"* and *"it makes him happy"*. Evident from these responses are the social aspect of the game as well as the elements of the game that test their skills and capabilities. The findings listed agree with the study by García-Lanzo and Chamarro (2018), who found that participants played eSports because it satisfied basic psychological needs such as the need for competition, social needs and a need to explore. This is supported by Cho Tsaasan *et al.* (2019), who mention that eSports games are often cooperative and social. They serve as an opportunity for teenagers to socialise and to form friendships.

5.3 Advantages and Disadvantages of Playing eSports

The parents were requested to list the advantages and disadvantages this form of sport had for their children. The advantages of playing eSports were listed as: *"They get the opportunity to interact with other children, as she is very shy"* and *"While playing, they grow maturity, building their EQ, learning about teamwork, learning life lessons and how to deal with conflict in general"*, *"during these games they learn how teams function, how to communicate with each other, not to be selfish, to think outside the box and how to apply creativity and strategy"*, *"I believe it exposes them to different languages and cultures, teaches them how to collaborate and learning skills for the future in technology."* Participants therefore learnt life lessons about teamwork, conflict management and communication by participating in eSports. These advantages are closely linked to the suggestions made by García-Lanzo Chamarro (2018), who suggest that eSports players should be developed in the teamwork and interpersonal and communication skills – all skills that would assist the gamers, should they decide to take up professional careers in eSports. Baltezarević and Baltezarević (2019) made similar findings regarding players' motivations to play eSports, such as advancing their knowledge of sports, improving their cognitive skills for competitions, for the socialisation aspect, and, finally, just to feel good. Leung and Chu (2023) agree with the listed advantages and add psychological benefits such as stereotype breaking, a sense of recognition, improved mood, and support from family and friends.

The disadvantages of minors playing eSports were listed as *"the risk of her becoming a recluse and not having any physical human contact with friends"*; *"the risk of not spending enough time on schoolwork"*, *"not developing his motor skills"* and *"always continuously wanting to play"*. Again, the management of the risk of playing eSports came into play here. Another parent also noted that even though their child had improved in terms of their ability to communicate, they struggled to separate *"real-world"* communication from communicating with teammates while playing. These disadvantages need to be managed from a risk perspective so that the participants can enjoy the benefits of playing eSports. Leung and Chu (2023) found disadvantages such as adverse health effects due to the games' psychological intensity, frustration, obsession with winning, and sleep disturbances.

5.4 eSports and eSports Events in South Africa

All parents agreed that eSports and eSports events were not yet supported well in South Africa, but noted that they were gaining traction, as eSports is a relatively new form of entertainment in South Africa, even though national and international bodies have been established (Funk, Pizzo *et al.* 2018). *"I am not aware of any marketing or advertising regarding these events and sport. We need more marketing and information regarding these events."* Another parent painted a bleak picture by describing, *"rural schools do not have access to any of these facilities, they don't even have basic computers. A lot of groundwork to be done. It would be nice to work esports into the syllabus or curriculum, or the school's offering. A lot of work needs to be done to make everybody more aware and informed about eSports and so get more funding and support. At the moment the sport is only for a selected few. Kids with disabilities would also find benefit in this sport and actually be able to participate."* Martinelli (2019) describes the challenges eSports in South Africa is experiencing, with numerous organisations claiming to govern this industry, but with a total lack of cohesion and/or focusing on just one aspect of the sport. Therefore, Martinelli (2019) called for a single regulatory body that would be responsible for overseeing the eSports industry.

5.5 Experience and General Rating of Hosted eSports Event

In general, parents admired the event hosted by the school. It was well organised, and praise streamed in for the beautiful venue that was equipped with the latest technology for eSports. One parent commented how her child must sometimes "*play eSports in the art class*", compared to this state-of-the-art facility. Other comments included that the events were well organised because the school was geared for events of this type. These findings concur with the study by Leon *et al.* (2022), who found event facilities and the quality of the services offered to be critical factors to attract spectators and participants to the event. Pu *et al.* (2022) further concur with this finding in that the physical space of an event critically impacts the overall experience a fan has at a spectating event. It immerses spectators while entertaining all attendees by, for instance, having an impressive venue such as the one where this study was conducted or high-quality and professionally produced broadcasting of the games played. Another parent made a suggestion, "*possibly consider cameras for streaming the event and then the rest of the family can watch it from home as well, but this was a good start for these types of an event.*"

Many of the parents commented that they did not know or understand how the eSports games worked, but they enjoyed the socialising part of the event where they could meet other parents and socialise with them. This statement is supported by the findings of Neus (2020) and Pu *et al.* (2022), who found that on-site attendees of eSports events were motivated by the social aspects of the events, whereas online attendees were more focused on gaining knowledge, and were interested in the intricacies of the game. Regarding knowledge of the games, this finding is further consistent with the study by Pu *et al.* (2022), who found the need to expand one's knowledge of the eSports games as an additional motivator. This social need is not just to be around people with the same interests, but also for the spectators, or, in this case, parents who come to support certain players and so create a connectedness. This is especially relevant to this study on parents who supported their children during an event. Pu *et al.* (2022) describe it as creating a physical offline space where people could gather at the event, something that would not be able to happen online. Neus (2020) further suggests that online tournaments should enhance the social experience of online events to cater to social needs by creating chat rooms or more interactive features that would assist participants and spectators to feel socially connected during an online event. Pu *et al.* (2022) make similar suggestions, such as a social zone, an offline get-together party or socialising apps through which spectators could connect during and after the event. What also further assisted the parents was seeing the game being played on the big screen and thus being able to immerse themselves in the game their children were playing. The issue of security was also raised, "*the groups are small and manageable and therefore I am not worried about security issues regarding my child.*"

One of the parents highly commended the hosts of the event and specially mentioned the helpfulness of the host students who assisted in facilitating the event. Leon *et al.* (2022) received similar responses in their study, where event staff were highlighted as playing a vital role in the hosting of the event. Additional factors that attendees listed as being essential to eSports events were the event atmosphere, the hospitality of the hosts, and general good feelings about the event (Leon *et al.* 2022). There was similar feedback from the parents during the current study. The parents' general praise and positive feedback about the event were overwhelming, with no negative feedback received.

6 Conclusions

Conclusions that can be drawn from this study are that parents of the hosted eSports event are fully informed about the risk of their children possibly becoming addicted to eSports gaming. The parents are realistic about this hazard and are taking proactive steps to try minimising the chances of this happening to their children. It can be recommended that the parents of children who participate in eSports should be educated about addiction to gaming by experts and that they should be given practical guidelines on how to limit this risk and how to react when they notice it happening.

When the parents were asked why their children participated in eSports, mention was made of the social aspect of the game and of the development of their personal capabilities and skills. Due to the importance of social interaction being highlighted by the respondents, it would be advisable to host more group tournaments instead of single-player games and to develop the gamers themselves in terms of the social and gaming skills that could be utilised during a game.

The advantages and disadvantages of participation in eSports events were highlighted, with the advantages being specifically developmental, as gamers could develop their interpersonal skills. From these findings it seems evident that these gamers enjoy learning and developing, albeit in a different way than other learners, namely

through playing games. In terms of the disadvantages, it was clear that the gamers did not come out of their rooms, lost contact with the real world, and that their interpersonal communication was limited. The suggestion here would surely be for teambuilding sessions for eSports gaming teams where they have to leave their homes, meet other people, and work on their interpersonal skills and being able to communicate in person.

It was clear that the government and governing bodies should provide more support to South African eSports. The request would therefore be for the government to be proactive and get involved in this growing event industry. If the correct leadership were in place to guide the development of this event type, it would be highly beneficial to the industry.

Finally, the parents were requested to rate their experience of attending the event. Their feedback was that they were happy, and some were even overwhelmed, by the successful event the school had hosted. They explained that they supported the event because of its socialisation aspect, but also because it taught them more about the way eSports gaming work. The researcher was not surprised by the positive rating of this event, as the state-of-the-art equipment in the venue had recently been installed and was of a high quality.

7 Future Research for this Study

This preliminary study has merely uncovered the tip of the iceberg in terms of exploring, discovering and learning about eSports events, the motivations behind attending these events, and how they are performing in the events industry. Future studies are planned to focus on the different stakeholders involved in eSports events, with the focus envisaged to be on spectators, event organisers, participants and eSports facilitators. The industry seems to be keen to participate in research for the advancement of this entertainment type and is, therefore, more than willing to engage in future research projects.

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