

## The Social Context of the Benefits Achieved in eSport

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### Abstract

The article presents a meta-analysis of the social context of benefits achieved by people in a new, yet not well-researched activity in electronic sports. The presented historical background of eSport and the dilemmas of the highly polarised scientific community, in which there are as many supporters as opponents of the recognition of eSport as a sport, have become a basis for describing this phenomenon in the context of the theory of use and gratification. Thus, based on the few eSport studies carried out, the human benefits related to cognitive and social development, identity development and participation in entertainment were determined.

**Keywords:** *eSport, cognitive benefits, social benefits, identity, entertainment, escapism*

### Introduction

Sport is an important area of human activity, which, as research indicates, has positive effects on the development of competences, pro-social behaviour through participation in team games (Knežević Florić, Ninković, 2013). Sport has therapeutic functions, e.g., swimming (Roj, Planinšec, Schmidt, 2016), or even has an influence on family relationships (Kraus, 2016). Therefore, a person undertakes a sport activity because thanks to it he/she achieves certain benefits, all of which are hard to enumerate.

Sport has always accompanied man by creating physical culture specific to this activity, which evolved along with social and technological development. In connection with this, digital media play an increasingly important role in physical culture, creating new areas that combine traditional sport and technology. This connection is not only superficial, involving the use of digital media in traditional sport, e.g., to measure sport achievements, but it is also a complete change of the form of sport into eSport, which takes place in the online world. In this context, a question arises about the benefits achieved in the eSport activities of the human being.

### **eSport versus sport. Definitional problems**

The first mentions of “electronic sport” or “eSport” date back to the late 1990s. One of the first credible sources in which the term “eSport” was used was the press release in 1999 about the launch of Online Gamers Association (OGA), which compared eSport with traditional sport (Hutchins, 2008).

However, the beginning and the development of eSport is mainly connected with the World Cyber Games (WCG) tournaments. The first tournament took place in Seoul in 2000, attracting over 174 competitors from 17 countries (Hutchins, 2008) from Western and Eastern Europe, North and South America, Asia and Pacific as well as Oceania and the Middle East. In 2013, the WCG gathered 500 competitors from 38 countries (WCG, access 2018), which confirms the growing the popularity of computer games. The games include various types, including first-person shooters (Counter-Strike), sport (FIFA Soccer), races (Project Gotham Racing and Need for Speed), actions (Virtua Fighter) and strategies (StarCraft, Command and Conquer and Warcraft).

The systematic organisation of the WCG, the activity of cyber-sportsmen, but also the growing popularity of computer games in youth culture (Hutchins, 2008) caused the emergence of a new, qualitatively separate phenomenon called “eSport”. Currently, there is no generally accepted definition of the term “eSport”. In most cases, it is equivalent to a “professional game”, a competition, a way to play computer games in a professional environment (Welch, 2002). The lack of a precise definition of “eSport” makes the academic discussions highly polarised. Therefore, among scientists and sports people there are many supporters and opponents of the thesis that “eSport” is to be classified as a traditional sport that requires physical effort (Funk, Pizzo, Baker, 2018). The main matter of dispute concerns effort and physical activity, which through sport should be an element that improves physical

and mental fitness of a human being (Council of Europe, 2001). Hallmann and Giel (2018) indicate that in traditional sport there should be four factors present: it should (a) involve physical activity, (b) be done for recreational purposes, (c) involve an element of competition, and (d) have an institutional structure. Proponents of “eSport” identified with traditional sport indicate that relying only on the physical movement of the human body cannot be a condition for a given activity to be considered a sport (Funk, Pizzo, Baker, 2018). In addition, they indicate that it is not possible to rule out a complete lack of physical activity in “eSport”, which includes low motor functions, hand-eye coordination, action speed and strategy, as it is in recognised sports such as chess, bridge or shooting.

The comparison of e-sport to chess or bridge causes additional problems, the first one being an attempt to classify e-sport into mass culture (low culture) or to high culture. It is a common belief, particularly among the older generation, i.e., “digital immigrants,” that chess is a game reserved for very intelligent, educated, often talented people. Contrary opinions may be expressed on e-sport, which is perceived by “digital immigrants” as part of low culture or mass culture. Hence, e-sport competitors may be seen as young people without significant educational achievements, with learning difficulties, to whom a computer game is an escape from problems rather than a comprehensively developing sport. It is hard to agree with this argument if, e.g., football as a sport discipline is currently part of mass culture.

A source of the presented dilemmas is probably the system of values, which in sport is based on the pursuit, through sport, of an ideal man in terms of his cognitive but above all physical development. The problem is that the latter is not a domain of e-sport competitors. In e-sport, the definition of factors such as resistance to pain, going beyond the physical and mental zone of comfort will make it possible to conduct more precise comparisons to traditional sport.

For the opponents of treating e-sport as sport, what is crucial here are: views, attitudes, habits, character, appropriate body proportions that reflect the potential of the sportsman and relate to sport derived from ancient Greece. Therefore, it seems that these features appear only in avatars that are put to motion by e-sport players in computer games, while the players themselves are perceived as overweight people, whose only entertainment is spending time in front of a computer monitor. This triggers a question whether the arguments presented by e-sport opponents are the result of their fear of a new understanding of sport, a yearning for an idealised sport, or rather the result of an objective analysis of reality?

The problem of classification of “eSport” is solved by the definition of sport proposed by Tiedemann (2004), which shows that sport is a cultural field, in which

people voluntarily make contact with other people, consciously desiring to develop their skills and achievements – especially in the area of specific skills – comparing in this field with other people in accordance with adopted rules.

Proponents of “eSport” want it to resemble traditional sport in the form of an attractive, safe, pleasant competition and obtaining better and better results (Heere, 2018). They want to include “eSport” in the area of traditionally understood sport, defining it as: – modern and highly organised action, which requires a physical action of a human body in order to resolve a competitive result (Funk, Pizzo, Baker, 2018); – an area of sport activities in which people develop and shape mental and physical abilities with the use of information and communication technologies (Wagner, 2006).

Academic disputes regarding the scope of the definitions of the terms “sport” and “eSport” focus mainly on the factor related to physical activity and the lack of “physical suffering” in “eSport,” i.e., physical injuries characteristic of typical sport. However, apart from these factors there are many other features, which suggest that “eSport” might be a recognised sport discipline in the future. Thus, what links sport with “eSport” is: -similarity in the organisation of games where “eSport” directly refers to the Olympic traditions, which are associated with rivalry between nations; -TV and internet broadcast of games between particular teams; – training system that includes exercise on precision, team cooperation, the use of a special diet; -elements related to disqualification, i.e., the use of illegal doping in the form of steroids and amphetamine in order to improve sport achievements; -institutionalisation allowing the association of teams in national and academic leagues; -advertising business, sponsoring of large corporations and eSport teams (Hutchins, 2008).

## **Theoretical basis**

Because the definition of “eSport” is embedded in the social, psychological, cultural, educational and media context, it is rightful to analyse the phenomenon in accordance with the “theory of use and gratification”. The confirmation of this thesis is found in the theory itself, which concentrates on social needs and expectations of the human being towards the media (Rubin, 1994). Thus, according to the “theory of use and gratification,” the use of media is conditioned by deriving the sense of satisfaction from them, and as a result achieving cognitive, social and identity benefits and the benefits related to entertainment (McQuail, 2005). In short, the choice and use of media is a targeted and deliberated action (Rosengren, 1974).

Benefits (Rubin, 1994) are conditioned by the choice of media that allow for achieving the satisfactory level of them (Blumler, Katz, 1974), so it is important to clarify and understand how people benefit from digital media and what consequences this brings to them (Rubin 2002). So, what are the reasons for applying the theory of “use and gratification” in explaining the phenomenon of “eSport”?

The first, very important reason is a man-oriented approach in which a player or supporter chooses the type of game in which he/she wants to specialise, satisfying various needs. The person here may be the passive recipient of information that is a product of “eSport” or he/she may be the creator of information, being the “e-player”.

The second reason for the choice of this theoretical concept, connected with the first one, is the assumption of the “symmetry of the communication process,” in which the players or the supporters assume the role of senders and recipients and “actively participate in the process” and their activity depends on their intentions and achieved benefits.

The third very important reason is the qualification of benefits, which allows for a precise description of the phenomenon of “eSport”, in particular, categorising it in the educational and social area.

The last reason is related to the general approach to studying the phenomenon of “eSport” from the perspective of the “theory of use and gratification,” which directs analyses to what people do with the media, rather than to what the media do with the people.

## **Interpretation of eSport in the context of the theory of use and gratification**

eSport is increasingly becoming a field of study, which is conducted as a part of faculties of computer science or media studies, but also at faculties and universities dealing with sport (Funk, Pizzo, Baker, 2018). The popularity of “eSport” causes the development of the whole infrastructure and institutions dealing with this area of human activity (Xu, 2012). Therefore, it is important to describe the reality connected with “eSport” in the area of benefits achieved by the human being. Hence, the question arises about the benefits of the players and observers – supporters from participating in “eSport”.

Does, and if so in what way, “eSport” make it possible to achieve cognitive benefits? Research conducted in the academic environment suggests that computer games are regarded by students not only as entertainment, but also, to some extent,

they are perceived as a teaching tool. According to students, computer games improve creative and logical thinking, the speed of reaction and the capability of communication in foreign languages (Szumski, Chmielarz, 2017). Other studies relating to the understanding of the role of “eSport” in academic achievements suggest that the participation in eSport teams provides their members with greater coherence and learning performance. It turns out that more cohesive teams have more internally motivated members, which leads to an improvement in learning (Kozachuk, Foroughi, Freeman, 2016). What is interesting is also the phenomenon which indicates that the interest in “eSport” among young people is reflected in the general interest in traditional sport (Garcia-Villar, 2018).

Does, and if so in what way, “eSport” make it possible to achieve social benefits? The comparison of different types of eSport players showed that they specialise in particular computer games creating specific clans. The comparison of eSport players with random players shows some differences between them. eSport players have different life goals, and “eSport” satisfies their need for belonging and the need for being the leader (Martončík, 2015). In addition, the researchers see in the social benefits achieved through “eSport” the isolation of factors that enable such a design of computer games to contribute to better social support and learning. Nowadays, this postulate is implemented through advanced technologies of online games, which facilitate interaction between players in real time. Apparently, simple relationships form complex sociotechnical systems among the players who form small teams that compete with each other (Kozachuk, Foroughi, Freeman, 2016).

Does, and if so in what, “eSport” make it possible to achieve the benefits of shaping identity? Formal and informal social groups creating “eSport” have created a specific culture. It is characterised by a unique ethos, which combines this form of activity with both free time and hard training. Research conducted in this field focuses on observation of tournaments and interviews with eSport players, and it indicates that for the survey participants “eSport” is a form of self-improvement, shaping of such attitudes as honesty and mutual respect and shaping their own identity (Seo, 2016). The above-mentioned values are not associated with the period of adolescence, therefore the question arises why “eSport” is so popular among teenagers, with values so little popular in this group. Adamus (2012) indicates that it is related to young people’s need to participate in subcultures. “eSport,” characterised by specific symbols, rituals and even attitudes, attracts teenagers who may easily become the members of the particular community at any time and they can leave the group easily as well. The conducted research also shows that socio-demographic variables have an influence on participation in “eSport”. It turns out that women are less interested in “eSport” than men. However, the

interest in sports video games has little influence on general population, but it has a positive and significant impact on men under 18 years of age (Garcia-Villar, 2018).

Does, and if so in what way, “eSport” make it possible to achieve the benefits connected with entertainment and escapism? Interesting research showing the relationship between “eSport” and entertainment and escapism was conducted by Hamari and Sjöblom (2017). The research results show that the benefits of gaining knowledge about “eSport” and escapism were related to the frequency of watching eSport games. It also turned out that the frequency of watching “eSport” and, as a consequence, obtaining gratification in the form of pleasure is also positively related to the need to watch aggressive behaviours (such as hostility, intimidation and macho atmosphere) presented by the players.

Entertainment through the digital media, including “eSport,” is sometimes identified with addiction and gambling. Griffiths (2018) points out that e-sportsmen are not addicted to computer games, but they might be addicted to their work and training. It is also unlikely that e-sportsmen are responsible for acts of cyberbullying (in particular in social media and on online forums) because it would damage their reputation (Griffiths, 2018). Other studies related to addiction indicate that among the surveyed e-sportsmen only a small percentage (2.5%) preferred functioning in virtual reality to functioning in real life (Szumski, Chmielarz, 2017). Therefore, research conducted in this area indicates that there are no strong links between e-sportsmen and gambling activities and addiction to computer games (Macey, Hamari, 2018a) However, it has been confirmed that eSport games are the subject of high interest in the gambling industry (Macey, Hamari, 2018b). Thus, what motivates e-sportsmen is not connected with addiction, but with the need to compete, challenge themselves and satisfy material needs (Weiss, Schiele, 2013).

## **Conclusion**

Electronic sport, cybersport, computer games and virtual sport are the synonyms of the term “eSport,” which is becoming more and more accepted as sport in society, and nowadays the players are referred to as sportsmen. “eSport” is increasingly becoming an area of interest for sport industry, business, educational environment at the level of secondary schools and universities. The university authorities create new fields of study connected with “eSport” and they award scholarships to the best e-sportsmen (Jenny, Manning, Keiper, Olrich, 2017). As a result, the functioning of “eSport” in different social areas, which is very similar

to traditional sport, creates many problems and definitional dilemmas that the scientists try to answer.

The analysis of the surrounding reality clearly shows that e-sport is very popular. In January 2019, in the Google browser I obtained 476 million results by typing the term “e-sport” and only 239 million results by typing the term “chess”. These figures prove that e-sport is inscribed in mass culture. However, does it mean that it is much easier than chess? It turns out that it is not because participation in the league championships of e-sport requires complex, meticulous and long practice.

To this end the so-called “gaming houses” are created, i.e., real places that offer ideal conditions for practice. High quality computer equipment, comfortable computer posts, accommodation, appropriate diet are only several factors that are crucial for the practice to be efficient. “Gaming houses” also provide e-sport teams with professional photo shoots, videos and promotion in mass media.

The analysis of the research on “eSport” presented in this article in the context of the “theory of use and gratification” indicates a great potential of this phenomenon in shaping the cognitive, social and identity sphere of the human being. However, it should be noted that the presented research focuses mainly on the positive aspects of “eSport,” which raises some doubts about the way they are conducted. Therefore, a number of questions arise about the quality and number of research studies, but most of all about the placement of the phenomenon of “eSport” in various theoretical paradigms.

Analysis of the recognised Web of Science database shows that in 2007–2017 only 71 articles regarding “eSport” were published in 60 top magazines. These results suggest that this phenomenon is still not well recognised. Research into “eSport” has shown that the topic is still new to scientists (Kozachuk, Foroughi, Freeman, 2016), so there is no agreement among researchers as to the objective evaluation of this phenomenon (Vanegas, Ochoa, Gutierrez, 2018). However, the growing concerns of scientists may be related to the vision in which eSport will replace the traditional sport in the future. The above deliberations and analyses of the research on “eSport” in the context of the “theory of use and gratification” indicate that this phenomenon is important and significant not only for scientific disciplines dealing with sport, which cannot determine whether “eSport” is a “sport” in a traditional approach, but also for social sciences. Therefore, the solution to this problem and precise research on the benefits achieved through the participation of a human being in the traditional sport and “eSport,” and as a consequence the indication of differences between the two of them, if any, will be important for social sciences including pedagogy, sociology, media sciences and psychology.



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