

SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL ASPECTS OF E-SPORTS: A LITERATURE REVIEW

Dejan Dašić¹

¹Information Technology School + Faculty of Sport, University Union
“Nikola Tesla”, Belgrade, Serbia

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Correspondence: dejan.dasic@its.edu.rs

Abstract: E-sports have, over the past decade, evolved into one of the most dynamic phenomena of digital culture, with significant economic, social, and cultural implications. The aim of this paper is to analyze the key dimensions of e-sports development - based on a systematic review of recent scientific literature - and to assess its impact on contemporary economic trends, social relations, and cultural patterns. The findings indicate that the economic growth of the e-sports industry stems from the interaction of media technologies, digital infrastructure, human capital, and global market trends. From a social perspective, e-sports contribute to the formation of new types of social capital, online communities, and generational identity, while from a cultural standpoint they manifest through the transformation of media consumption practices, audience participation, and the normalization of digital behaviors. The paper synthesizes insights from multiple disciplines and highlights the need for integrated models that connect macroeconomic factors, organizational structures, and the individual practices of players and audiences. These insights may serve as a foundation for policymaking, the development of educational programs, and the improvement of institutional support for the e-sports sector.

Keywords: e-sports, socio-economic aspects, cultural identity, digital culture, e-sports market

Introduction

In the past decade, e-sports have transformed from a marginal pastime of enthusiasts into a global phenomenon with millions of viewers, a complex eco-system of actors, and an increasingly visible influence on the economy, education, and cultural practices. Literature reviews show continuous growth in academic publications on e-sports across multiple disciplines - from business and economics, sport sciences, and sociology to media studies and law (Reitman et al., 2020). This interdisciplinarity is both a strength and a challenge: although the field is theoretically diverse and empirically rich, a stable theoretical core and clearly articulated socio-economic and cultural analytical frameworks are still lacking (López-Cabarcos et al., 2024).

On the economic level, e-sports are increasingly positioned as a specific segment of the creative and digital economy - with revenue streams from media rights, sponsorships, advertising, ticket sales, licensing, and digital goods. Cross-country empirical analyses show that e-sports performance correlates with broader macro-economic indicators (income per capita, digital infrastructure, social stability, and human capital), situating e-sports within the wider context of

socio-economic development (Kashcha et al., 2022). Research indicates that countries with higher levels of digitalization, stronger investments in education and information technologies, and more developed entertainment markets tend to observe greater success of their competitors and organizations within the global e-sports system.

At the same time, recent studies demonstrate that e-sports have significant implications for the knowledge economy, educational practices, and cultural communication. Research on the economic, educational, and cultural effects of e-sports highlights that e-sports can serve as a space for developing digital competencies, teamwork, strategic thinking, and new forms of professional careers - but also as a source of risks related to commercialization, addictive behaviors, and unequal access to digital resources (Reitman et al., 2020; Dašić et al., 2024). Thus, e-sports become relevant not only for the economics of sport and media but also for educational policy and broader public policies related to youth, culture, and digital transformation.

From a cultural perspective, e-sports are increasingly interpreted as part of broader processes of digital culture, media convergence, and the transformation of how younger generations

consume, produce, and share content. Studies of the popularity and cultural significance of e-sports show that competitions, streaming platforms, and online communities contribute to the formation of new types of collective identity, fandom culture, and transnational communities organized around games, teams, and influencers (Omole, 2024). These communities function not merely as passive audiences but as active participatory environments where values, behavioral norms, gender roles, inclusion, and questions of digital fairness are negotiated.

Despite rapid growth, several authors argue that scientific understanding of e-sports is still “emerging.” Bibliometric analyses indicate that the literature is predominantly focused on defining e-sports, differentiating them from traditional sports, and analyzing business potential within the entertainment industry (López-Cabarcos et al., 2024; Cranmer et al., 2020). Meanwhile, studies that systematically address the social, economic, and cultural aspects of e-sports are relatively rare and often fragmented across disciplines, lacking an integrated overview that connects macro-economic trends, local cultural contexts, and micro-level community and individual dynamics.

This paper therefore aims to provide, based on a systematic review of recent scientific literature, an overview of the socio-economic and cultural aspects of e-sports. The first section presents the theoretical framework and key methodological approaches used in previous reviews and bibliometric analyses of e-sports research (Reitman et al., 2020; López-Cabarcos et al., 2024). The second section analyzes key economic and socio-economic dimensions of e-sports – the structure of the global market, determinants of country-level success, the role of digital infrastructure and education, and effects on local economies and labor markets (Kashcha et al., 2022; Dašić et al., 2024). The third section focuses on cultural and identity-related aspects: social capital within e-sports communities, the transformation of leisure time into “professionalized” practice, and questions of cultural diversity, gender equality, and the normalization of e-sports as a “real” sport (Omole, 2024).

Through this review, the paper seeks to integrate the literature across three analytical levels: (1) the macro level (socio-economic structures and the global market), (2) the meso level (organizations, clubs, leagues, educational institutions), and (3) the micro level (individuals, players, spectators, and online communities). Such an

approach enables e-sports to be understood as a complex system that simultaneously generates economic value, shapes cultural patterns, and influences the educational and social trajectories of young people. Based on the identified findings, the discussion outlines future research directions as well as recommendations for policymakers, educational institutions, and e-sports industry actors aimed at ensuring responsible and sustainable development of this evolving phenomenon.

Theoretical Framework

In the literature, e-sports are defined as organized, competitive electronic gaming conducted within the context of video games, often accompanied by spectatorship, media distribution, and economic interests (Tang, 2023). It is widely accepted that e-sports only partially align with classical models of sport - resulting in ongoing debates about its status as a “sport” and its further institutionalization. Yamanaka et al. (2021) emphasize that the field is still in a formative stage, both theoretically and empirically fragmented. Accordingly, a theoretical framework must incorporate traditional sport theories (e.g., theories of sport institutionalization) as well as theories of digital culture, media, and globalization.

From an economic perspective, a key theoretical approach is to view e-sports as part of the digital and creative economy - where value is generated through media production, content creation, streaming, sponsorships, and international competitive structures. In an empirical study, Parshakov (2018) demonstrates that GDP per capita positively correlates with earnings per capita in e-sports, pointing to a link between economic development and competitive success. Additionally, Kashcha, Yatsenko, and Gyömörei (2022), in their analysis of 18 countries, find that economic stability carries greater weight than social stability in determining e-sports performance. Theoretically, this supports a model in which digital infrastructure, internet accessibility, human capital, and economic policy (investment, legislation, tax incentives) serve as decisive factors.

At the same time, a comprehensive theoretical framework must also encompass the socioeconomic dimension - e-sports as a vehicle for social mobility but also a potential site of reproducing inequalities. For example, youth support systems, access to technical equipment, education, and social capital influence opportunities to participate and succeed in e-sports (Riatti, 2021).

The cultural framework situates e-sports within the broader landscape

of digital culture, media, and online communities. Research shows that e-sports foster new forms of social interaction, fan cultures, spectatorship, and identity construction. Pitroso (2023), in a critical review of gaming communities, interprets e-sports as a space where subcultures, digital fandom, and youth representations are formed. Tjønndal (2025) argues that e-sports also intersect with cultural policy - both global media corporations and national strategies increasingly recognize its cultural and symbolic relevance.

Furthermore, cultural aspects include issues of gender equality, inclusion, belonging, and the normalization of digital practices. Rogstad (2022) analyzes the literature on gender in e-sports and finds that theoretical discussions frequently refer to hegemonic masculinity in the context of gaming and fan behavior.

Although numerous empirical studies address individual aspects (economic, social, cultural), comprehensive theoretical frameworks that systematically integrate these dimensions remain scarce. For instance, Li (2025), in a review of performance-influencing factors, highlights the lack of models that jointly consider technical (informatics), physiological, and media competencies of players. Similarly, Gábriš and colleagues (2024), in their analysis of e-sports integrity,

stress the need for a conceptual framework to manage integrity-related risks.

From a theoretical standpoint, a three-dimensional model may be proposed:

- (a) Economic/industrial dimension - viewing e-sports as an agglomeration of the digital economy and media industries;
- (b) Social dimension - understanding e-sports as a space of youth practices, fan engagement, and community formation;
- (c) Cultural/symbolic dimension - examining identity formation, media practices, and global online communities.

Within this model, it is essential to consider the dynamics between global markets, local cultural contexts, and individual actors (players, spectators, streamers).

Structure of the Global Esports Market and the Macroeconomic Determinants of Growth

The global esports market today represents a complex ecosystem in which the gaming industry, media, sponsorships, streaming platforms, technology companies, and public policy intersect. Although the public often refers to the "esports market value" as a distinct figure, recent

research indicates that a large portion of esports' economic value is actually embedded within the broader video game ecosystem and is significantly underestimated when only direct revenues from competitive leagues and tournaments are considered (Ahn, Collis, Jenny, 2020).

Global revenues of the formalized esports market have shown steady growth, reaching nearly USD 1.38 billion in 2022, with forecasts indicating an increase to approximately USD 1.86 billion by 2025 (Newzoo, 2022). More recent secondary market analyses, which aggregate data from multiple industry reports, estimate the market at around USD 1.64 billion in 2022 and USD 1.98 billion in 2023, with projected growth to roughly USD 2.89 billion in 2025 and the potential to approach USD 10.9 billion by 2032, driven by an annual growth rate of around 20–21% (DemandSage, 2025). Long-term projections from analytical firms such as Grand View Research similarly confirm strong expansion, estimating that the global esports market may reach approximately USD 7.46 billion by 2030 (Grand View Research, 2025). At the same time, Newzoo forecasts that the number of "esports enthusiasts" - viewers who follow esports content at least once per month - will grow to around 318

million by 2025, with the total global audience expected to surpass 640 million viewers, firmly positioning esports as a mass global media phenomenon (Newzoo, 2022; DemandSage, 2025).

However, Ahn and colleagues (2020) show that these market values are significantly underestimated when the entire ecosystem is included - game publishers, streaming platforms, teams, leagues, and physical and digital products. Based on their expanded "Entire Esports Ecosystem" model, the authors estimate that the *true* market size in 2019 was closer to USD 25 billion, with game publishers generating approximately two-thirds of total revenues. This finding is crucial for understanding market structure: intellectual property (IP) ownership and control over narrative and technical infrastructure (patches, game balance, tournament formats) are concentrated in the hands of a relatively small number of global publishers.

From the perspective of actor structure, Scholz (2019) views esports as a specific form of "sports business" in which traditional sports logics (teams, leagues, sponsors, media rights) coexist with the digital platform economy (streaming, digital goods, online communities). Carrillo Vera and Aguado Terrón (2019)

present a holistic esports ecosystem model in which central actors include: game publishers, teams and organizations, tournaments and leagues, content distribution platforms (Twitch, YouTube, regional platforms), sponsors and advertisers, technology companies (hardware, peripherals), and audiences who act simultaneously as consumers, co-producers, and promoters of content. This model highlights that economic value is created through interaction among market and non-market actors - from cities that finance esports arenas to universities that support esports programs.

Chikish, Carreras, and García (2019) argue that esports represents a “new era” of the sports industry, requiring adaptation of existing theoretical models in sports economics. They emphasize the characteristics of a multisided platform market structure: on one side are players and spectators; on the other, sponsors and brands; and mediating between them are leagues and publishers who set rules, define access to tournaments, and control revenue distribution. This structure creates high entry barriers for new actors while enabling rapid global scaling of successful formats (e.g., franchise leagues such as the *League of Legends Championship Series*).

The regional structure of the global esports market shows a clear concentration of revenue and audience share in the Asia-Pacific region, which represents the largest portion of the global esports industry according to recent market analyses (Mordor Intelligence, 2025). This region continues to dominate due to its large population of gamers, high digital penetration, and the rapid institutionalization of esports ecosystems. North America also maintains a significant share of the global esports market. Industry reports identify North America as one of the leading regions in terms of commercial development, infrastructure, sponsorship activity, and professionalization, accounting for more than one-third of global market value in 2024 (Grand View Research, 2024). In terms of viewership patterns, audience data similarly emphasize Asia-Pacific as the strongest esports hub globally. Recent statistics show that the Asia-Pacific market accounts for more than half of global esports viewership, reinforcing its status as the central geographic driver of industry expansion (Demand Sage, 2025). Meanwhile, other regions – including Southeast Asia, Latin America, and parts of Europe – are experiencing growth in audience engagement, though publicly available reports do not provide sufficient evi-

dence to categorize them as major global revenue centers at the same level as Asia-Pacific or North America. Overall, while regional growth outside the dominant markets is observable, available industry data confirm only that Asia-Pacific and North America are the clearly established leaders in the global esports landscape (Grand View Research, 2024; Mordor Intelligence, 2025; DemandSage, 2025).

Spatial organization represents a further dimension of market structure. Zhu and colleagues (2022) analyze the esports industry in the Yangtze River Delta, showing that industry development spreads from central cities (Shanghai) to smaller and medium-sized urban centers through networks of technological transfer, shared labor markets, and integrated infrastructural investments. Similarly, Zhan and colleagues (2021) identify a “polycentric” spatial structure of the esports industry in Shanghai, where clusters of studios, arenas, and tech companies form urban zones specialized in the digital creative economy.

Another important segment of market structure concerns labor markets and employment patterns. Zhao, Li, and Lin (2023) show that China’s esports sector has developed a complex “business ecosystem” in which

media corporations (e.g., Ten-cent), local governments, property developers, esports clubs, and tournament operators interact, creating new employment forms but also significant precarity risks (unstable, short-term creative industry jobs). This indicates that the structure of the esports market is not only a matter of revenue flows but also of institutional arrangements regulating labor, social protection, and risk distribution.

Finally, Jordan-Vallverdú and colleagues (2024) show through bibliometric analysis that economics, management, and industry policy form one of the dominant thematic clusters in esports research, highlighting the growing relevance of questions related to market structure, industrial organization, and regulation.

Esports growth cannot be understood solely as the result of “internal” gaming industry factors; it is strongly shaped by broader macroeconomic, technological, and institutional contexts.

First, digital infrastructure and technological development are key determinants. Studies consistently show that broadband Internet, 4G/5G networks, and access to streaming platforms are prerequisites for sustainable esports ecosystems on both player and audience sides. Zhu

and colleagues (2022) emphasize that technological spillovers between cities - via shared innovation clusters and tech parks – significantly explain spatial patterns of esports industry growth in China. Duan and colleagues (2023) highlight that China's esports industry relies on long-term investments in ICT infrastructure and digital public services, creating a favorable "ecosystem environment" for companies.

Second, demographic structure and the rise of the middle class accelerate demand for esports. Kim, Nauright, and Suveatwatanakul (2020) show that the post-COVID-19 expansion of esports is closely linked to shifts in youth consumer behavior - increased online time, greater acceptance of digital entertainment, and a growing willingness to spend on virtual goods. In countries with rapidly expanding urban populations and rising disposable income (e.g., China, Southeast Asia), this translates into increased demand for esports content, live events, and merchandise.

Third, industrial policy and state regulation play a dual role - as a driver and as a potential constraint on growth. Zhao and colleagues (2023) show that esports in China has become part of broader strategies of "cultural confidence" and the digital cultural economy, with local and

national authorities actively financing esports cities, arenas, and festivals to attract investors and young talent. Conversely, Li (2024) shows that the same regulatory environment can also generate "bubble" risks: rapid capital inflows into China's esports sector, driven by optimistic projections, were followed by correction when regulators imposed limits on minors' gaming time and tightened rules on online games. Using a bubble detection framework, the author demonstrates that China's esports market experienced an overvaluation episode and subsequent correction, highlighting the industry's sensitivity to financial and regulatory shocks.

Fourth, global financial conditions, access to capital, and investment cycles significantly influence growth speed. Scholz (2019) notes that esports teams and leagues depend heavily on venture capital and strategic investments from media and technology corporations, making the industry vulnerable to global shifts in interest rates and risk appetite. Ahn and colleagues (2020) similarly argue that the largest share of value is captured by big tech firms and game publishers, while teams, tournaments, and local organizers remain much more sensitive to financial fluctuations.

Fifth, urban and regional development strategies are increasingly important macro-economic drivers. Zhu and colleagues (2022) show that cities in the Yangtze River Delta are systematically using esports as a tool for branding, economic diversification, and attracting creative workers. Zhan and colleagues (2021) emphasize that spatial-planning policies supporting esports clusters (office space, content production studios, event zones) positively affect local value creation and employment. Duan and colleagues (2023) argue that this “endogenous development” of esports can support structural transformation of regional economies, but warn that coordination with other sectors (education, tourism, ICT) is essential to avoid overdependence on a single industry.

Finally, the globalization of media markets and digital platforms reinforces strong network effects, as Newzoo (2022) and other industry analyses show that the expansion of global audiences for live gaming and esports content enables monetization through transnational sponsorships and digital advertising, making esports less dependent on local macroeconomic conditions and more closely aligned with global trends in the digital economy. At the same time, this reliance on global

platforms increases the sector’s vulnerability to shifts in algorithms, content governance policies, and the evolving business models of major technology companies.

Bibliometric research, such as the work of Jordan-Vallverdú et al. (2024), shows that questions of economic value, regional development, labor relations, and industrial policy are increasingly intertwined in scholarly debates - indicating that esports is becoming firmly positioned within broader discussions of the digital and creative economy, rather than remaining a niche topic of sports management.

Taken together, the global esports market is characterized by high concentration of control in the hands of game publishers and major platforms, as well as significant territorial differentiation - from China’s mature but regulation-sensitive scene, to stable high-income markets (United States, Western Europe), to emerging markets in Southeast Asia and Latin America. The macroeconomic determinants of growth - digital infrastructure, demographics, industrial policy, financial cycles, and urban strategy - operate synergistically: where aligned, esports can become a catalyst for socio-economic and cultural development; where misaligned, the industry remains

fragmented, dependent on a handful of global platforms, and vulnerable to rapid booms and busts.

Esports, Social Capital, and the Formation of Cultural and Generational Identity

Esports are, in contemporary literature, increasingly rarely viewed merely as a niche form of digital entertainment and more and more as a space in which social relations, cultural patterns, and generational identities are simultaneously constructed. Research indicates that participation in esports communities - whether as a player, spectator, or “hybrid” fan who both plays and follows competitive leagues - can generate specific forms of social capital, a sense of belonging, and subjective well-being (Yeomans et al., 2025; Pang et al., 2025).

At the same time, esports is not a neutral field: cultural norms, gender relations, generational codes, and online toxicity shape who feels welcome and who feels marginalized (Crothers et al., 2024; Tang et al., 2025). In this context, esports can serve both as a resource for the accumulation of social capital and youth empowerment, and as a space for the reproduction of inequalities and stigmatization.

New empirical studies directly connect esports with social capital theory. Yeomans and colleagues (2025) develop the concept of “esport social capital” and show that active forms of participation - competitive play, streaming, and systematic engagement in clubs/teams - significantly predict both the level of social capital and a stronger sense of social connectedness and subjective well-being. Passive forms, such as occasionally watching streams, are not equally consistent predictors (Yeomans et al., 2025). These findings imply that esports do not “produce” social capital automatically; what matters is how structured and intensive participation is.

The systematic review by Sachan and colleagues (2025) shows that the relationship between virtual identities, participation in gaming/esports communities, and social capital outcomes is mediated by the salience of different identities (gender, ethnicity, gaming identity, fan identity) and the extent to which they are marginalized within the community itself. When identities are accepted and supported, online communities act as a resource for both “bridging” and “bonding” capital - connecting heterogeneous groups while simultaneously deepening close, supportive ties. When they are marginalized,

the same spaces become sources of exclusion and erosion of social connectedness.

Pang and colleagues (2025), on a sample of online gamers, show that frequent participation in gaming communities increases perceived social capital (especially bonding capital - close, emotionally significant ties) and, through it, life satisfaction. Although their study does not focus exclusively on esports, the implications are relevant: esports clubs, Discord servers, and fan communities can function as “hubs” of digital social capital, particularly for young people who have limited resources in offline contexts.

In the domain of fan communities, Barney and Pennington (2023) show that identification with esports, patterns of online engagement, and motives (sociability, excitement, learning) are closely interrelated. Intensive participation in fan practices - following teams, creating memes, discussing matches, participating in fan Discord communities - not only fosters a sense of belonging but also builds “symbolic capital” within the community (for example, the status of an “insider” who knows the team’s history, players, and game meta). This symbolic capital is often converted into social capital in

the form of recognition, support, and friendship networks.

Conceptually closer to sports management, Calapez and colleagues (2024) analyze esports fan identity in the context of the sponsor-sponsee relationship and show that a stronger fan identity enhances cognitive and emotional closeness to the sponsor’s brand. Although the study focuses on marketing outcomes (brand loyalty, purchase intention), the underlying mechanism is one of social capital: belonging to a “tribe” (team, game, league) extends to branded symbols, which become part of group identity.

In her doctoral thesis on “motivation-based esports spectator identity,” Chang (2024) shows that esports spectator identity can be clustered according to dominant motives (e.g., competence/learning, socialization, escape from everyday life) and that certain clusters (such as those with strong social motives) exhibit higher intentions to regularly attend events and deeper integration into the community. This supports the idea that social capital in esports develops particularly where communities are structured around shared motives and values, rather than solely around “content consumption.”

Xue, Newman, and Du (2019) demonstrate that esports is not merely

a collection of matches and results, but a “narrative ecosystem” in which stories about players, teams, and communities are used to articulate identity and belonging. By analyzing esports narratives, the authors show that fans, through these stories, share a sense of “we” - either as members of a specific team/franchise or as part of the broader gaming culture. Narratives about “underdogs,” about the rise of talented players from marginalized backgrounds, or about historic rivalries between teams act as cultural repertoires through which young people articulate their generational identity.

Barney and Pennington (2023) find that esports fans often combine elements of “sports” and “gaming” identity, with some practices – collective viewing, cheering, participation in online discussions – resembling traditional sports fan cultures, while others (memes, modding, participatory culture) bear the hallmarks of digital sub-cultures. For younger generations, particularly digital natives, esports becomes one of the main symbolic spaces in which sports, technological, and pop-cultural codes are unified.

Empirical studies indicate that generational identity in an esports context is not merely a matter of individual attitudes but also of collective

practices. Yeomans and colleagues (2025) show that the strongest effects on social connectedness and well-being occur where esports functions as a regular, structured activity (clubs, leagues, regular online teams), rather than as occasional entertainment. In this way, esports can take on some of the functions of traditional youth organizations: it enables the development of routines, rituals, and “inside jokes” that cement group identity.

Calapez and colleagues (2024) further show that esports fan identity extends beyond the field/screen through the use of club colors, merchandise, and symbols in every-day life (from profile pictures on social networks to clothing and accessories). This indicates that esports can function as a “cultural style” for young people - a set of symbolic choices that signal belonging to a particular generational scene.

Although esports offers a potentially rich source of social capital, it also reproduces certain inequalities. Crothers and colleagues (2024) show that women in esports, even when they are not professional players, regularly experience gender-based harassment and toxicity, leading to “self-concealment” strategies (e.g., avoiding voice communication, using neutral nicknames). Instead of

esports being a space for accumulating social capital, it becomes ambivalent: simultaneously a source of friendships and a source of psychological strain.

Tang and colleagues (2025) analyze young women participating in mobile esports and show how traditional gender norms and “masculine-coded” gaming culture produce stigma - esports engagement is viewed as “inappropriate” or “a waste of time,” which forces some participants to hide their involvement from family and the wider environment. Yet it is precisely through esports communities that these participants find support and a sense of collective identity that partially compensates for offline stigmatization. Players’ experiences cannot be understood through a single category (e.g., gender) but through the intersection of gender, race, sexuality, and age. For players with multiple marginalized identities, online communities can be both a refuge and a site of further discrimination. This is crucial for understanding social capital: for some groups, bridging and bonding capital is built primarily in subcultures and “niche” communities, while broader esports scenes remain partially closed or hostile.

On the other hand, by acknowledging these experiences, some seg-

ments of the esports community attempt to develop alternative norms and cultural codes. For example, Tang et al. (2025) point to the importance of game and community design that fosters cooperation and inclusion, while Crothers et al. (2024) emphasize the need for institutional measures (moderation, sanctioning toxicity, supporting women as players and moderators). In this sense, social capital in esports is not given; it is the result of ongoing struggles over rules of conduct, visibility, and recognition of different identities.

Taken together, the results of these studies suggest that esports is becoming one of the key spaces in which younger generations articulate their social, cultural, and value identities. Xue et al. (2019) and Barney and Pennington (2023) show that stable fan communities, based on narratives, rituals, and symbols, develop through esports. Yeomans et al. (2025) underscore that these communities have real effects on social capital and well-being.

At the same time, the work of Crothers et al. (2024) and Tang et al. (2025) reminds us that access to these resources is unequal: for women and other marginalized groups, the path to full participation in esports culture is often “through obstacles.” This means that social capital

in esports is at once a resource and a line of division - an instrument of generational cohesion, but also an arena in which it is negotiated who has the right to be a “real” gamer and a “real” member of the community.

For future research, these studies point to the need to analyze esports within the broader framework of digital citizenship and participatory culture: as a space in which young people not only consume content but also actively co-create rules, values, and forms of cultural expression that will define their generation.

Conclusion

Over the last decade, esports has evolved into a complex socio-economic and cultural phenomenon that transcends the boundaries of the entertainment industry. Analysis of the structure of the global market shows that it is a highly concentrated ecosystem in which key control is held by game publishers and global digital platforms, while teams, leagues, and local organizations operate under conditions of high financial uncertainty and dependence on external actors. At the same time, the economic growth of esports strongly depends on macroeconomic factors - digital infrastructure, industrial policies, regional development strate-

gies, access to capital, and demographic trends. In this sense, esports must be viewed as a segment of the broader digital economy, whose rise is not linear but sensitive to regulatory and financial shifts.

On the other hand, the analyzed studies clearly show that esports has profound social and cultural implications. It acts as a significant source of social capital, particularly through structured forms of participation - clubs, teams, leagues, fan communities, and online platforms. In these spaces, young people develop relationships of trust, mutual support, and belonging, while at the same time shaping their generational and cultural identities. Esports narratives, rituals, and symbols become part of their every-day practices and broader cultural codes. Yet these processes are not unequivocally positive: tensions, inequalities, toxicity, and barriers to access are present, especially for women and marginalized groups. For this reason, esports simultaneously represents a space of opportunity and a field of struggle for inclusion, recognition, and cultural visibility.

This paper also has its limitations. Although the theoretical synthesis is extensive, it relies on the analysis of available literature that is itself fragmented, methodologically diver-

se, and unevenly distributed across regions. Most empirical studies come from East Asia, North America, and several European countries, while other areas (the Balkans, Eastern Europe, Africa, Latin America) remain under-researched. Cross-sectional studies dominate, whereas longitudinal investigations, experimental designs, and in-depth ethnographies are much rarer. This limits the ability to clearly establish causality and to understand the long-term effects of participation in esports on identity, socialization, and youth well-being.

Based on the findings presented, future research directions should move along several lines. First, there is a need for comparative, intercultural research that would make it possible to identify both specificities and universal patterns in the development of esports communities. Second, there is a need for models that more deeply integrate economic, social, and cultural factors in order to jointly understand structural conditions and individual practices. Third, research on toxicity, inclusion, and gender relations in esports requires in-depth qualitative approaches to capture everyday interactions, mechanisms of marginalization, and strategies of resistance. Fourth, future work may focus on institutional aspects – regu-

lation, working conditions, professionalization, educational programs, and the role of local policies in developing esports ecosystems.

Overall, esports should be understood as a dynamic, multi-layered, and rapidly evolving field in which economy, culture, technology, and social structure intersect. This paper has sought, through an integrated theoretical and analytical approach, to highlight the complexity of the phenomenon and to encourage future research that will enable a deeper understanding of both its potential and its risks for contemporary society and the generations to come.

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SOCIO-EKONOMSKI I KULTURNI ASPEKTI E-SPORTA: PREGLED LITERATURE

Rezime: E-sport se tokom protekle decenije razvio u jedan od najdinamičnijih fenomena digitalne kulture, sa značajnim ekonomskim, socijalnim i kulturnim implikacijama. Cilj ovog rada je da se analiziraju ključne dimenzije razvoja e-sporta - na osnovu sistematskog pregleda novije naučne literature - i da se proceni njegov uticaj na savremene ekonomske trendove, društvene odnose i kulturne obrasce. Nalazi ukazuju na to da ekonomski rast industrije e-sporta proizilazi iz interakcije medijskih tehnologija, digitalne infrastrukture, ljudskog kapitala i globalnih tržišnih trendova. Iz društvene perspektive, e-sport doprinosi formiranju novih tipova društvenog kapitala, online zajednica i generacijskog identiteta, dok se sa kulturnog stanovišta manifestuju kroz transformiranje prakse potrošnje medija, učešće publike i normalizaciju digitalnog ponašanja. Rad sintetiše uvide iz više disciplina i naglašava potrebu za integrisanim modelima koji povezuju makroekonomske faktore, organizacione strukture i individualno-dualne prakse igrača i publike. Ovi uvidi mogu poslužiti kao osnova za kreiranje politika, razvoj obrazovnih programa i poboljšanje institucionalne podrške sektoru e-sporta.

Ključne reči: e-sport, društveno-ekonomski aspekti, kulturni identitet, digitalna kultura, tržište e-sporta

