

# National Identity in the Brazilian Gaming Community on Twitter: Esports Tournaments During the 2022 Elections

**Leonor Jungstedt, Tarcízio Macedo, Alessandra Maia, Luis Gomes, Lucas Roberto da Silva, Polyana Barboza, Dalby Hubert, Maria Sirleidy Cordeiro**

Cubo de Inovação da Escola de Comunicação, Mídia e Informação

Fundação Getulio Vargas (FGV)

Praia de Botafogo, 190

Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brazil, ZIP 22250-900

+55 21 3799-9648

[leonor.jungstedt@fgv.br](mailto:leonor.jungstedt@fgv.br), [tarcizio.macedo@fgv.br](mailto:tarcizio.macedo@fgv.br), [alessandra.maia@fgv.br](mailto:alessandra.maia@fgv.br), [luis.gomes@fgv.br](mailto:luis.gomes@fgv.br),  
[cubo.ecmi@fgv.br](mailto:cubo.ecmi@fgv.br).

## Keywords

Esports, National identity, Brazil, Twitter, Gaming community, 2022 elections

The 2022 Brazilian election was a contentious and polarizing process which engaged all levels of Brazilian society. This work is part of an ongoing research effort to monitor and analyze the gaming community's engagement with politics throughout the electoral period, starting with a focus on the divisive nature of political speech. During the two voting rounds, however, concurrent international esports tournaments generated significant engagement among Brazilian gamers, leading to a more in-depth analysis of the relationship between esports and national identity amid the fractured political climate.

In general terms, the framing given to the national sports culture is essential to understand the growing diffusion of a competitive video game culture and a professional ethos of digital gaming in Brazil. The relationship between esports and the idea of sports, especially football, as a “national passion” is an element of national identity formation (DaMatta, 1997; Helal and Gordon Jr., 1999; Ribeiro, 2012). As part of a historical genealogy of sports and heirs of this tradition (Jonasson, 2016), esports do not give up this identity dimension.

Over time, as the presence of the Brazilian public on the Internet and in online gaming in particular increased, a reputation began to be built around nationality. From the HUEHUE movement (Fragoso, 2014) to the release of items inspired by representative elements of national culture, Brazilian identity often mobilizes affection and disaffection in the gamer community. In the Brazilian context, especially, the approach and framing given to esports tend to appropriate and reproduce the same discourse as football, emulating codes and logics (forms and structures) of a legitimized social practice to justify itself as a sport modality.

In general, esports replicate the logic and language of sports journalism in the broadcast in its broadest sense. Broadcasts from consolidated channels, such as ESPN or SporTV, as well as specific streams produced by companies in the genre, such as Blizzard Entertainment or Riot Games, use a format that always seeks to emulate that of sports journalism, with professionals explaining and discussing the actions of the players. In addition, there are several analogies and references to the dynamics of football to explain the operation of games such as League of Legends or Free Fire. On the other hand, there is also frequent approximation between Brazilian football figures and the esports scene, including the presence of major football teams in esports.

The association of sports, especially football, and politics were altered after the 2014 presidential elections, when an organized right-wing movement on the streets became a new staple of the Brazilian political landscape, with protests focusing first on calling for the impeachment of president Dilma Rousseff. These protests developed a distinct identity as the movement was transformed into the support base of Jair Bolsonaro. Traditional football paraphernalia associated with the national team (“Seleção”), with the official yellow shirt as the centerpoint, became an unofficial dress code for right-wing protests and gatherings (Oliveira, 2021). This iconography, in turn, became associated with the movement, in what Guedes and da Silva (2019) call the “second sequestering of the yellow and green”.

We observed the gaming community on Twitter through the debate about games that occurred on the platform. The data for this research was collected using the Twitter API through a query for the classification of posts referring to games, the industry, or the streaming ecosystem around them (Ruediger, 2017). This resulted in two groups of data around both rounds of voting in the Brazilian elections, with tweets being collected a week before and after the voting weekend. During the two weeks around the first round of voting (Sep. 25th to Oct. 8th), there were 691.031 interactions collected<sup>1</sup>, while for the second round (Oct. 23th to Nov. 6) there were 805.991 interactions.

Through the Gephi application and based on the sharing of posts among profiles, a graph was elaborated for the representation of the interactions among users in each of the two data periods, which enabled the identification of profile groups based on the comparison of the volume of interactions outside and inside the communities. For the sake of consistency, we considered the groups that garnered at least 5% of the profiles engaged in the debate, which resulted in six communities during the first round of voting and eight communities during the second round. Next, a content analysis was applied to the top 100 tweets in each cluster in search of the positioning that the text emitted.

During both rounds, clusters were formed around supporters of either major candidate, progressive Luis Inácio Lula da Silva and right-wing Jair Messias Bolsonaro, with a majority of interactions and users favoring Lula. These clusters were separated, with Bolsonaro’s supporters, in particular, being more isolated from the overall network of posts. Alongside this, esports competitions that were happening at the same time led to clusters forming around this topic, overperforming Bolsonaro’s supporters in the second.

During the election period, major international tournaments in *League of Legends* and *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* were played, with Brazilian teams competing. The participation of these Brazilian teams were considered in many of the top-performing tweets, including streamers and the teams themselves, to be representations of the country and a source of national pride. In contrast to the controversial connotations acquired by the football national team, esports teams were freely associated with the Brazilian identity and its national colors, even during a contentious election.

In Simmel's approach about sociation, any kind of competition also results in a connection, in building a relationship, in establishing bonds with others. The data obtained in our collection show that esports competitions, based on the construction of the figure of the common external enemy, act as vectors of unification of a fractured gamer community during the electoral process in 2022. Competition and conflict staged in esports matches trigger effects that can generate more importance to the unity of the Brazilian gamer community because,

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<sup>1</sup> October 5th had no recorded interactions due to a fault in our server.

again, they tighten the social bonds between members, making them more sensitive. Esports competitions, when also built on the principles of conflict and competition, “[...] give the community a more lively feeling of its unity and solidarity” (Simmel, 1983, p. 55-56).

In a political scenario where some of the symbols of national identity (the Brazilian national team and its jersey) seem to have been co-opted by the national extreme right, esports emerges as a counterpoint, rekindling national identity and aggregating players with different political spectrums. This suggests a return to the separation between gaming and politics, if only momentarily, where professional competitions are considered sacred events of national unity. The professional practice of the game, however, seems to summon a behavior of respect, of a truce, even if subtle, between different players and their political positions.

This work adds to an initiative that seeks to include esports in the set of social facts that are important for understanding not only the gaming culture in Brazil but also Brazilian society itself. Sports, with emphasis on football, and politics are mixed in Brazil, and esports are currently starting to play a role in this relationship. DaMatta (1997) had already pointed to the relevance of sports, in this case football, for a better understanding of the country and of what Brazilians think about it. Thus, we gain an understanding of Brazil and Brazilians when we approach carnival, religion, entertainment, music, and the diversity of game situations present in the country, such as football, video games, and also esports.

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