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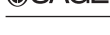

Original Article

Identity transformation, stigma power, and mental wellbeing of Chinese eSports professional players

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Abstract

In China, the expanding eSports culture has produced a vast cohort of video-game players whose peak age ranges between 16 and 22 years. This study explores the dynamic identity transformation and mental wellbeing development processes of eSports professionals in a risk-prone society. It comprises in-depth interviews with players, coaches, managers, and commentators working in 15 top eSports clubs in the Chinese cities of Shanghai, Guangzhou, Suzhou, and Chengdu. We find eSports is perceived as non-secure, casual, and irregular by the Chinese public and that the mental changes experienced by eSports professionals throughout their careers have been significantly influenced by a more sophisticated form of state power and social norms, including cultural cognitive beliefs, economic stimulation, and authority attributions.

Keywords

China, eSports, identity transformation, mental wellbeing, *mianzi*, stigma power

eSports (electronic sports) is the name given to competitive video-game playing or professional gaming (Seo, 2016). The meaning of the word 'competitive', in this context, has been the subject of significant debate among scholars from a variety of

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disciplines. Sport science scholars Jonasson and Thiborg (2010) defined eSports within the framework of traditional sports as individual or team competition and challenge, where the goal of each athlete and team is to win against competitors; here, eSports are categorized in the framework of traditional sports. Meanwhile, 'professional', as understood in eSports, was associated with professional salaries, which have reached, or even substantially exceeded, the level of traditional professional sports (Steinkuehler, 2020), or having the same skills and capacities required by traditional professional sports, such as physical prowess, dexterity, and quick reflexes (Hallmann and Giel, 2018; Witkowski, 2012).

With the rapid development of video streaming technology and an increase in the accessibility of the internet, fans can easily access elite competitions and watch tournaments and their favourite players online (Heaven, 2014); as a result, there has been rapid growth in professional eSports over the last few years. The eSports industry is expected to increase to nearly US $5 billion in value and a global audience of nearly 600 million people by 2020 (Aviles, 2018) – a phenomenon driven by the ever-expanding information and communication technology sector. eSports is particularly popular in Asia, especially in Korea and China (Liao, 2016; Lu, 2016). By 2016, China had overtaken the United States, becoming the world's largest digital gaming market by revenue and number of consumers, with the Chinese company Tencent becoming the world's largest gaming firm (Snyder, 2018). Tencent has developed and published many popular games, and it owns and operates eSports leagues in China that are popular among the younger generation (Yu, 2018). However, the Chinese public, including parents, educators, and medical professionals, are more concerned with video-game addiction as a negative consequence of the development of eSports (Lu, 2016), while the popularity of video-game playing is seen negatively when compared to pursuing academic success, a much preferred cultural value for Chinese youth (Li, 2004). Hence, video gamers are often stigmatized in China as gaming addicts (Lu, 2016).

Despite the increasing economic importance of eSports, relatively little is known about the mental wellbeing of professional players (Fischer, 2016). eSports players competing in top-level tournaments face similar pressure and stress to professional athletes (Smith et al., 2019). As eSports particularly fascinates adolescents and youth (Hamari and Sjöblom, 2017), this study responds to the need to investigate the complexity, dynamics, and risk involved in young people's creative pursuit of eSports careers in order to improve management and contribute to sustainable development for future eSports talents.

This study aims to understand how Chinese eSports players who depend on social, political, and economic resources, negotiate the transformation from 'gaming addicts' to professional athletes, with specific attention paid to Chinese cultural norms. First, the literature review outlines the history and key arguments of the eSports concept and the development of eSports in China. Next, by reviewing the arguments related to stigma power and *mianzi* (face), this study provides a detailed self-reported perspective to contextualize the sociocultural conceptions of eSports players in China. Finally, we present the qualitative methodology and findings of the study, which leads to a discussion of how young Chinese eSports players risk developing self-stigma given the power of the state and of capital, as well as related implications.

Literature review

Recognizing eSports as a sport

Sport 'means all forms of physical activity which, through casual or organized participation, [are] aimed at expressing or improving physical fitness and mental wellbeing, forming social relationships or obtaining results in competition at all levels' (Council of Europe, 2001). There is a dispute as to whether competitive video gaming can be considered a sport in academic, industrial, and political contexts (Jenny et al., 2017). In 1999, the Sport Academy refused to acknowledge the United Kingdom Professional Computer Game Championships as a sport (Wagner, 2006). Hallmann and Giel (2018) argued that eSports, thus far, cannot be considered a sport with regard to five key traits: physical activity, competitive elements, recreation, organizational structures, and acceptance.

On the other hand, eSports players were recognized as professional athletes because the eSports federation and its related organizations could potentially gain substantial financial benefits when eSports is formally accepted as a sport (Hallmann and Giel, 2018; Tassi, 2013). When associated with intercollegiate athletics and other organized sports, eSports can attract global viewership, revenue generation, increased physical activity, and participant diversity within athletics departments (Nagel and Sugishita, 2016). In June 2014, the US-based Robert Morris University became the first university to regard eSports as an official varsity sport; it not only facilitated collaboration with athletics departments across the United States (Nagel and Sugishita, 2016) but also supported gaming scholarships for eSports athletes (RMU, 2014). This was followed by the University of Pikeville (UPike, 2014) six months later.

Although eSports has already become recognized institutionally, for example being included as an official sport at the 2022 Asian Games, scholars continue to debate whether eSports should be considered a sport (Hallmann and Giel, 2018; Heere, 2018; Martončik, 2015). This debate is particularly complex on account of the industry's novelty and the unique convergence of culture, digital technology, and sport encompassed in eSports (Jin, 2010). For the purpose of this study, we define eSports as a spectator sport of competitive video gaming.

eSports development in China

In the late 1990s, personal computers (PCs) became affordable for the Chinese public, and the 2000s witnessed a market rise in the popularity of console and PC games in China (Lu, 2016). Since this time, the expanding eSports culture has produced a vast cohort of video-game players in China whose peak age ranges between 16 and 22 years (HRSS, 2019). Starting around 1999, with the first unofficial online StarCraft championship, eSports gained official recognition in China, and China's General Administration of Sport approved eSports as the country's 99th official sport in November 2003 (Yu, 2018). On 19 June 2004, the official governing body for sport in China, the Sports Ministry, and the All China Sports Federation (ACSF), launched the First China E-sports Games (CEG)(Lu, 2016). In 2003, the sports channel of China Central Television Station (CCTV5) launched a show called 'eSports world', which became very popular with young audiences. However, the show also received complaints from concerned parents

who feared their children might develop internet addiction disorder (IAD) (Bax, 2013), which resulted in the show being cancelled in 2004 (Sina, 2018). Online gaming has been subject to negative stereotypes in the Chinese media following an incident in which 24 young men were killed in a fire in an illegal internet café in Beijing on 17 June 2002, which resulted in the government consistently treating internet cafés and online gaming as a cause for concern (Szablewicz, 2010). Indeed, the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) reported that the majority of online game consumers are adolescents between the ages of 10 and 19 years, who spend a significant amount of time playing either at home or in internet cafés (CNNIC, 2011). Rehabilitation facilities for internet addiction were established in various cities and towns to treat adolescents whose parents volunteered to commit their children in the hopes of turning a person regarded as an internet addict into a person that would 'firmly grasp his studies' (Bax, 2013: 5). While scholars continue to argue over the benefits and deficits of online gaming (Li and Wang, 2013), mass media in China have consistently associated online gaming with internet gaming disorder (IGD) (Sigerson et al., 2017) and branded gaming addiction 'unhealthy' (Szablewicz, 2010: 463) and in contradiction to the Chinese cultural value of academic success as the norm for Chinese youth.

Thus, the Chinese government has a dilemma with respect to its support of eSports. On the one hand, the state has shown a supportive stance towards the gaming industry and eSports in order to boost the economy (Lu, 2016). A demonstration of eSports was featured at the 2018 Asian Games, with the Chinese team winning the Arena of Valor and League of Legends. Contrarily, China Central Television Station did not show any eSports on television, despite having purchased the broadcasting rights for all of the 2018 Asian Games. China's National Radio and Television Administration announced 'Provisions on the Administration of Programs for Minors', which stated that programmes for minors must not promote or introduce electronic games of any kind, days before the Asian Games took place (NRTA, 2018). Because eSports are not allowed to be showcased on Chinese television, viewers watch eSports mainly via livestreaming platforms. In fact, livestreaming was found to have contributed to the rise and growing popularity of eSports (Wulf et al., 2018). Chinese livestreaming services provide real-time content, including games that encourage viewers to buy virtual gifts to give to the streamer (Chen and Xiong, 2019). There are 'host unions' that mentor streamers on their streaming performance to cultivate 'internet celebrities', who can receive significant attention and wealth (Chen and Xiong, 2019). The interaction between viewers and streamers has created bonding effects and fosters a sense of community (Hu et al., 2017; Wohn and Freeman, 2020). A 2018 report shows that the top ten game streamers in China each made over US$ 3 million that year from virtual gift donations (Sohu, 2019). While eSports players may engage in livestreaming activities aside from or together with competition in professional eSports games, streaming may distract players and their in-game performance may deteriorate (Matsui et al., 2020).

Stigma power and mianzi

Since video gamers are often stigmatized as gaming addicts in China, we will review the concept and debates on stigma and stigma power when linking stigma with the Chinese

cultural norm of *mianzi*. Stigma highlights the differences between normalized and stigmatized individuals, and pivots on the established social consensus of 'what is normal' (Goffman, 1986 [1963]: 138). As the result of stigma, individuals may suffer from reduced status, prejudice, discrimination, stereotyping, or social exclusion (Corrigan, 2004). Link and Phelan (2014) have deployed the concept of power to illustrate many stigma processes, drawing on concepts of symbolic power and misrecognition (Bourdieu, 1987, 1990). Included in this research is an exploration of whether stigma represses individuals in a way that substantially serves the underlying interests of stigmatizers as a covert means of achieving their motivations.

Stigma power is then defined as 'the capacity to keep people down, in and/or away by using stigma-related processes' (Link and Phelan, 2014: 30), which help ground the construction of stigma operated through a social structure. This is because the 'social-political function of stigma is an instrument of social policy and a component of the state's coercive apparatus' (Davis, 2004: 494). Richman and Lattanner (2014) employed stigma power – whether social, economic, or political – as a central ingredient to critically understand how both structural and interpersonal stigmas influence health and wellbeing. Video gamers, for example, as 'stigmatized' individuals, may refuse to stay within normative boundaries or accept these devaluations because of stigma power. For instance, Norton et al. (2012) demonstrated that stigmatized individuals may challenge stigma power through the delivery of a persuasive 'power' during face-to-face interactions and negotiation with non-stigmatized individuals.

The concept of *mianzi* ('face'), which is a symbol of social status in China, may be useful in understanding stigma formation and may play an operative role in the creation stigma power (Yang and Kleinman, 2008). *Mianzi* is perceived as a consciousness of glory and shame; it represents one's reputation and social status in others' minds and perception (Hu, 1944). These structural components might lead stigmatized individuals to internalize stereotypes, causing them to suffer a reduction in their self-esteem and sense of self-worth (Vogel et al., 2013). Thus, *mianzi* is understood to be the relationship between 'normal' and stigma in China, in that it creates power relationships either at the macro level (e.g. structural power) or the micro level (e.g. everyday interactions) (Tyler, 2018). In other words, the significance of political and economic components affecting the extent of *mianzi* might drive the establishment of social control, a consequence that has been largely ignored. In our specific area of investigation, *mianzi* in Chinese culture is positively associated with academic success, such as attending universities (Guan and Ploner, 2020), and negatively associated with gaming addiction. The sociocultural conceptions that eSports players might have 'self-stigmatized' or 'internalized' (Corrigan, 2004; Corrigan and Watson, 2002) when considering the degree of loss of face due to 'cognitive and evaluative beliefs', continue to buttress current digital-sociological concerns. However, 'stigma consciousness' (Pinel, 1999), related to the concept of self-stigma, has been under-explored in this new digital field. In particular, there is a need to further identify the kinds of psychological predicaments that eSports professionals experience between the self and others (Link and Phelan, 2014). *Mianzi* is very important for Chinese eSports players when it comes to winning competitions against other nations (Ismangil, 2018). However, *mianzi* is more than winning games, and it is deeply embedded in the everyday lives of Chinese people. Attending university is seen as the path to

success in China; for young eSports players to compensate for not attending university, they may earn *mianzi* by succeeding in competitions, or by becoming rich through successful livestreaming engagements.

Thus, this research aims to illuminate the situation of Chinese eSports players by rethinking stigma power as a technology of governance. The research questions are twofold: first, do eSports players self-stigmatize under Chinese cultural norms and related cognitive and evaluative beliefs? Second, how and to what extent do eSports players transform themselves as athletes through mental changes within a professional eSports career?

Materials and methods

This research employed ethnographic interviews that took place at Chinese eSports clubs to prepare a detailed description of the career development of eSports players. Additionally, we analysed relevant policy documents and observed several participants' eSports tournaments. Ethnographic interviewing demonstrates 'the personal experiences, interpersonal dynamics and cultural meanings of participants in their social world' (Heyl, 2007: 372). The fieldwork was conducted in Shanghai, Guangzhou, Suzhou, Xi'an, and Chengdu for one year (1 July 2018 to 30 July 2019) at 15 top eSports clubs using a snowball sampling strategy. Thirty-five in-depth interviews (see Table 1 in Supplemental Material) were completed with different practitioners in the industry, including 24 professional players, four coaches, and seven CEOs/managers/directors. The researchers were allowed to participate in – and observe – cultural events related to eSports, including the League of Legends Pro League (LPL) Spring (12–26 January 2019), the World Cyber Games (WCG) in Xi'an (18–21 July 2019), and the Asian Games in Jakarta (26 August to 1 September 2019), so that they could familiarize themselves with participants' cultural interpretations and expectations.

Specifically, participants were selected using three successive criteria. First, the participants were recruited during field visits to 15 established top eSports clubs in China. These eSports clubs were officially identified by local offices of both the General Administration of Sport of China and eSports industry associations, which are authorized to train eSports players and allowed to participate in eSports tournaments. Second, players from the first group were selected who had signed official employment contracts with eSports clubs. Third, players from the second group who had experience in eSports tournaments were considered eSports athletes, and subjects to be investigated in this research.

Three further steps were taken to minimize bias and ensure the factual accuracy and reliability of participants' long-term memories: first, participants were asked the same or similar questions more than once to check coherence; second, participants' reactions were monitored/observed during the interview and responses from other interviewees were analysed to compare and contrast the consistencies, similarities, and differences; third, we drew upon other public documents, sources, and evidence to investigate the value and quality of the interviewee data. The collected research included more than 2.1 million words contained in observation notes and interview transcripts.

As a result of the broader conceptual mapping of this study and its aims and objectives, the interview questions were focused on (1) interviewees' lives and work experiences before eSports was officially defined in 2003; (2) the cultural processes that influenced

how interviewees interpreted their career actions during different career stages; and (3) specific examples of the honour, normal responses, and shame that they perceived in their career paths, along with any potential related outcomes. Thematic analysis was employed to analyse interview data as an interactive and reflective process (Braun et al., 2019; Nowell et al., 2017). We adopted Strauss and Corbin's (1998: 55–8) open, axial and selective coding procedure as we initially analysed the interview data manually, using open coding guided by our research questions and generated initial codes. We then looked for relationships between initial codes and combined similar codes which refined the data into categories/themes relevant to the research questions. The research team met and agreed on the themes before re-reading and coding the data based on the relevant categories identified in axial coding (O'Connor and Joffe, 2020: 1).

NVivo, a qualitative data analysis computer software package (NVivo, 2020), was used to assist the coding process. Sampled codes and analytical scripts with quotations are highlighted in Table 3 (in Supplemental Material).

The researchers complied with the ethical guidelines of the British Sociological Association, and all interviewees were fully informed about the purpose of the research and the procedures to be used. Interviewees aged 18 years and over provided consent for the use of their data and occupational background. We obtained informed consent from the parents of participants aged under 18 years (16 and 17). The participants were guaranteed anonymity and assured that the information they provided would only be shared between the project researchers.

Results

The results explore the three main stages in the development of eSports that have contributed to the major mental changes experienced by eSports professionals during their career. The analysis is organized as follows. First, it explores the experiences or memories of eSports players, particularly before 2003 (the year that eSports was officially defined), as well during the years when eSports were developing, from 2003 to 2011. Second, it investigates the interconnections between eSports players' professional performance and the political-economic changes that have occurred because of significant policy support and strong capital investment in the industry since 2011. Third, it follows the career evolution of eSports players in the context of the Chinese eSports value chain (e.g. the influence of livestreaming) to examine mental changes since 2016.

Good Friday: Take it on the chin (pre-2011)

The main stigma associated with eSports is the stereotype of the gaming hobby as 'spiritual opium' (Szablewicz, 2020: 51), a term used to condemn the rapid and vigorous development of the gaming industry, which has caused young people to become addicted to playing games rather than attending school. This 'addiction' includes those players who either steal money from their families, or lie to their parents and teachers, to skip school to play games. This reputation creates dim, unhealthy, or sullied impressions with the public. Since the peak age of a professional eSports player is between the ages of 16 and 22 years (only 20% or less have a college degree) (HRSS, 2019), after secondary school, young players

must choose whether to attend university or become a professional player. In Chinese culture, *mianzi* is positively associated with achieving a higher education degree (Guan and Ploner, 2020); by choosing the eSports career and skipping university, young eSports players bring 'shame' to their parents, thus causing them to lose *mianzi*.

> It is not just a decision that we [players] have to quit education, but is actually a significant challenge for our parents too as to whether or not they can accept such a non-mainstream educational path . . . or, even worse, we have to face [it] that one day we have to find a 'proper' job, as would be expected, if we cannot win a championship or have to retire [from eSports]. (Professional player, 17 years old, Guangzhou, Arena of Valor)

In the early stage of eSports development until eSports clubs were officially recognized, the training of eSports was a mode of apprenticeship in China; in other words, junior players[1] were significantly affected by their peers and mentors. Therefore, almost all eSports players interviewed during our research readily recalled what their peers and mentors shared with them, memories of tough experiences and their low quality of life between 1999 and 2003. These were the years during which eSports remained officially unrecognized, and that period was regarded as the 'dark age of riff-raff'. This description refers to negative public and family critiques; even though the World Cyber Games (WCG) was established in 1999, one retired player (currently CEO of a club) commented thus:

> Video games are something for you to spend money on, eSports is something for you to make money. However, the public still misunderstands the nature of eSports with video gaming, which might be the main reason why from eSports [we] leave the impression of it being 'over-consuming' and us being 'too addicted to it'. (CEO, 26, Chengdu, League of Legends)

'Dark age' also refers to the casual and non-secure condition of the eSports industry at its inception: 'renting a house for both living and working, no secured investment, no insurance, no corporation model, [my mentors would] get only RMB 800 per month [equivalent of US $110], which is much lower than the basic salary in Chengdu' (Coach, 22 years old, Chengdu, League of Legends). A retired player (20 years old, Beijing, Arena of Valor) explained:

> Actually, the boundary between professional and non-professional was not quite clear cut at that time [before 2011], unlike now. Once you have signed the contract and finalized the payment of 'Wu Xian Yi Jin [Five Insurances and One Fund]',[2] it means that you are already a professional.

A chief coach (28 years old, Beijing, Arena of Valor) recalled:

> If we were lucky and had an impressive competition record, we could be sponsored by the local internet café. They offered RMB 100 or 200 [equivalent of US $14–28] for us to take that kind of green train,[3] no sleeping space, sitting or standing all night long from Chengdu to Beijing or Shanghai for more than twenty hours, eating only fast food . . .

Thus, we observed that most interviewees demonstrated their positive acceptance of the fact that the 'social environment' still does not treat them as athletes. For instance, the

CEO, manager, and chief coaches who were interviewed for this research highlighted that one of their important daily tasks was to communicate and engage with their players' parents. On the one hand, some parents can be negotiated with once one has a 'foot in the door'. One coach (28 years old, Chengdu, League of Legends) noted how he successfully persuaded his first player's parent around 2010:

> Playing billiards might have been a rogue action twenty years ago, but now it is a gentleman's activity. Similarly, eSports has great potential as a chivalric social activity in the near future, and has been upgraded to new cultural heights, and accepted by mainstream society.

Another chief coach (24 years old, Shanghai, League of Legends) explained:

> We [my mentor and I] normally engage four to five parents per day. Some of them visit us [the club] regularly, like every two months, to chase up both their children's' performance and our club's management. If the player succeeds in a tournament, and particularly [the players] wins a large bonus, we will contact their parents the first time directly.

On the other hand, some parents are too conservative to accept such competitive and precarious jobs: 'even though the whole environment is better than before, it is still no surprise that some parents might still intrude into our club and drag away their children directly', a CEO stated. Therefore, historically and culturally speaking, at this stage, it is easier to acknowledge that these professional players were not seen as athletes; however, they make a great effort to 'take it on the chin'. In other words, before 2011, professional players were powerless to refute the stigma and prejudice, with the Chinese public and even their own families labelling them as 'gaming addicts'.

Professional pursuits: 'In the true spirit of sportsmanship' (2011 to around 2016)

Three main factors have driven the fascinating development of China's eSports industry since 2003, and particularly in 2011, and these have been recognized as the key 'powers' that have helped eSports players to develop confidence and self-actualization. First, the Chinese government has facilitated numerous policies and events (see Table 2, in Supplemental Material) to support the eSports industry, including game content, game licensing, gaming tournaments, education, coaches, and professional players. Additionally, regional-level governing bodies, for example in Xi'an, Chengdu, Shanghai, and Taicang, have launched a series of regulations and policies to attract eSports clubs and investment (e.g. Taicang eSports town) to stimulate the local market and gain tax revenue. The most significant is that official news agencies have started to refer to eSports professionals as athletes (Jenny et al., 2017) rather than addicts, and that they have been legitimized as national heroes by winning international eSports championships.

Second, Mr Wang Sicong, a well-known second-generation Chinese billionaire and entrepreneur of Wanda Co. Ltd, has invested RMB 500 million (equivalent of US $70.62 million) in Prometheus Capital to facilitate a strong entry into the field of eSports since 2011, thereby contributing to the eSports industry boom in China. Almost all interviewees

referred to this remarkable event as it has completely shifted the entire value chain of the eSports industry and has improved the quality of the whole ecology. A club CEO recalled what Wang said to him several years ago: 'I want to help you, the other players, and the other clubs live better. . .. I hope this industry will be able to see the "light".' More precisely, in August 2011, Wang acquired the CCM (Catastrophic Cruel Memory) eSports club, which was on the verge of dissolution, and changed its name to IG (Invictus Gaming). It concentrates on three projects, StarCraft II, DOTA (Defence of the Ancients), and League of Legends.

> He [Wang Sicong] not only appointed Sun Liwei as the CEO, but also improved the basic salary of his eSports players to RMB 10,000 [after tax; equivalent of US $1,412.40]; the maximum monthly salary [including bonus] could reach RMB 100,000 [equivalent of US $14,124.40]. Then he led other bosses of clubs to establish the Association of Chine E-sports [ACE] affiliation, including setting out to develop the rules and regulations to virtuously manage the industry and clubs. (CEO, 26 years old, Chengdu, League of Legends)

Third, almost all the interviewees explained in detail the system of training programmes and daily operation in their own clubs, that significantly draws on the United States' National Basketball Association's (NBA) training systems and value chain. In most clubs, these include constant cycles of intense training, (informal) psychological counselling, team management, strategic skills development, and a six-round recruitment system (e.g. 94% to 97% elimination rate). One participant (a professional player, 17 years old, Xi'an, Cross Fire) stated how this is like any full-time sports profession and that they train in a manner like other sports:

> We must dedicate 10–12 hours routine training per day to practice . . . including sacrificing our interpersonal social life. To be honest, it is tough; at times we could not completely feel happy and joyful like we did before entering this industry.

A professional player (18 years old, Hangzhou, PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds [PUBG]) also noted:

> Each skill set may need to be practised more than 1,000 times to form the muscle memory that can be released in the field for 0.1 second.

Another chief coach (28 years old, Chengdu, League of Legends) explained in a more detail the qualities that enable players to succeed:

> First, our eSports players have remarkable motor skills and are quick with their hand-eye coordination. Second, they should have 'perfect' dynamic and static vision to capture and process the message in an instant from any moving images. Third, logical thinking; some are naturally talented and make appropriate judgements, while others could be improved through intensive training, only to a certain extent.

It was found that the cost and process of informal psychological consultancy depended on the corporate size of the clubs. For example, the well-known clubs – OMG, All

Gamers (AG), and Team WE (WE) – employed a professional psychological consultancy every three months; it mainly concentrated on players in two stages:

> In the first stage, when a fresh player has just achieved a great result, particularly has become an eSports idol, we make a great effort to engage and manage his/her mental change. The second stage, is when some star players fall into a trough in their competitive state, we will also help them to quickly recover, and then reset the goals and re-plan his/her development path. (Chief coach and CEO, 23 years old, Shanghai, League of Legends)

This study, therefore, found that meritocracy is typically salient in most cases; it has formed a doctrine in practice for the regulation of players by the government and capitalized marketing. Well-known events in this regard included, as early as 2016, the Chinese team's victory in the DOTA International Invitational Championship. Furthermore, on 3 November 2018, IG gained its first championship victory in the LPL S8. At the end of July of that same year, the Chinese OMG team won the FPP (First Person Perspective) final in the PUBG Global Invitational (PGI) Tournament. The momentum of the Jakarta Asian Games, which was won by the Chinese team at the end of August, played a positive role in relabelling eSports players from video gaming players to professional athletes. In this way, players employ a meritocratic discourse, embodied in sport practice and internalizing their work as a professional pursuit, to destigmatize themselves from being seen as 'gaming addicts' and earn more *mianzi*.

To be digital king or amusing themselves to death? That is the question! (post-2016)

The most influential policy related to the eSports industry came into effect in 2004 when the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television of the People's Republic of China (SAPPRFT) banned the mainstream media, including digital TV channels, from broadcasting eSports-related content. Thus, the famous *eSports World* program on Chinese Central Television Channel 5 (CCTV-5) was suspended in April 2004. Further, in February 2007, CCTV was accused by eSports players of 'under-the-table dealing', as the World of Warcraft's champion Li Xiaofeng (Sky) failed to be selected as one of the most influential figures in sports. For players, these events raised many concerns regarding their social reputations and status, as is illustrated by a response from a CEO who retired five years ago (26 years old, Chengdu, League of Legends):

> It is a shame. . .. Although more of our young customers are getting used to watching tournaments through computers and mobile phones. However, older people feel that the content on TV is more trustworthy, and they are more likely to accept it. This [broadcasting on TV] helps us to show off to our parents, get the respect from our family; our job could be recognized and identified by the older generation. It will be a milestone for us if eSports could be allowed . . . [to broadcast on TV].

This policy of banning eSports from televised broadcasts brought about important changes in the eSports industry chain in China, which differed from Korea's model of game-competition broadcasting, in which eSports can be broadcast through digital TV.

In China, livestreaming broadcast platforms, as the main bottom stream of the eSports value chain, has played a key role as the most important distribution channel (Johnson and Woodcock, 2019). Starting in late 2015, livestreaming became a burgeoning media industry in China, with diverse livestreaming applications receiving significant investment (iiMedia, 2016). eSports players may participate in livestreaming (e.g. playing and commenting on a live gaming show) to showcase professional skills, maintain a close and interactive relationship with their fans, earn virtual gifts or sell gaming products. However, this model has propelled some players into an economic-driven career path – or even forced some players to take this option – because of the huge gap in the annual income of official players, which can vary between RMB 80,000 and RMB 20 million (equivalent to US $11,299 to US $2.82 million).[4] Those who receive significantly higher incomes often benefit primarily from livestream bonuses and may lose focus on actual tournaments.

A CEO (23-year-old, Shanghai, Playerunknown's battlegrounds) illustrated this aspect in a negative way: 'it is all about commercial "hit potential" (*liu liang*) and "conversion rate" (*zhuan hua lv*)'. He explained how economic profits associated with livestreaming could hinder a professional eSports player's career development: 'in the beginning, these players aim to compete in the championship; however, after one month – only one month after entering this [livestreaming] industry – they change . . . become so greedy'. Hence, such dynamics may pose another mental challenge for young players who face the dilemma of focusing on competing in eSports tournaments or making money via livestreaming during their peak age:

> The current eSports industry [particularly livestreaming broadcast platforms] is quite unhealthy; have you seen any football commentator who earns more than the income of a football star? No! Have you seen any basketball commentator earning more than basketball stars? No, I have not. But in China, yes, they do. (Project director, 23 years old, Xi'an, Arena of Valor)

> It may not be physical deterioration; it is an issue of mental stress, burnout . . . the issues include the key culprits for a short career span, forcing them [eSports players] into early retirement. . .. You know, these are young people who may have physical alertness but not the mental or emotional maturity to process the fast changes and monetary temptations [from livestreaming business] around them. (CEO and chief coach, 20 years old, Guangzhou, Arena of Valor)

The eSports industry ecosystem has led Chinese capitalists to raise concerns as to how eSports players are valued. The interviewees also commented on how the 'market' treats eSports players who resemble traditional movie stars, but who are disadvantaged when considering their educational background, the peak age for professional players (16–22 years), and poor brand positioning. Moreover, the term, 'chronic conditions' has been employed to refer to any disability, mental health concerns, or physical health problems of digital labouring, afforded by economic and digital inclusion (Johnson, 2019). This point is illustrated through a chief coach's (28 years old, Beijing, Arena of Valor) interview, which included the following observations of players' critical unplanned decisions and the performance variables that influenced their career paths:

> Even though livestreaming has contributed most to the rapid development of the eSports industry, it is too fast. . .. This has resulted in the unnecessary loss of time and energy for eSports players. Examples include some talented players who are supposed to maintain the best competing form to compete; however, they prefer to stream. Consequently, these players fail to be streamers and disappear completely from the circuit.

Therefore, these coaches criticized the fact that the Chinese eSports industry's value chain has misled some players, especially in determining their career paths; some are technically skilled but not sufficiently eloquent or capable of being successful streamers. In contrast, some players, who did not perform well in competitions, ended up becoming celebrity streamers. Most administrative professionals illustrated the increasing challenges in managing clubs: 'in the past, we just needed to showcase who we were and what eSports is; but now, it is more complex . . .' (CEO, 23 years old, Shanghai, League of Legends). He continued to explain that their eSports club has proposed a thorough management programme that helps their employed players pay more attention to tournaments, meanwhile, making good use of livestreaming platforms to maintain their reputations and to earn extra income, which are important for Chinese people to earn *mianzi*. Although it is seen as a norm for eSports players to engage in livestreaming regularly, interviewees mostly agree that focusing on and performing well in eSports tournaments is the main path to success.

Discussion and implications

The perception of eSports as non-secure, casual, and irregular work has been internalized by the public in China. eSports players have experienced two specific types of stigma over the past twenty years. First, adults simply associate eSports with gaming addiction that has led young people to miss out on higher education potentially leading to good careers. Second, these youth may be perceived, somewhat naively, as celebrating their gaming addiction by engaging in eSports as a professional pursuit to cover up the fact that they are losers, causing them to lose *mianzi* ('face'). Both cases require unpacking through insights into the relationship between stigma power and perceptions of career chances among eSports professionals in China. Otherwise, there is a potential risk that eSports will continue to be perceived as occupying a thin line between a sports hobby and an addiction.

Since 'stigma processes have a dramatic and probably a highly underestimated impact on such life chances' (Link and Phelan, 2001: 381), our research suggests that the stigma associated with power flows over cultural cognitive beliefs (e.g. *mianzi*), economic stimulation (e.g. income), and authority attributions (policy support) should be deconstructed. These stigma power flows, as social control processes (Trammell and Morris, 2012), represent the three stages of mental change in eSports career development: first, eSports players are easily self-stigmatized and engage in 'cultural value control' as a way to navigate their own identity through daily social interactions, particularly based on the reciprocation of *mianzi.* Second, the Chinese government reinforces sociocultural norms by labelling eSports players as athletes and has legitimized these professionals as engaging techno-nationalist pursuits, which provide a social and political environment for them to overcome their discredited identity. Moreover, the financial support of famous young

entrepreneur Wang Sicong is not perceived solely as capital; instead, it is perceived as a legitimizing eSports as a business, providing not only symbolic access to mobilize eSports professionals' network resources but also to the fast-track evolution of the eSports industry in China. Third, the stigmatized players are still defined by the discredit and greed associated with the digital economy, which eventually causes them to engage in impression management by becoming eSports professionals. This implies that stigma jeopardizes eSports players' ability and desire to obtain income to attain essential social statuses. In combination, the three stages discussed in this article show how eSports players navigate 'stigma consciousness' (Pinel, 1999) between the self and the power of social control embodied through *mianzi* in China (Yang and Kleinman, 2008). This enables them to change their professional performance, which, in turn, is interwoven into their professional practices as a way to transform social identity and reduce stigma (Park, 2002; Siegel et al., 1998).

The findings suggest that young eSports players risk developing self-stigma and their mental changes throughout their careers are influenced by a more sophisticated form of state power, as part of proactive stigma management. These young people may lack guidance regarding mental and emotional growth when facing intense pressure in a fast-growing digital economy. Therefore, policies and regulations should be developed to support young players' physical and mental wellbeing, to destigmatize eSports, and to unlink professional eSports from gaming addiction. Policy makers might consider strategies involving the destigmatization of eSports via mainstream media and institutionalized education.

Therefore, it would be interesting to determine, given the limited governmental power, whether a fundamental and sustaining endeavour can enable cultural norms to become deeply re-embedded when eSports players are redefined based on the effects of digital economic practice. On the one hand, owing to 'a career with specific financial, social, entrepreneurial, and political stakes involved through the production of gameplay as an ongoing professional endeavor made across networks' (Witkowski and Manning, 2019), we argue that the stigma experienced by eSports players can be managed through their own conscious professional pursuits, shifting the power structure to maintain proactive and sustainable stigma management. On the other hand, as professionals working in the Chinese eSports industry still evaluate their success and self-worth based on performance in eSports tournaments, we argue that laws and policies need to be put in place to regulate the livestreaming industry to improve the management and sustainable development of future eSports talents. Notably, eSports clubs and eSports associations need to carefully collaborate with livestreaming services to help transform the discourse of stigmatization through engagement with professionals and their livestreaming performances.

Conclusion

This is the first study to make both empirical and theoretical contributions to the exploration of the dynamic process underlying the identity transformation and mental wellbeing development of Chinese professionals in the fast-developing eSports industry. The novelty of this study was strengthened as we interrogated the unique Chinese cultural norm of *mianzi*, and its stigma power, which provides insights into what makes Chinese eSports distinct and transformed, as a technology of governance. We argue that the social

norm of linking eSports with gaming addiction needs to be challenged and eSports should be destigmatized in order for young professional players to stay focused and resist making quick cash from livestreaming businesses in order to earn *mianzi*. The mixed-method design enabled us to capture the cultural and psychological dynamics of viewpoints among eSports players as well as their families, coaches, and club managers.

This study has several limitations. First, this is a qualitative study that interviewed 35 individuals from 15 top eSports clubs in China using a snowball sampling strategy; thus, it may not represent the wider population of eSports players, including those in smaller and less competitive eSports clubs. Second, this study examined a specific Chinese context, so its findings may be inapplicable to other cultural contexts. Future studies may consider a comparative study with another country or region – for example, a study on eSports athletes in the USA or Korea, where eSports are more advanced compared to other countries.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. The quotations in the first section, 'Good Friday: Take it on the chin (pre-2011)', include the memories shared by the interviewees' peers and mentors.
2. Chinese standard national insurance policies.
3. Green train, or 'green-skinned trains' – so named for the colour of carriages' external paint – as they are associated with a slow and rickety ride, but they are more affordable. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-01/19/c_135997020.htm
4. Among eSports professionals, 86% earn salaries one to three times higher than the local average income: http://www.mohrss.gov.cn/SYrlzyhshbzb/dongtaixinwen/buneiyaowen/201906/t20190628_321882.html

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