Problems anchoring and verifying identities in an emerging esports ecosystem

J. PATRICK WILLIAMS
Nanyang Technological University
School of Social Sciences
patrick.williams@ntu.edu.sg

Vinh Trinh Luu
Nanyang Technological University
School of Social Sciences
vtrinh97@gmail.com

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

We live in a world in which people are increasingly able to take on digital games-related careers through which they can support themselves financially, even reaching celebrity status (Lee and Lin 2011; Johnson and Woodcock 2019). Esports is a major contemporary example. However, participants in esports scenes may struggle to develop or manage professional identities (Brandtzaeg and Chaparro-Domínguez 2020). Identities are worth studying because they connect people to the social world through the social roles and memberships they objectify, and because of the sense of belonging, well-being and self-confidence that can derive from them when they are positively valued (Glynn and Walsh 2009). In this paper we investigate how individuals in Singapore—a small island nation in Southeast Asia with an emerging esports ecosystem—make sense of their identities within the context of esports participation. Linking esports to career identities (LaPointe 2010), we explore the significance of self-definitions for developing a more holistic understanding of esports participation and careers (Johnson and Woodcock 2021; Wimmer and Sitnikova 2012).

The paper frames two concerns. The first is how socio-material conditions and cultural expertise anchor esports identities. Esports identities are shaped by a variety of social and material affordances, including the state of the local esports ecosystem (e.g., underdeveloped<--->developed), participants' access to games and esports performances (e.g., practice, competition), and the degree of support participants receive from relevant institutions (e.g., media, families, peers, schools, clubs).[1] Drawing from Miles (2014), we explore how these affordances might anchor—i.e., shape or manage—interviewees' self-definitions in terms of esports. The second and related concern is whether and how their esports identities are or are not verified through participation. Verification refers to the extent to which one's self-definitions match the definitions available in the larger social context (Stets and Burke 2005). Self-definitions are shaped in large part through socio-emotional feedback loops constructed through individuals' imaginations of how they appear to significant others (Lundgren 2004). Those "others" may include people inside (audiences, coaches) and outside (parents, peers) of the esports ecosystem, but also are increasingly impacted by media representations (Grooten and Kowert 2015). In contexts where esports are well developed and viewed as acceptable or popular within mainstream culture, social and material affordances should reflect identities that align with individuals' self-

definitions such that healthy esports identities emerge. In contexts where esports are not well understood or have negative connotations attached to them, or where there are insufficient or unsettled socio-material conditions, such self-definitions are likely to be more problematic (Jiow et al. 2018; Williams and Chua 2021).

We interviewed people from across the Singapore esports ecosystem, including aspiring and retired professional players, business developers, marketing managers, coaches, local esports association staff, event planners, streamers and shoutcasters (n = 33; 7 female, 26 male). We asked them about their gameplay growing up, about their development of esports-related knowledge and skills, and about their past, current and future interests in games-related work or careers. Identity emerged as an important concept during early inductive coding and our analysis therefore focuses on issues that participants experienced with anchoring and/or verifying esports identities.

Esports identities may form an important part of the self only when there are sufficient opportunities for their verification (Miles 2014). Interviewees expressed desires for an esports self and described how esports-relevant identities were verified/verifiable in some contexts (e.g., when playing among friends, when attending an esports workshop). Yet they lamented both the limited socio-material affordances to anchor esports-identity verification (e.g., viable career opportunities, spaces to practice or demonstrate expertise) and mainstream perceptions that such affordances and identities were unimportant or unnecessary, primarily because "esports" were neither a career nor an industry to significant others (e.g., families, schools, local government).

Limited access to identity anchors negatively impacted the development of cultural expertise and the number and frequency of situations in which to achieve identity verification. During the Covid-19 period of 2020-22 especially, there were fewer tournaments, which constrained players', event organizers', and shoutcasters' (among others) esports-identity performances. And when events did occur, a culture of toxicity often resulted in participants anchoring their own and others' identities in non-esports terms (e.g., age, gender, dispositional traits), even in the context of gameplay. Such circumstances further lowered the salience of their professionalizing identities in everyday life (Adler and Adler 1987). Interviewees also discussed how others sometimes cast identities on them that were not congruent with their own imagined esports selves. When their own self-definitions could be verified in situations, they reported investing in improving their expertise to appropriately embody an esports identity. However, when mismatches occurred or socio-material resources for acquiring cultural expertise were limited or absent, participants would often choose to invest less, or cease to invest, in their esports identity, which often led to its abandonment. This created bottom-up problems for sustaining the local esports scene.

Research has demonstrated the importance that identities, anchoring and verification play in making sense of people's behaviors (Swidler 2005; Carter 2013). In the current study, the esports ecosystem is not yet cohesive and suffers from toxicity and other problems (Johnson and Williams, in press). Participants find it difficult to anchor or verify preferred esports identities, which leads to trouble deriving benefits from esports participation, whether financial, social, or emotional. This study offers insight into the problems of identity anchoring and verification among participants in a local esports ecosystem. Findings can help explain the social-psychological and micro-interactional problems associated with developing professional esports identities and their effects within esports ecosystems.

ENDNOTE
1. The parenthetical examples are not intended as an exhaustive list of what constitutes social circumstances and material affordances.

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