

# Aiming for validity: The experience of conflicts in legitimacy judgments in esports actors and new grassroots activism

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## Abstract

Esports is a phenomenon which continues to grow in socio-cultural and economic importance, yet it remains at the edges of mainstream society. To date, there have been few works which address the topic in terms of legitimacy, particularly the micro-processes of legitimization. Given that the esports system is one which currently operates outside wider societal practices, the lived experiences of actors in the ecosystem can offer valuable insights into the world of esports. This research employs IPA in order to understand how actors in organized grassroots esports movements make sense of their individual experiences and actions. A series of novel contributions are provided by this work. First, micro-level theories of legitimacy are applied to a phenomenon which has recently come to mainstream attention, one which is at the same time a business and a culture. Second, it is the first, in our knowledge, to apply a qualitative methodology to the explicit issue of legitimacy in esports. Third, it adds to theories of legitimacy and institutional change by providing empirical insights into the circumstances in which the experience of conflicts in legitimacy judgments independently mobilizes actors, shaping collective action into grassroots activism efforts. Finally, it highlights tensions between international success and the foundations of grassroots esports.

**Keywords 1:** Esports, Legitimacy, Grassroots, Activism, IPA.

## 1. Introduction

Why do some individuals become activists to legitimize esports when faced with the general perception that their activities are not acceptable or desirable, despite the personal cost and with no obvious return in sight? Traditionally, scholarly accounts of these individuals, mostly made in retrospect once legitimacy has been achieved, present them as resourceful agents of change and foresight<sup>7</sup>. These accounts, however, barely explore what makes an ordinary activist when even the possibility of change has yet to be imagined. Theories of legitimacy<sup>42</sup> have recently started to understand how institutional change may stem

from actor level experiences of legitimacy judgments<sup>2</sup>. Theories on activism and institutional change have traditionally been interested in the role played by institutional contradictions in the organization of change initiatives, often describing agents of change as “active and artful exploiter of institutional contradictions”<sup>35</sup>. Yet, fundamental questions remain as to why, how, and in what form individuals initiate and organize change initiatives<sup>31</sup>. Recent theoretical advances on the multi-level of legitimacy are starting to provide useful tools to answer these questions and, particularly, how individual experiences of legitimacy (or lack thereof) can connect collective action with the personal stories of change agents.

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The practice of esports provides a uniquely rich empirical setting to study individual level legitimacy issues and the emergence of change initiatives. Esports, defined as competitive video gaming, is a complex and multifaceted activity<sup>17</sup> that has rapidly developed into a phenomenon of global significance<sup>32</sup>. However, as a consequence of its relatively recent emergence, and despite massive global audiences, esports continues to struggle with a lack of structures, regulation and governance that leads to issues with legitimacy<sup>22</sup>. These issues stem from a combination of factors such as the definition of the context, the multitude of relevant stakeholders and the rapid expansion of the context<sup>32</sup>. The ongoing question of where esports is located in reference to traditional sports perfectly encapsulates the multitude of issues connected with legitimisation<sup>20</sup>. For example, grassroots esports organizations may not be able to access the same funding instruments as other grassroots sporting organizations, similarly the status of esports affects the ability of competitors to secure travel visas for international competition<sup>21,27</sup>. In this context, activist movements of amateur video gamers are appearing and expanding in attempts to organize local esports, to bring about legitimacy and support for their activities<sup>27</sup>. Despite the significance of esports, there is little work which directly addresses issues of legitimacy, with what little there is being framed in reference to governance at national and international levels<sup>47,19</sup>. Furthermore, the esports ecosystem is uniquely self-contained, isolated from wider societal connections as the assemblage of practices (playing, watching, governing) are often performed by the same actors<sup>36</sup>. This suggests that the lived experience of these actors offer significant insights into the world of esports.

Accordingly, this research is guided by the following question: *how do personal experiences of legitimacy trigger and shape actor mobilization and collective action in esports?* We employ interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) in order to examine how actors in organized grassroots esports movements make sense of their individual experiences and actions.

This work provides various novel contributions. First, it applies multi-level theories of legitimacy to esports: a phenomenon which has recently come to mainstream attention, one which is at the same time a

business and a culture, a phenomenon with both local and international characteristics. Second, in our attention on ongoing actor level experiences and actions—that we observe through interviews and observations—it is the first, in our knowledge, to apply a qualitative methodology to the issue of legitimacy in esports. Importantly, our study provides a better understanding on how collective action is triggered and shaped by the personal experiences of esports actors.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. The emergence of collective action for institutional change

Mass movements and activism for societal and institutional change seem to be common attributes of human organizing<sup>31</sup>. Questions related to why, how, and in what form individuals become agents of such change initiatives have endured in organization studies<sup>15,35</sup>. Initial attempts to address these questions largely centered on field-level conditions that enabled or constrained opportunities for institutional change processes<sup>8,33</sup>. Later efforts made convincing theoretical arguments about how institutional contradictions lead to collective action for change on the part of embedded agents; that institutional contradictions would potentially enable a shift of consciousness “from an unreflective and passive mode to a reflective and active one”<sup>35</sup>. As such, individuals would then perceive some institutional arrangements to no longer be inevitable, resulting in collective action for change.

Recently, empirical studies have become increasingly interested in how individuals come to participate in activist movements, shaping identities and organizations<sup>9,38</sup>. Yet, questions linger in relation to both the formation of activists and activism “as a function of personal histories”, and the role played by narrative and reflexivity in collective activities and agency<sup>31</sup>. Specifically, despite the recent attention, we still know few empirical details about how actors individually experience institutional incompatibilities<sup>2,43</sup> and how these personal experiences of contradictions may result in a reflective shift of consciousness shaping their mobilization for collective action. Some

approaches to these questions have relied on the concept of legitimacy.

## 2.2. The micro of legitimacy

Legitimacy has become a pivotal concept in management studies<sup>43</sup>. The most widely used definition of the term legitimacy in organizational theory refers to ‘the generalized perception’ that the actions of an entity are “appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions”<sup>42,6</sup>. It is generally accepted that communication and non-verbal actions influence evaluators’ perceptions, facilitating the legitimization of an entity by skillful actors<sup>44</sup>. Perspectives on the perceptual, and evaluative, nature of legitimacy have focused on the resulting opportunities for strategic manipulations of actors’ judgments<sup>1,48</sup>. This is our theoretical focus. Based on this assumption, a large body of research has studied different types of strategies by which individuals attempt to gain legitimacy in institutional contexts. This process has been often described as being led by actors who skillfully gain legitimacy for their activities via impression management<sup>54</sup>, social mobilization<sup>51</sup> or cultural agency<sup>24</sup>, potentially initiating institutional innovation<sup>13</sup>.

Recently, multilevel theories of the legitimacy process<sup>2</sup> have started to explicitly link macro dynamics of institutional change with legitimacy micro-processes. At the micro-level, individuals form their legitimacy perceptions by combining two perceptual inputs: perceptions of the entity’s properties or behaviors (i.e. propriety judgments) and perceptions of what social norms are thought to dominate at the collective level (i.e. validity judgments)<sup>2</sup>. While propriety judgments are based on the own personal belief that some action, behavior or organization is acceptable and desirable<sup>34</sup>, validity judgments depend on the appearance of a consensus that some entity is collectively considered appropriate in its social context<sup>48</sup>. Research suggests that validity judgments strongly influence assessments of propriety<sup>28</sup> and even condition the likelihood of initiatives aiming at institutional change<sup>50</sup>.

In conditions where conflicting judgements on legitimacy exist, individual evaluators are expected to be less affected by validity and more likely to rely on, and express their own, independent proprietary assessment.

Potentially, these judgments can drive institutional change if they succeed in creating a new validity judgment<sup>2</sup>. An extensive body of work has assigned the origins of institutional instability to macro-level phenomena, such as environmental jolts<sup>13,37</sup>, and meso-level action, such as organizational institutional entrepreneurship<sup>26</sup> which succeed in breaking the perceived consensus. Recently these perspectives have begun to be complemented with micro-level arguments focusing on values, beliefs, and activities in individuals.

Studies providing actor-level explanations to the occurrence of independent, evaluative-mode propriety judgments and the later emergence of these alternative judgments in public strongly hint at the central role of the personal experience of legitimacy in these processes. Additionally, actor-specific characteristics, such as personal interest and previous knowledge, also facilitate the active processing<sup>53</sup> behind independent legitimacy judgments. There is some evidence suggesting that, at later stages, changes in actor’s economic interests, social ties, power dependencies<sup>2</sup> and knowledge may encourage the expression of deviant judgments<sup>3</sup>. Others have theorized the important role that feelings can play in perceptions of legitimacy<sup>16</sup>.

Yet, there is insufficient integrated knowledge on how individual experiences of legitimacy result in more reflective and independent legitimacy judgments, their public expression and, eventually, the actor mobilization in collective action for change. As most actor centered legitimacy studies focus on the actions of these actors in an ongoing legitimizing process<sup>43</sup> little is known about the initial moments leading to the emergence of agents of change and their emergent efforts at legitimizing. Finally, current studies retain an overarching focus on institutional entrepreneurs<sup>7,18</sup>; largely already established protagonists of change who are thought of as resourceful actors, while less empowered stakeholders, such as new grassroots organizations, are less studied<sup>4</sup>.

In sum, to fully understand the formation of agents of change and activism, scholarship requires the introduction of new methodologies to the field<sup>43</sup>. This includes under-utilized approaches to qualitative research (e.g., IPA) in empirical settings brimming with opportunity, and challenges, for the legitimation of new activities, behaviors, and organizations. The

emerging field of esports offers such an empirical setting.

### 2.3. The field of esports

The majority of academic works concerning esports introduce the topic with a series of facts and figures which convey its importance, whether in purely numerical terms (number of active viewers, value of prize pools) or in relativistic terms (rate of growth, comparison to existing sports)<sup>20,25</sup>. Such practices indicate the need to convince readers that esports is a topic of significance, that its study is, in fact, a legitimate undertaking. This approach is consistent with other representations of esports in mainstream media; despite its size, it features comparatively rarely in established media channels in comparison to traditional sports. In essence, esports is not yet sufficiently institutionalized within wider society; its lack of established history and social presence means that it is still considered as a “fad”<sup>45</sup>.

Prior work on legitimacy in esports has predominantly been focused on the macro level, specifically the way in which the definition of esports impacts upon the formalized structures guiding participation<sup>19,20</sup>. The issue which most succinctly encapsulates this approach is the ongoing debate concerning the question as to whether or not esports can be considered a sport. This issue is not simply one of theory, it has many practical ramifications for all areas of the esports ecosystem, for example, the long-term viability of collegiate esports programs, or of grassroots organizations depend on access to funding afforded to traditional sporting activities<sup>27</sup>.

By examining esports through the lens of Caillois’ work on play, Seo and Jung<sup>36</sup> highlight that one of the most significant barriers to acceptance of esports as a legitimate activity is the apparent conflict between a playful activity and the seriousness of formalized competition. The extrinsic motivators of financial success and increased social status afforded by esports serve to reframe a leisure activity as a form of labor, a phenomenon that has been observed in many other aspects of contemporary digital culture<sup>23,49</sup>. Yet, the fact that esports utilizes video games is potentially that which distinguishes it from other “hobbyist” activities which have the potential to become serious, in that they can be leveraged for income, e.g.,

painting, photography, etc. It may be that because games have long been viewed as being “for kids”, they are not considered as having cultural or artistic value in the same way as other pursuits<sup>41</sup>.

The characteristics of esports participants as over-energetic, over-enthusiastic, and over-dynamic<sup>32</sup> means that esports markets are primarily shaped by those engaging as actors<sup>27</sup>. At a regional level, amateur local actors engage in advocating and legitimizing processes that are designed to develop grassroots institutions<sup>26</sup>, indeed, the energy and activity of grassroots organizations have traditionally been central to the rise of esports<sup>45</sup>.

Until the question of esports as a legitimized sport is resolved, legitimacy and governance in esports remains obscured with power currently residing in the hands of the individual game publishers themselves<sup>22</sup>. Further issues which complicate the question of legitimacy relate to both the breadth and disparity of the individual games included under the umbrella of esports, and the disparate range of relevant stakeholders<sup>32</sup>.

In sum, esports is a phenomenon which is both a business and a culture, a consumable product which is at the same time local, national, and global. In other words, esports uniquely combine two factors theoretically relevant for the study of the personal experience of legitimacy and the initiation of actor mobilization for collective action: first, its emergence as a field and, second, the fact that the social interactions taking place are conducted in many different locations and exposed to multiple and potentially incompatible institutional arrangements.

## 3. Method

This research employs Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)<sup>39</sup> as part of a social constructivist framework<sup>5</sup> in order to provide an understanding of the lived experiences of grassroots esports actors. IPA supports the collection and in-depth analysis of participant narratives to reveal the idiosyncratic and socially constructed meanings behind personal experiences<sup>29</sup>. IPA permits a more in-depth exploration of underlying meanings of informants’ lived experiences and, as such, requires smaller sample sizes than alternative approaches<sup>40</sup>.

### 3.1. Sampling

Two prominent esports associations in Sweden were identified, Esport United and Svenska Esportsförbundet. Esport United is the largest grassroots esports organization in Sweden with over 25,000 registered members, and acts as an umbrella brand to support other grassroots organizations throughout the country. Svenska Esportsförbundet represents Swedish esports as part of the European Esports Association. Both organizations have emerged from the grassroots communities within Sweden and receive financial support as NGOs. Within each organization we identified and recruited three senior members who had extensive histories within esports. Our six participants were all males aged between 23 and 37, with each having a minimum of ten years' experience actively engaging as actors within the scene.

### 3.2. Data collection and analysis

In total ten interviews were conducted in English with six interviewees. All interviewees were informed of the scope of the project, assured of anonymity, and provided verbal consent to participate. Each interview lasted between 30 and 180 minutes. A professional transcription service provided transcripts of the conversations to the research team. The research conformed to all ethical guidelines and requirements of the host institutions.

A participant from each organization was interviewed twice by author A via Skype (round 1). The four interviews were transcribed, and initial analysis began in order to develop the interview guide using an inductive approach to coding<sup>11</sup>. As participant meanings are not explicit, this approach supports the interpretation of their experiential sense-making across multiple readings of, and reflections on, each transcript<sup>39</sup>. Authors A and B analyzed these first interviews and responses were annotated, and emergent themes were identified. These themes were interrogated to develop key additional questions for the second round of interviews. Author B then conducted six semi-structured interviews based on this question guide with all three members of each organization (round 2). These six interviews were combined with the initial four, giving a total of ten. Extensive notes and memos of each

interview were produced and added to the analysis. Information obtained via the interviews was complemented with archival data on the selected cases, including websites, strategic documents, and other working materials from each organization.

Before commencing the primary analysis of all ten interviews, an intercoder agreement was developed based on the coding scheme inductively developed in round 1<sup>14</sup>. Multiple readings of the transcripts to annotate compelling or symbolic statements in the left margin (subordinate themes), were then translated into emerging themes in the opposite margin. We identified how these arrayed, leading to the development of a final coding scheme to clarify and distinguish emergent and potentially superordinate concepts. Continuing the first step of IPA four-step process<sup>39</sup>, the final coding scheme was applied to subsequent transcripts, and extended as new subordinate themes were identified. Iterative comparison and discussion identified and reconciled discrepancies, consolidated similarities, refined codes and definitions, which were then reapplied to all transcripts<sup>12</sup>. Through this iterative process, we remained focused on developing reliability through negotiated agreement for the application of the coding scheme. In the second step, patterns were established across cases and documented in a master table of themes for the group. In the third step, author C engaged with the data, reviewing, and auditing the themes to ensure they were grounded and well represented in the interview transcripts. This represented an external round of coding; author C was excluded initially to ensure impartiality at this stage. All three authors then finalised agreement on the master table and built the narrative account with verbatim extracts used to support the analytic account.

## 4. Findings

The story which emerged from the data was one in which participants encountered the puzzling experience of judging some activities appropriate, i.e., participating in esports, while perceiving they lack validity in both wider society and, to a lesser extent, the gaming community. These episodes gradually lead actors to critically reflect upon the legitimacy situation of their valued esports activities, this

awareness often includes a deeply intimate, emotional struggle when these actors encounter conflicting judgments. Our cases show the powerful effect that this combination has on mobilizing them to legitimize esports. Because the legitimacy conflicts these actors experience is determined by the perceived lack of validity of their propriety judgments, their collective actions aim to achieve validity, in our case through grassroots movements. In sum, our cases provide details on three core aspects of this tension between personal conviction and wider perceptions of illegitimacy: 1) how early stages of critical reflection emerge from conflicting propriety and validity judgments; 2) how the emotionally charged experience of a puzzling lack of validity contributes to the mobilization of the focal actor; and 3) how particularities in these early experiences shape the form of grassroots movements in the collective legitimizing actions undertaken by these actors.

#### **4.1. Conflicting propriety and validity judgments**

Participants commonly expressed conflicts between the propriety they experience in their gaming activities and the lack of validity of these judgments outside their immediate esports circle. *Informant 2*, for example, deeply enjoyed esports because of the feeling of playing “together” with other people, the interaction with other players, a “friendship” (“better than real life”). Yet, he was puzzled by his parents “not understanding” esports’ relevance (his “emotions”, e.g., when losing a match, and “everything else”, compared to similar emotions in physical sports which were easily understood by his parents). Similarly, *Informant 1* offers another exemplary illustration of this conflict. When he and his friends began organizing local area network gaming parties (LANs) they realized “oh shit people want to compete in this stuff, which was interesting”. For him, the greatest attraction in esports is the social aspect, having “friends on the mic”, however, they found that early activity in the esports scene was frustrated by the fact that they could not find outside validity in line with their propriety judgments. When searching for “an organization that would work with esports as a sport... no valid or legitimate organization [was] doing this stuff”.

Whatever the set of norms used in their propriety judgments (e.g., friendship, competition) the nature of the perception of lack of legitimacy across our cases is one of conflict between finding esports appropriate and not finding validity in other evaluators. This idea is clearly articulated in the puzzlement experienced by *Informant 6*. “The parents have no idea what the kids are doing online, there's a big gap between the parents and the kids. And that's some part of it, I think, it's because the parents or the adults in general don't know what it is, and they don't know how to talk about it, and they only read what's posted on Aftonbladet ... And all the bad things that's posted about games”.

#### **4.2. Mobilization of actors**

Highly mobilized participants commonly reveal how the lack of legitimacy they experience becomes a form of emotionally charged personal struggle with others who displayed negative attitudes toward esports, typically parents, teachers, authority figures and other validators. In these cases, the “overwhelming effect” of this contradiction drove these individuals to engage in “legitimizing actions” aimed at creating new validity perceptions. *Informant 6* provides a good example. He struggled with the “skepticism towards what they are doing”, “[it's] hard to talk about esports to a level that everyone understands”. *Informant 2* details the problems he had because of his parents not letting him spend enough time playing esports. Importantly, it is this personal struggle that informants explicitly link to their mobilization to resolve their legitimacy conflict. *Informant 6* says: “There is also no knowledge or very little knowledge about gaming, or esports. And you know that it exists, and you know that it's in some ways it can be a problem. But you don't have enough tools to do something about it. And that was one of the reasons that we applied for a Swedish Sportive Association.” Similarly, the situation experienced by *Informant 1* “provoked” him and his associates to form one of the first local esports associations in Sweden, as well as national and international entities which promote esports. Interestingly, informants not reporting a similar personal struggle are less mobilized. They, in a somehow perfunctory way, make claims of lack of

legitimacy in esports, but we could not trace these claims to any personal experience of conflicting legitimacy judgments. *Informant 4* offers a good example of how disappointments in esports not linked to any particular experience of illegitimacy lead to less mobilized involvement in collective action. He was a member of a team, but “we weren't any good, so they weren't any tournaments... [eventually] when they reworked some of the characters I quit because they really weren't one of my favorite characters... I regret it a little. I wanted to keep on playing.” He explains his engagement in the grassroots movement in these terms: “[I knew the organization when] I helped them with a space they had [at a LAN], and after that we just kept talking and playing games and then I got involved in the organization.”

### 4.3. Grassroots collective action

One final noteworthy issue to emerge from the data is that, despite the range of personal experiences, every single interviewee with a high level of mobilization felt that the most appropriate means of securing legitimacy for esports was through building strong, grassroots support. Indeed, most were highly critical of top-down attempts to promote esports and felt that many larger organizations or companies were seeking to exploit esports' popularity without understanding, or actually supporting, the scene itself. *Informant 2* expresses the reason behind his grassroots movement accordingly: “We had [no one] interested and understand[ing] esports. The solution was not to throw money at it, but to engage people. Money comes later.” Similarly, *Informant 5* says: “I started in a community with friends called [inaudible]... based on a group of people that bought a server and enjoyed playing on that one together.” His way to gain validity is not to inform parents, rather “making stuff possible for kids. I would say that's number one. I like making possibilities that I did not have when I was young”. The priority of his organization is to help other grassroots associations to create developmental environments for youth.

Importantly, although the interviewees shared a common commitment to establishing legitimacy via a bottom-up process, this did not prohibit several distinct approaches. The most commonly referenced approach was that of

education: educating parents, national organizations, and authorities about the benefits of both esports in particular, and gaming in general; educating players about the demands of esports; and educating coaches and trainers. The second approach concerned building the esports community: developing and advising local and national associations; securing funding for local clubs and teams; establishing common standards and codes of conduct; building the player base; providing access to resources for disadvantaged youth; promoting democratic values within the community. Finally, increasing the professionalization of grassroots esports was a significant activity: providing increased access to training; educating players about physical and mental health issues; introducing dedicated esports programs into educational institutions; reduce gatekeeping; bringing structure to amateur esports. These diverse sets of social norms, providing both ownership of esports and templates for collective action, were often linked to the individual episodes and trajectories of each informant.

## 5. Discussion

Our findings on how actor mobilization and collective action are triggered and shaped by the personal experience of legitimacy in esports actors contribute to theories on the micro of legitimacy and the emergence of collective action for institutional change. Building on the micro aspects of the legitimacy process<sup>2</sup>, we provide empirical details on how actors experience conflicts between proprietary and validity judgments. We explain how the personal experience of these conflicts embody, at the actor level, the type of interinstitutional incompatibilities that institutional logic theory expects to drive the reflective shift in thinking needed for actor mobilization and collective action for institutional change<sup>35</sup>. Importantly, our findings add key insights to these concepts, suggesting how both the mobilization of actors and the form of collective action that precede institutional change are facilitated and shaped by particular experiences of legitimacy conflicts in the personal stories of potential change agents<sup>31</sup>.

Relying on the theoretical apparatus of the micro of legitimacy, our data suggest that the individual experience of conflicts between

propriety and validity judgments allows a reflective shift in consciousness. Institutional logics theory has proposed that “the degree of subjective exposure to multiple, incompatible institutional arrangements may facilitate a gradual shift in actors' consciousness”<sup>35</sup>. We provide details on the personal experience that necessarily links subjective exposure to institutional contradictions and shifts in consciousness. In our cases, actors evaluate esports as legitimate because it is congruent with their social norms (i.e., propriety judgment). These judgments, however, contradict the dominant collective legitimacy judgments (i.e., validity judgment) of key evaluators in their environment. Unless in a context of institutional instability, these contradictions commonly result in the suppression of independent propriety judgments, reinforcing institutional stability<sup>2</sup>. Yet, our data shows how this experience of interinstitutional incompatibilities can result not only in individual reflexivity but also in actor mobilization for institutional change.

Our research complements research on actor mobilization and collective action for institutional change by focusing on the initial stages of new institutional engagements. Extant research has explained how processes of disengagement<sup>10</sup> and “deinstitutionalization”<sup>30</sup> gradually facilitate critical understanding, and independent legitimacy judgments, in the reflective shift of consciousness which drives actor mobilization for institutional change. Others, having theorized how feelings can shape legitimacy judgments<sup>16</sup>, have asked for further empirical exploration. Our data adds to these accounts and suggests that, in some actors, conflicting propriety and validity judgments result in emotionally charged personal struggles, thereby facilitating their mobilization for institutional change.

Crucially, individual engagement mobilizes different actors in forms of collective action that are shaped both by actors' early experiences of legitimacy contradictions and their personal stories. In our cases, this results in different versions of grassroots movements aiming for validity, each one of them focusing on alternative sets of norms that originate in the experience of propriety that potential change agents have encountered in their personal stories. We show how, in initial conditions of institutional stability, the emergence of

conditions of institutional change are strongly anchored in individual level experiences<sup>31</sup>.

## 6. Conclusion

We advance research on esports by complementing extant analysis on field level legitimacy issues with the study of the micro dynamics of legitimacy behind potential institutional change. We employ a qualitative methodology that allows the production of rich insights on actor level judgments, feelings, activities, and subsequent actions. A key insight is that the conflict these actors experience early, between propriety and validity judgments, is what allows a reflective shift in their consciousness, mobilizing them to legitimize esports. Although these actors evaluate esports as legitimate because it is congruent with their social norms (i.e., propriety judgment), this judgment contradicts dominant collective legitimacy judgments in key evaluators in their environment (i.e., validity judgment). Extant research suggests that these contradictions result in the suppression of deviant judgments, providing a protection to the existing social order<sup>3</sup>. Our data, however, show how emotionally charged experiences of interinstitutional incompatibilities shape reflexivity and mobilize actors. Because these shifts in reflexivity and mobilization happen independently in different actors, we also provide key empirical insights into the circumstances in which collective action forms into grassroots activism and the emergence of conditions for institutional change<sup>35</sup>.

Finally, our study serves to highlight tensions between international success and the somewhat shaky foundations of grassroots participation in esports. Field level aggregated data says very little about the personal struggles of esports actors that, despite the quantitative growth of the field, continue to suffer from judgments of illegitimacy. Our findings suggest that both realities are not only perfectly possible, but that they coexist and may linger unless the actions of institutional change agents succeed. As our focal actors have experienced legitimacy judgment conflicts, so members of their organizations and ordinary esports practitioners do. Although esports activities may exhibit high levels of propriety within the circles where they transpire, while validity remains in question by key external evaluators,



the legitimacy of esports, and their benign effect on participants, will be elusive.

Important limitations in this research open opportunities for future work. Our sampled organizations are grassroots movements in Swedish esports and our insights may be particular to this type of collective action in the field of esports. Interviews to activists in other types of collective actors may provide relevant counterfactuals to our findings. Similarly, although our small data set is particularly adequate for IPA and the exploration of individual feelings and judgments, it also provides insights that cannot be easily generalizable. Further research may benefit from more extensive interviews and an increased pool of interviewees (e.g., both alternative organizations and other fields, such as youth cultures). These efforts may increase the external validity of our findings and sharpen the theoretical extension of our insights.

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