

e-Sports Events: A Sports Parent's Perspective

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Abstract: e-Sports is a rapidly growing industry, which has gained popularity in the recent years. It is estimated that the global e-sports market will have a value of \$1.87 billion in 2025. e-Sports competitions and tournaments are becoming increasingly popular, especially among schoolchildren and college students. The growth of leagues, at school level, requires that parents should understand this sport and have a positive attitude towards e-sports and e-sports events, due to the likely support that parents are required to provide to participants at these events. The study is a preliminary study, which aims to understand parents' view of e-sports, as a form of sports, to determine the financial investment to participate in e-sports and parents' experience during an e-sport event. The study used a qualitative approach, utilising a semi-structured interview schedule, with six parents interviewed at an event, as well as a focus group discussion, with 21 parents of e-sports players. The study found that parents have a positive perception of e-sports events and are fully supportive of their children participating in them. Further, it was concluded that e-sports is viewed as a form of sports and, in comparison to other 'traditional sports', it is actually a very affordable form of sport to partake in. Parents spend most of their money at e-sports events on food, whilst some parents will go to a restaurant after the event, to celebrate the child's accomplishments. The results of this preliminary study will guide further studies on e-sports events and are already giving an indication to e-sports organisers what the perspectives and needs of parents are.

Keywords: parents, perspectives, e-sports events, experience, sport

1. Background and introduction

Competitive gaming, commonly known as e-sports, is a fast-expanding industry that has gained enormous popularity in the past decade. The growth of e-sports can be attributed to numerous factors, such as technological advancements (Lal 2019), growing business opportunities and sponsorships (Mahlangu & Naudé-Potgieter 2022), which is resulting in global e-sports revenue being valued at over \$1.38 billion and projected to reach \$1.87 billion by 2025 (Statistic 2023). Currently, Asia and North America present the biggest e-sports markets globally (Statistic 2023). The expansion of the e-sports market has created a chance for e-sports events and e-sports tourism to flourish (Ioannis & Ioulia 2021). While e-sports competitions are held worldwide, they are primarily held in Europe, Asia and the United States (Jenny, et al. 2018). But, e-sports aren't just growing in the northern hemisphere, according to Games Industry Africa (GIA), sub-Saharan Africa will see the biggest growth in e-sports gaming globally (Libera, 2022). Ioannis and Ioulia (2021) state that e-sports events, which are classified as e-sports tourism, have many similarities with traditional sports tourism. The main distinction is that spectators watch video game players, rather than athletes participating in "traditional" team or individual sports.

According to research conducted by Hamari and Sjöblom (2017), men under the age of 25 make up the majority of e-sports participants. Anderson (2019) reports that global e-sports participation has increased in high schools, due to the prospect it presents for students to acquire new abilities and skills that foster both personal and competitive growth. Looking from a South African perspective, the development of the largest school e-sports arena in the southern hemisphere, at a Johannesburg high school (Centennial Schools 2023), and the hiring of an online gaming journalist by a well-known media organisation (Broad Media) display examples of the region's growth and focus on e-sports events (My Broadband 2022).

Winning is the primary goal of e-sports competitions, which are structured as leagues or tournaments involving players competing against one another, as individuals or professional teams (Anderson 2019). Nowadays, e-sports are seen as a professional endeavour, with its roots in a hierarchical, competitive and regulated worldwide environment (Thompson et al. 2022), where players seek to become experts at games that required specialised knowledge, endurance and skills.

Cho et al. (2019) report that the occurrence of both school and collegiate e-sports leagues are rising globally. For this relatively novel kind of sport, it is mostly unknown what motivates spectators and competitors, as well as what their expectations are of an event. This statement is supported by Anderson (2019), who describes e-

sports as an emerging trend and who further points out the paucity of research on this type of event. The rise in e-sport leagues, competitions and events present a contemporary, technologically advanced online trend that offers event destinations the chance to offer alternative forms of tourism, in addition to the ability to develop new tourism goods (Leon, et al. 2022, Ioannis & Ioulia 2021).

Learners, who compete in school leagues, need parental approval and support, both monetarily as well as permission to participate in the league. It is, thus, key to comprehend the parents' perspective on the following: a) e-sports as a form of sport; b) the financial implications associated with children playing e-sports; and c) the needs and behaviour of parents during an e-sports event. This article's primary goal is to ascertain how e-sports have evolved, from being solely seen as a recreational activity, to a more professional activity (i.e., a sport) by parents, and their level of involvement at e-sports tournaments. Given that e-sports are still seen as a relatively new phenomenon that has the potential to develop into a new subsector of the tourism industry, it is important to understand how parents feel about e-sports and the associated events that take place in relation to these sports.

2. Defining e-sports

The term "e-sports" refers to a form of sports, where the primary feature of the sports is played by electronic systems: human-computer interfaces mediate both the e-sports system's output and the input of players and teams (Juho & Max 2017). e-Sports, put simply, is competitive video gaming (broadcasted on the internet, in contrast to traditional major sports, where participants play a single game type) e-Sports competitors compete in a variety of games, each with unique subtleties and target audiences (Abby, Long, Nick, Drabicky, Hayley & Rhodes 2018). e-Sports encompasses all games played professionally, as well as younger-targeted mobile games, and first-person shooter games with a predominantly adult player base (Abby, et al. 2018).

Video games of many different kinds and unique styles comprise e-sports (Juho & Max 2017). e-Sports is not frequently thought of as the "electronic" version of a "traditional" activity like athletics, soccer or basketball, despite the fact that FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association) video games replicate "conventional" sports like football (Juho & Max 2017). e-Sports games include titles like Street Fighter, Pike and Shot, CS:GO, League of Legends, Call of Duty, Call of Duty 20, Tekken 7, Fortnite, Overwatch, PUBG Rainbow Six Siege, and Dota 2 (Johnson 2021; YOU Digital 2020; Wagner 2006; BOO Games 2020; Online Casino Review 2020). The six categories that can be used to group the games are first-person shooter (FPS), real-time strategy (RTS), sports, multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA), fighting games, and games tailored for mobile devices. The two most well-liked e-sports categories are multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) and first-person shooter (BOO Games, 2020). Whatever the e-sports genre, it includes player/team organisations, games, management structures, prize monies, tournaments, leagues, and sponsorship deals (Anderson 2019). Thus, it may be claimed that e-sports encompasses a variety of game genres, such as racing games, sports games, and first-person shooters. These games are played competitively, in small teams or one on one (MOBA).

3. Adopting e-sports

Despite being around for almost 20 years, e-sports is still an emerging industry and is only now becoming mainstream (Juho & Max 2017). Thus, there is no universally accepted definition of e-sports. Due to its recent global growth and significant opposition (particularly from fans of traditional sports), e-sports cannot be called a sport, because players/gamers are seated, and their competency is not assessed by physical elegance or prowess (Juho & Max 2017). However, "professional gaming", in other words, competitive computer gaming in a professional setting, is sometimes compared to sport (Wagner 2006).

However, as stated by Mahlangu and Naudé-Potgieter (2022), Guttman's model of contemporary sports supports e-sports being considered a form of sport, with the model having four transitional stages, namely play, games, contests, and sports. All sports begin with play - a realm of freedom where non-utilitarian physical or mental activity is done just for the pleasure of "doing". The play's essence can develop in the second stage, which includes organised and spontaneous performance. This level means every play has rules that players must follow. In this second stage, players agree to follow the adjusted rules and avoid instinctive behaviour. An organised game's rules are meant to make it harder to play and minimise inefficiencies. Most games in the third stage can be played competitively or non-competitively, and they must be win-lose games. However, competitions can be further separated into intellectual and athletic categories (Jia 2019). Greenhill and Houghton (2017) found that e-sports take as much physical effort as shooting, pool/snooker, and bowling; yet, require less physicality than basketball, football, and tennis. Since they need concentrated, polished motor skills and quick, accurate hand-eye coordination, e-sports are intellectually demanding (Greenhill & Houghton 2017). According to Jia (2019), and Greenhill and Houghton (2017), e-sports is similar to the preliminary paradigm

(2017). Play is the foundation of sports and e-sports. Wagner (2006) use the terms "training", "cyber fitness", "high performing teams", "strategy" and "cyber-sports", to classify e-sports as a sport. Elite league teams often have experienced coaches, dieticians, mental health specialists, and fitness trainers, just like traditional sports (Online Casino Review 2020). Thus, defining e-sports can assist to distinguish between sports and e-sports (Juho & Max 2017).

e-Sports and e-sports competitions were once considered niche or fringe activities (Funk, et al. 2018). Despite the establishment of international and national bodies, teams with uniforms, coaches, management, competitions, leagues, marquee events, endorsement deals, scholarships, and issues related to doping and gender-related issues, e-sports' increasing similarity and legitimacy to traditional sports events and competition is still debated (Funk, et al. 2018). According to Tjønnndal and Skauge (2021), some athletes, professionals, sport officials and fans still oppose e-sports being considered a 'real sport'.

4. Purpose

In the sports and events sector, e-sports is a relatively new trend that has the highest participation rate among minors. The purpose of the study is to investigate how parents view their children competing in e-sports events and what the parents expect and actually experience at the e-sports events.

This study aims to ascertain the following:

- Do parents view e-sports as a form of sport?
- What do parents anticipate from an on-site e-sports event?
- What are the financial implications associated with e-sports participation?

5. Methodology

The preliminary exploratory study used a qualitative approach, utilising a semi-structured interview schedule, as well as a focus group discussion. The interview method has been deemed the most useful method for this study, as an interview has the potential to elicit rich and thick descriptions. This method, furthermore, gives the researchers an opportunity to clarify statements, as well as probe for additional information. A large benefit of collecting data through semi-structured interviews is that this allows potential to capture a person's perspective of an experience or event (Bloomberg & Volpe 2012). An e-sports event was held at a South African high school in Gauteng, in May 2023, during which the interviews were conducted by the researchers. It is estimated that approximately 20 parents attended the event, with 6 parents that agreed to participate in the interviews. Each parent had a child who was participating in the e-sports tournament held between different school e-sports teams.

A second set of data was gathered during a focus group discussion held at a Gauteng high school that offers e-sports as an extramural activity, in which school children can participate. Parents, whose children participate in e-sport at the school were invited to attend the focus group discussion. A total of 21 parents attended the focus group. The invite was sent out by the school, who facilitated the focus group in terms of distributing the invitations, communication about the research and provision of a venue for the researcher. During both interview processes, the participants signed the informed consent forms, were given a short introduction to the study and then the researcher commenced with the questions. Both the interview and focus group followed similar questions, as guided by the interview guide.

The proceedings of the interviews and focus group were recorded and transcribed by the researchers, after the event. Thematic analysis was conducted, with codes extracted from the various transcribed interviews. The two researchers further observed each other's transcriptions, to confirm codes assigned. The results of the thematic analysis will be discussed in the subsequent section.

6. Results

6.1 In the semi-structured interviews, parents were asked how many e-sports events their children (also called participants) attend each year and if they travel for these events.

Whilst parents in the focus group were asked what initially attracted them to supporting their children's interests in participating in e-sports events.

In the semi-structured interview, every parent mentioned that they were either on an official e-sports team or were relatively new to participating in e-sport events (tournaments). Each participant has been preparing for one to two years to compete in competitions. Every participant has already participated in one to three e-sports

competitions. The focus group's parents said that their children's participation has varied, from 6-7 months to 2 years.

The reason for parents supporting their children in e-sports varied, with a majority of the parents stating that their children were not necessarily sporty or good at 'traditional sports', but their children had an affinity for computers and technology. A specific parent noted that they hope their children get recognised for who they are, even though they don't necessarily fit into a normal sporting team. "This is for those other kids who are nerdy or shy and just don't fit in the normal sports." e-Sports provide these children with an opportunity to participate in a team, and in a sport in which they have the possibility to excel, due to their strengths. However, not all children played e-sports only, with one child participating in various 'traditional sports', as well as e-sports, in order for the child to learn which sports are the best fit for them. This sport allows them to have contact with other children (socialise), get out of the house, or even communicate with children from other countries. "When my son heard about e-sports, he was like, 'yes, I can sit behind my computer and interact with people that are very far from me' The parents then went deeper into the discussion on why e-sports is valuable, noting that the children learn skills such as strategic thinking, coding and the ability to work collaboratively, in teams.

It's clear that young gamers with the support of their parents are becoming interested in eSport and are spending the time and effort to practice of eSports tournaments. With parents making a shift, from viewing eSport as hobby to more of a sport. These findings align with Thompson, et al. (2022) who stated that eSports is gaining the recognition as a sport. This is further supported by Guttman's model of contemporary sports (Mahlangu & Naudé-Potgieter 2022) which illustrates that eSport events at a school level, are organised (level 1 of the model), competitive (level 2 of the model) and a combination of intellectual and physical contests. As Greenhill and Houghton (2017) stated that eSport requires as much physical effort of sports such as pool, shooting and bowling as well as a large intellectual demand. These results are also support by Libera (2022), who stated that sub-Saharan Africa will growth in e-sports.

6.2 Parents were asked if they are spectators at e-sports events (tournaments) and what their experience has been of the e-sports events that they have attended thus far?

Parents stated that they have attended e-sport tournaments that have been hosted at local schools, in and around the Gauteng province. Parents also attended a schools e-sport tournament, which was hosted at Comicon Africa in 2023. Parents stated that they stay at the e-sport event for two main reasons, namely the safety of the children and to support and watch their child/ren play. One parent commented as follows:

"So, I did not enjoy it. I enjoyed watching my son play and that is why I stayed the whole time. It was too far, too busy, too loud, too early for him. So that is not my scene at all, but I sit there the whole time and watched him."

An interesting statement that was made was of parents who stayed and watched the children play, even though they do not understand or follow what is happening in the tournament. "It is very long, and I don't understand what is going on." Therefore, the parents can be considered a captured market, at the eSports events with them spending money to spend at the tournament. With another parent commented:

"Just to add, Comicon and the downside of it, leave your bank card at home. You get there and then get exposed to all the gadgets that they need and everything, and it is very pricey".

Whether it is a larger tournament such as Comicon or a smaller eSports event which is hosted a schools, it is observed that parent spend money, with the researcher observing that the parents at the local school tournament were purchasing food and drinks throughout the day at the school's catering facility.

It is important to note that the experience at a larger school tournament (i.e., Comicon Africa) differs for both parents and children. In such environments, they were exposed to the various elements of e-sports and the different type of e-sport tournaments and games that exist in the e-sports industry. At e-sports tournaments, at local schools, children only play Minecraft, which has been selected as the e-sport game played at local schools' tournaments, as it meets the necessary safety standards for children under the age of 15, with proper access, firewalls and distribution in place to support e-sports in school, and with the Minecraft maps incorporated being able to be used for educational purposes. Comicon exposed parents and children to other games which exist in e-sports. A parent also stated that, at Comicon, they "learnt a lot, on how big the sports is and how big the community is". A second parent comments on such events as follows:

“... the thing with the big event what we try and do with those events, we try and give kids exposure to potentially what is there ... what is available, so it is not necessary wanting to the SuperSport's corner, its more to give them a visual, because with other sports, cricket, rugby, they are national stadium sports, ... it's easy for someone to see if I'm a very good cricket player that what I can done, with eSports it not that. So, as part of that, we try to feature the sports what is the potential within this line.”

Another parent stated that they went exploring and missed their child's game. Some parents found Comicon and the eSport event at Comicon a memorable experience and indicated that they will be planning to visit the next Comicon and e-sport tournament, with the whole family, which is hosted.

It is noted that the experience for all parents is not universally positive, with some parents enjoying their experiences at e-sports events, whether it is big or small, and others attending the tournaments out of obligation and not necessarily pleasure. The common thread is that money is spent at these events, as parents would be buying food and, at larger events, spend money on technological products and services. The spending of money at the eSport event aligns with Leon et al. (2022) states that the economic potential of eSports events. With this further supported by Ioannis and Ioulia (2021) who stated that the expansion of the e-sports market has created a chance for e-sports events and e-sports tourism to flourish.

6.3 Parents were asked about the financial aspects of their children participating of e-sport and e-sports events.

Parents in the semi-structured interviews stated they do not spend a lot of money on e-sports equipment, besides paying for tournament registration. There are several possible explanations for this, including the following: a) the school provided them with the e-sports games and the software licensing; b) prior to making any additional investments, the parents still want to see if the e-sports participant will continue to demonstrate an interest in e-sports; and c) the parents think the event registration cost is fair, considering what the e-sports participant stands to gain from it.

One parent said that, if their child wants to compete professionally in e-sports, they will look for sponsorships. Additionally, they didn't think of e-sports as an expensive kind of sports. One parent stated they purchased e-sports gear for R20,000, in 2023, offering the following explanation:

“Investing in e-sports requires one-time purchases of a laptop and software. Should my kid participate in soccer, I would need to purchase a new uniform for him each year.”

Parents, who participated in the focus group, mirrored the same feelings, saying that their child could participate in e-sports with just a laptop or tablet. While they are aware that there are devices that can improve their child's performance, parents are delaying buying such equipment, in order to first assess their child's e-sports aptitude and interest in the sport in the long run.

6.4 Parents were asked if they see e-sports as a sport or do they see it as a form of entertainment?

Many parents, who participated in the semi-structured interview said they first thought of e-sports as a way to entertain their kids. Parents' attitudes are shifting, and they are beginning to see e-sports as a sport now that players are entering competitions and taking the activity more seriously. Initially, the parents thought it was a “waste of time”, but a parent remarked that “they actually break a sweat when they are playing; this stuff is the hardcore”. This was due to the demands placed on teamwork, the necessity of practicing the game, and the need for analytical abilities. After a while, the parents started to see the benefits of e-sports, which include the benefits of skills in strategic thinking and teamwork. Parents also realised that e-sport has the same benefits as ‘traditional team sports’, with the children socialising and creating bonds with other children. Parents in the focus group also stated that they can see the hard work that goes into preparing for e-sport tournaments. Parents also stated that they are now aware that there are numerous career opportunities which exist in e-sports; these opportunities vary from being a professional gamer, to coding.

Notably, one parent mentioned that they are aware that e-sport can be addictive, unlike other sports; however, there are measures and restrictions that they can put into place to try manage the children spending too much time in front of the screen. A second parent concurred, saying, “It seems that the children have the capacity to manage their exposure to e-sports.”

This indicates a shift in parental perception, with many initially viewing eSports as a form of entertainment for their children but gradually recognising it as a legitimate sport. The acknowledgment of the physical and mental demands, as well as the benefits of strategy and teamwork, reflects a deeper understanding of eSports' intricacies. It's evident that parents understand that the world has changed, and that e-sports is now considered

a professional endeavour, rather than a significant hobby (Thompson, et al., 2022). This shift in perception is crucial for the acceptance and growth of eSports in mainstream society.

7. Conclusions

The early and preliminary research indicates that parents are generally supportive and positive regarding their children's participation in e-sports gaming and events. Generally, it seems that, on the topic of gaming addiction, parents are aware of this possibility, and they are well-informed regarding it, but both the parents and children are all managing it in their own way. Some children are able to manage their gaming exposure themselves, while some parents have to apply ground rules on the time spent on gaming devices. The parents were all in agreement on the benefits of e-sports participation, especially in giving their children exposure to technology and learning information technology skills like coding, shortcuts, etc. e-Sports have further given children, who would not usually be classified as "sporty", the opportunity to also take part in a sport, socialise and learn much-needed life skills. No concerns were raised with regard to the financial expenses required to participate in e-sports events, due to a basic laptop or iPad being sufficient for e-sports gaming.

Tournaments for electronic sports are very new in South Africa, particularly in Gauteng, and there is currently a lack of information regarding the perspectives of parents regarding tournaments. Despite this, there is a significant amount of interest in e-sports and e-sports tournaments by sponsors, which is resulting in a significant amount of economic potential presented at e-sports events. It is also clear that there has been a movement in the perception of e-sports as a sport, as well as a shift in the perception of e-sports as a sector that provides a variety of career prospects for children and young adults in their future. It is possible that this sentiment may lead to the expansion of the e-sports industry, which will result in e-sport being treated as a 'traditional sport'.

Recommendations for this sector include considering supplying even more information to parents, among others, how tournaments work, tournament schedules, and gaming addiction information. Attending a mega gaming event has opened up new horizons to parents, who saw the potential of gaming and were exposed to all of the hardware and software that can enhance the participants' playing. The rest of the family were exposed to the prospects of gaming as well. The importance of human face-to-face contact was highlighted, prompting the need for team get-together sessions to be arranged, to facilitate socialising among the children.

7.1 For research purposes, the following recommendations are made:

To continue with focus groups with parents of e-sports participants, to expand on the data gathered and gain further insights. To survey e-sports participants, to better understand their attraction to this form of sport and their current experiences. To engage more effectively with industry partners and leverage opportunities where more research can be done and further insights can be gained regarding this new event type. To attend more e-sports events, to gain a better understanding and perspective of the fast-growing sector in South Africa. To compare results of studies of events held among private schools versus public schools.

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