

Exploring Esport Players' Motivation, Experiences, and Well-Being

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This study aimed to explore esports fans' motivation, experiences and well-being. Guided by the serious leisure perspective and self-determination theory, this study focused on the community of Super Smash Brothers (SSB). This study adopted a qualitative approach and interviewed thirteen members with different types of involvement with the community. The results showed that participants' continuous involvement with the activity is motivated by pursuing personal and social benefits as well as their serious pursuit of esports and their identity as a SSB community member. The esports experiences also improved their well-being through enhancing their social well-being, improving their quality of life and satisfying their needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Lastly, the finding showed that despite the digital nature of esports, the onset of the pandemic has negatively impacted player experiences and re-emphasized the importance of attending in-person events. Based on the findings, this study discussed how to reconceptualize esports as well as highlighted the need for more future research focusing on the positive effects of esports.

Keywords: esports; esports fans; esports motivation; esports experiences; digital wellbeing

Introduction

The esports industry has proliferated in the past five years – the industry received \$4.5 billion in investments in 2018 and is expected to generate \$1.6 billion in revenue by 2023 (Perkins, 2020). Unlike traditional events, which have been suspended during the COVID-19 pandemic, the esports industry pivoted quickly and began hosting high-profile virtual events such as Madden NFL Invitational and NASCAR's virtual race, making it one of the very few sectors that have escaped from the adverse effects brought by the pandemic (López-Cabarcos et al., 2020). Esports is also well embraced by the young generation, and even the International Olympic Committee plans to take advantage of this trend as part of their efforts to improve youth appeal (Tjønndal & Skauge, 2021).

Accordingly, esports research has received increasing attention and grown rapidly over the past few years. As a result, it has evolved into an academic field that spans various disciplines, such as media studies, informatics, business, and sports sciences (Reitman et al., 2020). Notably, one of the recent foci within this research stream involves esports players' experiences (Cumming, 2018; Meng-Lewis et al., 2022), especially the effects of esports participation on various individual outcomes, such as skill development (Zhong et al., 2022) and lifestyle behaviors (Chan et al., 2022).

Moreover, despite its strong growth and popularity, social controversy has surrounded esports. Supporters of the activity praise its ability to connect people, provide an accepting social outlet, act as an escape from daily troubles, and serve as a fulfilling hobby or career (Hamari & Sjoblom, 2017). Studies also found that esports can foster skills such as teamwork, communication, and problem-solving (Zhong et al., 2022). On the other end of the spectrum, concerns arose around the close associations

between esports and heightened aggression and the tendency towards violence, gaming addiction, social isolation, and adverse health outcomes, including obesity. (Guy et al., 2011; Granic et al., 2014). Thus, as important as it is to recognize the popularity of esports, it becomes essential to explore esports participants' experiences and the effects of esports experiences on their overall well-being. However, this direction has not been well addressed by the current literature (Chan et al., 2022).

Study Context

Esports is an umbrella term that encompasses several major game genres and prominent franchises. As each esports genre has different characteristics and features, Brown et al. (2018) consider employing an individual approach imperative. When it comes to the current study, the Super Smash Brothers (SSB) franchise of games was chosen. The decision to focus on this context is based on this franchise's long-standing success, widespread influence, unique community structure and culture, and growing popularity.

The Super Smash Brothers (SSB) franchise of games, created by Nintendo, features titles spanning from 1999 up until the most recent release in 2018. Out of the five titles released in this span, the two most prevalent esports titles are Super Smash Brothers Melee (SSBM), released in 2001, and Super Smash Brothers Ultimate (SSBU), the latest title from 2018. Unlike other esports titles, which will rise into and fall out of popularity rapidly, the SSB franchise has maintained a competitive following for over 20 years.

The influence of SSB in the esports industry and community has been growing proportionally as well. For example, SSBM, a title that is now over 20 years old, recently had its largest prize pool in the game's history, with competitors splitting USD 155,669 at Smash Summit 11 in 2021; similarly, the other premium title, SSBU,

recently concluded a global tournament that boasted a prize pool of USD 250,000 (Koch et al., 2020). Besides these high-profile events, these two sub-communities of the SSB franchise have managed to host global spanning tournaments with significant prize pools, all without any notable support from Nintendo, the game's publisher. Instead, the success of these tournaments is attributed to a robust and passionate group of fans, competitors, and creators who work in concert to create opportunities to play and promote their favorite games (Koch et al., 2020).

Thus, SSB participants' commitment and dedication make it a unique esports, as well as a proper context for this study, which aims to analyze why people play esports, their experiences playing, and the effects of these experiences on their well-being. More specifically, this study was guided by the following research questions:

- (1) What factors motivate SSB players' continuous participation?
- (2) How do SSB players define their esports experiences?
- (3) How does SSB players' esports experience impact their overall well-being?

Literature Review

An overview of esports research

Generally speaking, esports can be understood as "an organized competitive approach to playing computer games" (Witkowski, 2012, p.350). However, it is vital to discern between esports and the act of playing video games, where esports often require a human opponent and an organized competition structure. Such differences are also reflected in the contemporary definition, which sees esports as "a form of sports where the primary aspects of the activity are facilitated by electronic systems; the input of players and teams as well as the output of the eSports system are mediated by human-computer interfaces" (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017, p.211). The most significant

differences between esports and regular sports lies in the "e" element, where esports' outcome-defining activities typically occur in a virtual environment mediated by electronic devices and computers rather than in the physical world (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017).

Esports can be further divided into a wide variety of following genres: First Person Shooters (FPS), Battle Royale (BR), Real-Time Strategy (RTS), Collectible Card Games, Multiplayer Online Battle Arenas (MOBA), Sports Simulation Video Games (SSVGs), and Fighting Games (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017; Pu et al., 2021; Tang et al., 2021). Each of these genres offers different play styles, draws different fans, and requires specific skills to succeed.

Academic attempts to explore esports have predominantly focused on fields such as business, media studies, and sociology (Reitman et al., 2020). Nevertheless, esports research is still in its nascency. Several recent review articles (e.g., Cranmer et al., 2021; Reitman et al., 2020) indicate that the major shortcoming of the existing research lies in the inconsistency in definitions, various disciplinary approaches and distinctive unit of analysis, as well as the lack of in-depth theory-driven exploratory attempts.

Furthermore, topics related to esports players' motivation and experiences have been emerging within this research area. Some studies (e.g., Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017; Pizzo et al., 2018) utilized traditional sports scales, such as the Motivation Scale for Sports and the Sport Interest Inventory, to investigate the drivers of players' consumption for esports. In comparison, others have examined esports fan experiences at major events. For example, Hedlund (2021) developed a typology of esports players, and McCauley (2018) found that esports fans' event experiences consisted of entertainment, education, socialization, and active support. Although these studies

provide vital context to esports fandom, they tended to either rely on traditional sports scales or look at merely broader trends. As such, these attempts cannot fully reveal the uniqueness of esports, and, to a large extent, limits our understanding of how this field is evolving (Reitman et al., 2020). As this body of literature progresses, we cannot simply overlook the importance of conceptualizing esports and understanding how different esports genres can be segmented to provide a deeper understanding of why individuals are attracted to the activity (Brown et al., 2018; Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017; Reitman et al., 2020; Qian et al., 2022).

The serious leisure perspective

One of the critiques of current esports literature is the lack of conceptualization attempts (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017; Reitman et al., 2020). To address this issue, this study chose to examine esports from the serious leisure perspective. Leisure is typically characterized by an escape from one's work life that brings fulfilment and enjoyment involving minimal obligations or pressures (Stebbins, 2001). Early studies of human recreation found leisure to be a productive and enriching outlet that can benefit the well-being of individuals and society as a whole (Stebbins, 1982). Serious leisure represents a deeper level of commitment and involvement in a leisure activity. Robert A. Stebbins is a pioneer in serious leisure research and defined it as such:

Serious leisure is the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer core activity that people find so substantial, interesting, and fulfilling that, in the typical case, they launch themselves on a (leisure) career centered on acquiring and expressing a combination of its special skills, knowledge, and experience. (Elkington & Stebbins, 2014, p. 4).

Since its establishment, the serious leisure perspective has been utilized to explore individuals' participation and commitment to a wide range of leisure activities, including sports. Examples of these leisure activities include youth sports (Siegenthaler & Gonzalez, 1997), dancing (Schupp, 2019), as well as nonphysical activities like dog shows (Baldwin & Norris, 1999) and college sports fandom (Gibson et al., 2002). Recently, esports, as a new component of sports, have been explored under the paradigm of leisure (Hallman, 2018), and some esports activities, such as gaming, have also been investigated through the serious leisure perspective (Commerford et al., 2020; Tancred et al., 2020).

Besides its suitability, the benefits of adopting a serious leisure perspective to examine esports lie in two perspectives. First, serious leisure remains distinct from leisure due to several key qualities that are tied to intrinsic motivations as well as the presence of a collective community around the serious leisure activity (Stebbins, 2001). These notions align well with the findings of previous esports studies (Cumming, 2018; Qian et al., 2020), which outlined the benefits that motivate individuals' continuous engagement in esports and esports events. Second, subjective well-being can be understood as people's cognitive and affective assessment of their overall quality of life (Diener, 2000). And several critical determinants of subjective well-being overlap with serious leisure qualities, such as enjoyment and satisfaction (Stebbins, 2006). Multiple empirical studies also highlight the close association between serious leisure pursuits and well-being (Lee & Hwang, 2018). Thus, the serious leisure perspective not only offers a way to conceptualize esports and explore esports players' motivations but also allows this study further to investigate the association between esports participation and well-being.

Self-determination theory (SDT)

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) approaches human motivation through empirical methods while focusing on human needs and abilities (Ryan & Deci, 2000). It is a broad framework that examines how intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, and well-being are affected by numerous factors (Ryan & Deci, 2020). The basic psychological needs theory (BPNT), one of the major developments of the SDT framework, focuses on the connections between satisfying these psychological needs and one's wellness (Ryan, 2009). The SDT suggests that each need affects one's wellness independently, and their impacts largely depend on the extent the need is satisfied. According to Ryan and Deci (2000), these needs must be fulfilled for a person to be at their best in life, which directly contributes to their well-being. The three basic psychological needs include (1) competence, an individual's ability to learn and master new tasks and skills, (2) relatedness, connections with others, and a sense of belonging, and (3) autonomy, suggesting that intrinsic motivations are tied to willingness and enjoyment (Ryan et al., 2019).

Additionally, as part of the holistic psychological theories, SDT argues that humans have evolved psychological growth and development tendencies inherent in them, manifested through their intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2020). However, these tendencies require specific support from social contexts (Ryan, 2019). Therefore, SDT suggests that a social setting that fulfills these needs will lead to increased vitality and well-being for individuals (Ryan, 2009). In the same vein, recent studies show that SDT is a valuable tool for understanding how an individual's involvement in an activity, passion, or career can improve their overall well-being (Liu-Lastres & Han, 2021).

Motivation plays a central role in the SDT, and there are three types of motivation -- amotivation, extrinsic motivation, and intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Amotivation, manifested as a lack of motivation, occurs when an individual is

unable to see connections between their actions and outcomes and experiencing the feelings of lack of control (Pelletier et al., 1995). Extrinsic motivation is when a behavior is engaged not for its own sake but to reach an objective. There are four subcategories of extrinsic motivation; external regulation, introjected regulation, identified regulation, and integrated regulation (Pelletier et al., 1995). Extrinsic motivation is driven primarily by external sources such as rewards or constraints. Even though an individual's actions are heavily dictated by external regulation, there is a chance that the individual could transition to introjected regulation, which is when the extrinsic motivational source becomes internalized and remains highly relevant. Another form of extrinsic motivation is identified regulation (Pelletier et al., 1995). This is when the individual determines that their behavior is important and continues to pursue it on their own accord. Integrated regulation is highly autonomous and occurs when an individual has incorporated identified regulations into their own self-concept. (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The individual is, therefore, motivated by self-examination and aligning new regulations with their values and needs. Lastly, a person who participates in an activity voluntarily for the sake of enjoying it experiences intrinsic motivation, which is different from extrinsic motivation and tends to be more self-determined.

In light of these theoretical advancements, SDT has been applied to understand participants' motivations in traditional sports (Vlachopoulos et al., 2000). Recently, Qian et al. (2022) found that SDT effectively explains people's involvement in esports, where satisfying their psychological needs is an essential motivator of their esports consumption. Thus, including SDT in the theoretical background enables this study to obtain a deeper understanding of esports players' experiences and motivations, as well as critically investigate the connection between esports participation and one's well-being.

Conceptual model development

Based on this study's purpose, the serious leisure perspective, and SDT, a conceptual model (Figure 1) was developed to guide the study. First, the conceptual model consists of three core components: (1) the three basic psychological needs (e.g., autonomy, relatedness, competence) as outlined by SDT, (2) the core serious leisure activity, in this case, competitive SSB, and (3) well-being. Second, the serious leisure perspective was applied to examine esports players' motivations, experiences, and enduring outcomes, which, in this study, refer to their well-being. Third, the three key components outlined by SDT (e.g., autonomy, relatedness, competence) are included to address esports players' basic psychological needs and motivations related to the activity (e.g., competitive SSB).

[Insert Figure 1 Here]

Methodology

Data collection

This study adopted a qualitative approach and conducted semi-structured interviews. The purposive sampling method was used to recruit the participants. All participants needed to be over the age of 18 and have been active SSB players. Initial contacts were made through posting public invitations to online gaming hubs, namely Reddit and Discord. In addition, posts were made within SSB-specific pages on these platforms outlining the study's goal, and interested individuals were invited to provide their contact information through a Google Form. Snowball sampling was also utilized when participants were willing to connect the researchers with other SSB players they knew.

Each participant was contacted and communicated through either email or Discord, depending on their preference. After having the informed consent signed, the interviews were hosted and recorded through zoom and transcribed verbatim. The data

collection process took place between January and June of 2022 and ended when no new themes emerged in new interviews. A total of 13 interviews were conducted. The length of the interviews varied from 20 to 50 minutes, with an average length of 32 minutes.

The interview guideline covered five primary topical areas: (1) personal information and involvement with SSB, (2) esports consumption habits and SSB experiences, (3) SSB tournaments experiences, (4) the impact of SSB experiences on their lives, and (5) how COVID-19 impacted themselves and their community, and their intentions to remain involved in the future.

Data Analysis

Based on the conceptual model, a thematic analysis was conducted on the interview transcripts. Following Heish and Shannon's (2005) recommendation, the coding process consisted of the following steps: (1) identifying major themes, (2) defining each theme, and (3) coding the text and organizing by theme. The research team then discussed, reviewed, and refined the identified themes. Both investigator and theoretical triangulation methods were used to ensure the credibility of the findings (Decrop, 1999). The revised coding scheme is outlined in Table 1.

[Insert Table 1 Here]

Results and Discussion

Sample profile

A total of 13 participants were included (Table 2) in the study. The sample had an average age of 26.9 years old, 85% were male ($n = 11$), and 77% had completed or were in the process of completing an undergraduate degree ($n = 10$). 53% of the sample self-identified as having an advanced skill level ($n = 7$). The participants had an average of

4.96 years of involvement in the SSB franchise. The sample comprised 62% SSBU players (n = 8) and 38% SSBM players (n = 5). The participants all resided in the United States at the time of their interview.

[Insert Table 2 Here]

Major Themes

The first two research questions mainly concern the participants' SSB motivations and experiences related to this particular esports activity. The motivation part includes the themes of *personal and social benefits*, and the experience part includes the themes of *serious pursuit* and *the identity of an SSB community member*.

Exploring the motivations to participate in SSB

Personal benefits

Personal benefits are one of most common themes reported by the participants. At the superficial level, most participants reported a sense of enjoyment, relaxation, and gratification, as they "*had fun playing the game*" (Interviewee #1) and knew that "*a lot of people are playing there just to de-stress from the week*" (Interviewee #4). This is consistent with the serious leisure perspective (Stebbins, 2006) and previous studies on esports players' experiences (Cumming, 2018), where it is always accompanied by pleasure and joy when one is involved in the activity.

Another noticeable personal benefit is self-improvement and accomplishment.

Enjoying the game provides a starting point for the participants to grow. As the participants' involvement progressed, many noticed incremental improvements, even for beginners who played the game casually. Thus, short-term enjoyment quickly transfers to feelings of self-improvement and accomplishment in the long run. For

example, one participant (Interviewee #3), who identified him/herself as an intermediate-level competitive player, shared, “*It is great to feel as though you’re improving ... it is a sense of pride... a sense of accomplishment.*” This rewarding sensation often drives the participants’ continuous consumption of esports. The desire to improve can come from intrinsic and external sources; for example, some players may be intrinsically motivated to improve and find it rewarding to see their growth, whereas other players may try to improve to impress other players or to prove someone wrong, which is likely tied to introjected or identified regulation. Regardless of the source of behavior, such positive experiences exemplify the value of serious leisure as well as highlight the positive impact esports has on their well-being. These notions are highly consistent with the postposition of the SDT.

Social benefits

Interesting to note, the results showed that SSB offered participants various social benefits, despite the stigma that gamers are often socially isolated. The initial interaction often started with a similar interest in SSB, where the participants got to know others through “*talk(ing) about stories, tech skills, characters, or tournaments*”(Interviewee #11). Several interviewees (e.g., #2, #5, #7) reported that they had made close connections and lasting friendships through competing in SSB. Notably, these lasting connections often span long lengths of time and even distance. One participant (Interviewee #2), who had to move around frequently while competing in SSB, said that “*I remember seeing players from other states, meeting all old friends, all coming together, having a fun time. What’s better than that?*”

Furthermore, in spite of its digital nature, attending tournaments in person appears to be one of the most popular ways for these social encounters. Competing in SSB is inherently social, as the players interact with each other and compete in close

proximity. One participant, who is an experienced player in multiple titles and genres, shared his/her insights, *“when you play Melee (SSB) at a tournament, you’re sitting right next to the person, You’re seeing how what you’re doing is affecting them”* (Interviewer #11). In addition, some participants appreciated the opportunity to meet other players and their friends' support in the tournaments, making these in-person events unique opportunities to strengthen existing friendships. Some interviewees (e.g., #8) mentioned that his/her friends joined him/her at a tournament even though they did not compete, and others addressed the essence of having active support on site, saying that *“I only show up if my friends are going”* (Interviewee #2).

A final social dimension of competitive SSB is the ability to meet and compete against professional players. Interviewee Two explained that he/she got to know some of the best players in the game and that doing so made attending events more special. He/she further elaborated, *“people who watch football or watch tennis or golf might be able to be in the same venue, but you're never playing the same game.”* The intermingling of fans and top competitors is uncommon in many traditional sports and even some esports, making this experience unique and special for members of the SSB community. One participant (Interviewee #10) related a story about one of his/her favorite players winning a tournament he/she was attending, and the player gave him/her a medal, creating a wonderful memory to share and remember.

The abovementioned social benefits illustrate how esports offer a unique social environment, which is consistent with the notion of contexts addressed by the SDT (Ryan, 2009). The definition of relatedness in SDT is also echoed (Qian et al., 2020). As Deci and Ryan (2000) pointed out, being able to relate to others and feeling a sense of belonging fulfills the need for relatedness. From a serious leisure perspective, these benefits align with the dimension of social connection and belonging (Stebbins, 2015).

More interestingly, these social outlets seem not confined to the digital environment. Rather, tournaments and other live events contribute more to these opportunities for socializing. Although it is consistent with the feature of esports, where events play a critical role in the industry, it challenges the existing stereotype assuming that esports is mainly online.

Defining the SSB Experiences

Serious pursuit

According to Stebbins (2012), “serious pursuit” can be seen as an umbrella term involving leisure activity and all devoted work. When it comes to competing in SSB, like any other competitive activity, specific knowledge and hours of practice are required. Interviewee Nine explained that there are basic technical skills that are necessary to master before it is possible to take the next step competitively; these skills range from learning the timing of specific actions to learning advanced movement techniques to optimize gameplay.

To master the skill and knowledge, some participants chose to spend hours practicing and to “*establish muscle memory for actions in-game*” (Interviewee #9), and some (e.g., Interviewee #3, #4, #5, #6) mentioned that they watched the video of past matches and/or footage featuring top players to learn the knowledge, the action, and the decision-making processes so that they can adopt into their own play. Interviewee Four, an expert competitor who has attended tournaments in multiple countries, describes that “*There is no better feeling than practicing a combo extensively and then landing it during an actual tournament match.*” Such continuous effort in learning knowledge and improving their skills is a typical characteristic of serious leisure, and satisfies the players’ needs for autonomy and competency according to SDT.

As players become more advanced, their aspirations grow as well. Interviewees Three, Four, and Eight described their experience as intermediate-level players and explained their goals were to reach their local or state power rankings, which is a list of the best players in a state released on a monthly, quarterly, or yearly basis. This is a common goal for intermediate players to reach, as it demonstrates that they are among the best in their region and, therefore, better prepared at large tournaments where players from across a country or even the globe gather. These power rankings are one form of the medals, rewards, and recognition associated with SSB as a serious leisure activity. Players also earn prize money based on their placement and even trophies for larger tournaments, as explained by interviewees Two and Four

Besides skill development, one's serious pursuit of SSB is reflected in building a career in this profession. In the process of career formation, there are turning points, or ups and downs, faced by participants and a need to persist through those challenges. Interviewee Eight reflected on this and shared that what drives him/her to keep playing is that *"There's a chance that the culmination of your efforts will happen and there's a chance that it'll be today."* The obstacles and temporary failures faced in the pursuit of competing in SSB do not detract from the experience but serve as learning opportunities and help to make the triumphs feel even greater. In addition to being a professional player, there are some other routes. For example, interviewee #13 created an LLC to host tournaments in his/her local community. Interviewee #11 is a content creator who hosts a podcast about SSB on his YouTube page. These endeavors are just two examples of opportunities to pursue a deep, fulfilling career in esports and the SSB community specifically.

Serious leisure has uncovered countless instances of individuals pursuing a career in an activity that outsiders may not understand. Fans of Florida Gators athletics

were found to reflect on past experiences as a fan and how the fanbase has changed over time (Gibson et al., 2002). This resembles the countless turning points and highs and lows that an SSB player faces during their competitive pursuit. Other serious leisure participants are able to create actual, paying careers out of their serious leisure activity, such as professional dancers who serve as teachers or create instructional videos (Baldwin & Norris, 1999). Developing a real-life career out of a serious leisure activity is common in SSB, as can be seen in the sample of interviewees.

The identity as an SSB community member

Stebbins (2001, p.56) remarks, “*every serious leisure activity offers a major lifestyle and identity for its enthusiasts.*” The identity affiliated with SSB is also prominent among the participants. Most participants have addressed the essential role played by SSB in defining themselves, depicting SSB as “*part of me*” (Interviewee #5) as well as “*part of my internal DNA*” (Interviewee #9). Self-expression is also conveyed through SSB. Interviewee Thirteen, an SSB tournament organizer and the mother of two SSB competitors, explained that the experience goes beyond just playing the game and into an individual being able to be their true self without concern of judgment, stating, “*I feel like people [get to be] their authentic selves... and they’re not afraid to be that way.*”

On a collective level, many participants held a positive attitude towards the SSB community, describing the overall atmosphere as “*relaxed*” (Interviewee #4) and “*a great small little niche community*” (Interviewee #11). Participants also expressed a sense of appreciation and belonging toward the SSB community. As one participant (Interviewee #13) specified, “*It’s how welcoming the community is that keeps me coming back.*” Another participant (Interviewee #10) shared a story: When a large-scale tournament closes for the day, the players return to the hotel and play more SSB for fun

and practice. Walking through the hotel, he/she saw “*a bunch of open doors on hallways, and it was just come in and play, you know, and everyone was super nice.*”

Lastly, the participants enjoyed being part of the SSB community; they actively contributed to the community as well. For instance, Interviewee Eleven, a longtime fan and part-time competitor, said that he/she wishes he/she could be a “*competent player*” but does not have enough time to fully dedicate himself/herself to improving at the game. This does not mean that he/she is disengaged from the community. Instead, he/she used his/her strengths to host an SSB podcast featuring a multitude of famous players, community members, and tournament organizers in his journey, which helps promote SSB to the public.

In summary, participants’ willingness to incorporate SSB into their self-identity is a perfect example of serious leisure (Stebbins, 2012) and satisfies their autonomy needs. The attachment and the continuous contribution to the SSB community, on the other hand, represent a higher level of social connection embedded in serious leisure as well as demonstrate how SSB experiences meet the relatedness needs in SDT.

Understanding how SSB experiences impact Well-Being

The last research question aimed to explore the connection between SSB players’ experiences and their well-being. The broad range of personal and social benefits delivered through the activity strengthen each other and can make the activity more fulfilling for players with a deeper involvement. The enjoyment, excitement, and satisfaction are all examples of the positive effects of SSB experiences on players’ well-being. Additionally, the results highlighted the significant improvement in the participants’ social well-being. Playing the game, regardless in an official or a casual setting, allows SSB players to socialize with each other. These friendly settings not merely enhance the social connection but also allow the players to improve their skills

and share their knowledge. Besides its competitive nature, attending tournaments and other in-person events offer special opportunities for players to meet new people as well as catch up with acquaintances. For most participants, attending these events allows them to showcase their improved skills and share their progress with a close social circle.

Interestingly, it is noticed that some of the positive influences on SSB players' well-being seem long-lasting and provide a multitude of benefits, enhancing the quality of their day-to-day life. For example, interviewee #5 explained that the game helps him/her calm his/her mind and that *"it's something that really helps me in my life a lot. It's it has a very big impact."* These benefits and activities make a notable impact on the participants' overall well-being through their pursuit of the activity. These notions are also supported by empirical studies, where Lee and Hwang (2018) found that factors such as enjoyment, self-improvement, and expression are all key contributors of serious leisure to one's well-being.

Additionally, from the perspective of SDT, participating in competitive SSB satisfies the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. These needs are more than simply satisfied, however, as the act of playing competitive SSB creates a positive feedback loop that can drive players to involve themselves further and further in the activity, which now becomes an essential part of their well-being (Qian et al., 2022).

COVID Shock Impacts

The COVID-19 pandemic is more than a health pandemic; it has greatly affected how people think, behave, interact, and reach key decisions. As such, it is essential to understand the participants' SSB experiences and feelings during this special time and to explore the potential impacts on their esports participation. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of SSB tournaments were in-person events. Lockdowns and restrictions between the Spring of 2020 and the Summer of 2021 prevented these

communities from meeting in person for over a year. Forced to adapt, the communities began hosting online tournaments, which caused concerns among the players. They tended to be skeptical and worried that issues like lag and internet connectivity could “ruin an entire game”(Interviewee #6) and “*whether the online experience was close enough to in-person to take the results seriously*” (Interviewee #8). Adding to the doubt was how significant the results of these online tournaments were when it came to player rankings and performances, according to Interviewee Two.

Apparently, these obstacles slowed the initial efforts to keep the community together and active during the pandemic lockdown period, when individual well-being was severely impacted and the need for connection was heightened (Hagerty & Williams, 2020; Marler et al., 2021). Nevertheless, SSB community members kept hosting tournaments regardless of the challenges, and many saw value in them despite the less-than-ideal circumstances. For instance, Interviewee Ten appreciates the online experience for what it is, explaining, “*in-person [events] are a lot better than online, but I think it's an amazing substitute.*” Interviewee Three echoed this sentiment, albeit in a more pessimistic view, stating, “*online has its benefits, and I think it's better than nothing... that's just what we had to deal with for a couple of years.*”

The players reacted to this sudden change differently. Some participants who are longtime community members chose to step away from the community, at least temporarily. Interviewees Three and Four both mentioned that they did not “*touch the game at all*” after a certain point in the pandemic. Conversely, Interviewees Six, Seven, and Ten reported using the extra time they had in lockdown to play the game more and further refine their skills. It is evident that the pandemic was a stressor on the community and that the topic of online versus in-person SSB competitions can quickly become a heated conversation.

What disappointed the participants the most about online tournaments was the lack of social connections that were enjoyed pre-pandemic. Interviewee Eleven explained that the in-person experience “*it is something that online can't re can't replicate.*” And the participants were excited about the return to in-person events. Interviewee Eleven explains that his local scene is “starting to come back around... trying to make the best of it anyway.”

The competitive SSB community is resilient because it is filled with individuals like these who continue to carry the banner for the game they are passionate about. The COVID-19 shock shows how the lack of in-person events temporarily derailed the SSB community and prompted a united effort to overcome and adapt to the circumstances. Though the community was not able to connect in person, the bonds between individuals allowed for the creation of online events and paved the way for the eventual return to competition in-person. Despite the stigma that gamers are anti-social, it is evident that connection and interaction are significantly more important to SSB players than the public may perceive.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the individual stories of SSB players to understand what motivates them to play, the nature of their experience, and how playing SSB impacts their well-being. Semi-structured interviews allowed a place for SSB players to share openly and for the discussion to focus on what was most important to them. This led to the researchers unearthing a complex set of benefits delivered and motivations satisfied through participation in competitive SSB. The findings of this study also demonstrated how SSB experiences might improve one’s well-being by bringing out various benefits as well as satisfying psychological needs. Lastly, this

study revealed the impacts exerted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which highlighted the resilience of the esports and the community.

Theoretical implications

This study has several theoretical implications. First, this study examined a popular esports through the theoretical lens of the serious leisure perspective and SDT. This attempt directly fills the knowledge gap concerning esports research's lack of theorization attempts (Reitman et al., 2020). This study also answers the need for exploration into specific genres and communities under the umbrella term of esports and contributes to current esports knowledge by providing context to the experience of individual players of the SSB franchise of games.

Second, the findings of this study illustrated the esports' positive impacts on one's well-being. As revealed in the findings, SSB is a serious leisure activity from which participants receive complex durable benefits that improve their sense of self, develop their identity, and gain access to opportunities to socialize and connect with like-minded individuals. The blend of social interaction, self-improvement, and competition provides a valuable outlet that improves the overall well-being of the individuals who participate in the activity. These benefits contribute positively to the participant's state by providing enriching outlets to exercise their need for relatedness, competence, and autonomy.

Lastly, contradicting the negative stigma surrounding video gaming and esports, this study helps shed light on the rich communities that form around competitive gaming by examining one of the longest-standing esports franchises that still maintains a following. These interviews show that players of esports titles are not anti-social, nor are they wasting their time in their pursuit of competitive video games; instead, these

individuals become a part of a larger community that accepts them for who they are, fosters personal growth, and improves their quality of life.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study have several practical implications. To start with, the findings showed that for most participants, in-person events, such as tournaments, are important. This is mainly because they value the opportunity to socialize and interact with each other. Thus, tournament organizations should acknowledge this increasing need and create special sections and events for this purpose.

Second, viewership and sponsorship are vital in esports. As reflected in the findings, the participants enjoyed the relaxed atmosphere of the community and often relied on digital footage to improve their skills. Even though they were not competing, many loyal, committed members were willing to participate in streaming and commenting services as a path of their involvement with SSB. This can be an initiative to be addressed in future sponsorship initiatives.

Lastly, esports is well embraced by the young generation and can be a vital part of youth sports. This study shows that proper engagement with esports improves one's well-being. Therefore, cities and towns that are interested in growing an esports community should work to overcome negative stigmas against the activity by demonstrating the power of competitive SSB to bring people together and improve individual well-being.

Limitations and Future Research

A limitation of this study is the lack of generalizability of the data due to the nature of a qualitative approach. The results are reflective solely of participant viewpoints and experiences. The SSB community is likely different from other esports communities in

a multitude of ways that can only be clarified with similar explorations into other esports franchises. Thus, future studies can be conducted in other esports. A concerted effort to understand the experiences of different esports communities is essential to understanding the activity as a whole. It is likely that each community will similarly have rich histories and dedicated fans willing to share their stories. Understanding what different esports communities value and experience,

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Tables

Table 1. Coding Scheme

Theme	Sub-Theme	Definition	Quote
Personal Benefits	Enjoyment	Players pursue SSB because they enjoy it.	“it’s just really fun” -Interviewee 3
	Self-improvement and accomplishment	Incremental improvements and accomplishments are noticed.	It’s great to feel as though you’re improving.” -Interviewee 3
Social Benefits	Social Interaction	Players form relationships with other community members.	“Even if you are not playing in the competitive scene, it really is a social game, meant to be for a social group of people.” -Interviewee 6
	Tournament effects (social nature of SSB, active support)	In-Person SSB events are inherently social.	“You’re sitting right next to the person You’re seeing what you’re doing is like affecting them.” - Interviewee 10
	Competing with top players	Casual SSB players compete in the same spaces as professionals.	“People who watch football or watch tennis or golf might be able to be in the same venue, but you’re never playing the same game.” -Interviewee 1
Serious pursuit	Skill/knowledge development	Hours of practice and self-reflection are required to find competitive success in SSB.	“establish muscle memory for actions in-game” -Interviewee 9
	Career formation	SSB players are able to recall different moments and stages in their competitive pursuits.	“A lot of the newer kids go through the same learning curves that I did, so it’s always fun to talk to them about what they’re thinking about the game.” -Interviewee 4
Identity	Self-expression/image	Connecting individual identity to SSB	“SSB is part of my internal DNA.” -Interviewee 11
	Belongingness	Feeling connected and accepted by the community.	“It’s how welcoming the community is that that keeps me coming back.”

			- Interviewee 13
	Contribution to the community	Players receive benefits to the community and in turn want to sustain and grow the community.	“I owe a bit of a debt, I've helped in small ways, but I've never taken the burden of like making sure [events] happen regularly.” -Interviewee 4
Covid Shocks	Obstacles in transition to online-only	Obstacles like connectivity issues are online-specific and posed a challenge to hosting events.	“whether the online experience was close enough to in-person to take the results seriously” -Interviewee 8
	Loss of Social Dimension	Though competitions continued, COVID-related isolation still persisted.	“it is something that online can't re can't replicate.” -Interviewee 11
	Keeping the Community Alive	Despite the obstacles posed by COVID, the community maintained tournaments and prepared to return to in-person events.	“online has its benefits, and I think it's better than nothing... that's just what we had to deal with for a couple of years.” -Interviewee 3

Table 2. Sample Profile

ID	Age	Gender	Highest level of completed education	Skill Level*	SSB Exp. (Years)	Title Played
1	25	Female	Masters	Intermediate	3	SSBU
2	34	Male	Masters	Intermediate	10	SSBM
3	18	Male	High School	Intermediate	0.5	SSBU
4	22	Male	Bachelors	Expert	7	SSBU
5	21	Male	Bachelors	Advanced	5	SSBU
6	30	Male	Bachelors	Advanced	1	SSBU
7	23	Male	Bachelors	Advanced	6	SSBU
8	27	Male	Bachelors	Advanced	7	SSBU
9	22	Male	Associates	Advanced	7	SSVM
10	23	Male	Associates	Advanced	5	SSBM
11	26	Male	High School	Rookie	1	SSBM
12	21	Male	Bachelors	Advanced	7	SSBM
13	58	Female	High School	Rookie	5	SSBU

*Note. Skill level was self-identified on the following scale: Rookie, Intermediate, Advanced, Expert

Figures

Figure 1. Conceptual Model

