


Chapter 5

Is eSports a Sport?

Insights from Future Educators

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores university students' perceptions of esports, focusing on its classification as a sport, its potential educational applications, and its perceived effects on individuals. Data were collected during the 2023–2024 spring term from 40 volunteer students enrolled in a faculty of education at a public university in Türkiye. Participants were selected through criterion sampling to ensure diversity in gender, academic background, and prior esports knowledge. A phenomenological research design was employed, and data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using content analysis with open and axial coding. Findings indicate divergent views on whether esports qualifies as a sport, often shaped by perspectives on physicality versus cognitive skill. While some students viewed esports as beneficial for strategic thinking, attention, and teamwork, others questioned its educational value. Moreover, esports was found to impact individuals cognitively, socially, and emotionally—both positively and negatively.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, esports has rapidly gained popularity and become an area of interest across various disciplines. Historically, the origins of esports date back to the late 1970s and early 1980s. While early events such as the *Space Invaders Championship* held in 1980 signaled the beginning of competitive gaming, the substantial development of esports emerged in the late 1990s with the advent of

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the internet. Games like *StarCraft* and *Counterstrike* created competitive platforms that attracted dedicated players and large audiences. Like traditional sports organizations, large-scale events began to emerge, laying the groundwork for professional organizations and sponsorships (Örsoğlu, Yüzbaşıoğlu & Pekel, 2023). The rapid growth of esports in the 2000s can be attributed to advancements in technology, increased internet accessibility, and the popularity of streaming platforms such as Twitch. These developments have contributed to the legitimization of esports within the sports industry by fostering large communities of fans and players. By the 2010s, global tournaments such as *The International for Dota 2* and the *League of Legends World Championship* attracted millions of viewers and formed massive prize pools, creating an environment where esports could evolve into a profitable industry (Perez & Rúbio, 2023; Scelles, Peng & Valenti, 2021). Despite the growing integration of esports into educational contexts, empirical studies examining how university students perceive its educational and social dimensions remain scarce. This study addresses this gap by focusing on students' evaluations of esports as both a cultural and pedagogical phenomenon.

The integration of esports into educational contexts has shown potential in promoting student engagement, motivation, and the development of cognitive skills. For instance, Nielsen et al. (2021) examined how educators in special education schools employed esports to enhance learning and motivation among students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Their findings highlight the capacity of esports to facilitate participation and foster inclusive learning environments (Nielsen, Hanghøj, Boller & Mollerup, 2021). This notion is further supported by a systematic literature review conducted by Ibda et al. (2023), which demonstrates that esports not only engage students but also contribute to the development of essential skills such as teamwork, strategic thinking, and technological literacy. The review emphasizes that esports can be particularly effective in school settings by integrating diverse educational objectives and promoting collaboration among students. Additionally, Medina (2024) discusses the broader cognitive and psychological benefits of esports participation among university students. These include adaptability, problem-solving, and the development of team dynamics—outcomes that align well with educational goals and support deeper student development.

Esports offers players unique opportunities to enhance their cognitive skills while also serving as a platform for social participation. For instance, Tang et al. (2023) emphasize that esports can contribute positively to participants' lives by fostering social connections and a sense of community among players. In addition, participation in esports often facilitates enhanced emotional and social learning experiences. Research shows that players can develop critical thinking, communication skills, and emotional intelligence—competencies increasingly essential in today's digital and social environments (Hayday & Collison, 2022). Socially, esports demonstrates

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