

Legitimizing the game: how gamers' personal experiences shape the emergence of grassroots collective action in esports

Legitimizing
the game

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper studies early stages of actor mobilization for institutional change within Swedish esports.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors employ interpretative phenomenological analysis.

Findings – The authors' findings explain how actors become motivated to act in critical reflections linked to conflicting legitimacy judgments and emotionally charged personal struggles. Moreover, the findings show how, as actors get activated in collective action, they identify efficacy lines around valid domains and experience emotionally charged collective endeavors. Furthermore, the findings explain how particularities in early experiences project legitimacy aspirations that orient collective action toward validity ends and particular values and ideals shaping actors' grassroots movements.

Originality/value – This study adds to legitimacy and institutional change theory through individual actors' perspectives, providing key insights into how they are motivated, activated, and oriented. This study is the first to investigate grassroots activists' personal stories in esports.

Keywords Esports, Legitimacy, Grassroots, Collective action, Interpretative phenomenological analysis, Personal experiences, Sweden, Change agents, Validity, Mobilization, Propriety judgments

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Esports is competitive video gaming at professional and amateur levels that is coordinated and structured through online platforms and offline events (Hamari and Sjöblom, 2017). Distinguished from the broader act of video game play by the human-against-human

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competitive element (Pizzo *et al.*, 2022), esports combines sport, culture, and entertainment through online technologies (Sjöblom *et al.*, 2020). Driven by a young digital audience within evolving communities, esports is increasingly relevant to understanding the impact of technological change across society (Crammer *et al.*, 2021; Hong, 2022; Macey and Hamari, 2022; Seo *et al.*, 2019), such as the practices informing gaming communities (Scaraboto *et al.*, 2020).

Despite an active and engaged audience, esports' legitimacy is still questioned, such as whether it can be considered a traditional sport (Funk *et al.*, 2018). As esports gains increasing significance in popular youth culture globally, occasionally surpassing traditional sports, issues of legitimacy, governance, and institutionalization are becoming more relevant (Kelly *et al.*, 2022; Witkowski, 2023). The legitimacy issue is particularly pertinent because despite esports' economic and societal impact (Nyström *et al.*, 2022), it remains predominantly a youthful movement at the margins of mainstream culture. Consequently, at professional and amateur levels, there are institutionalization efforts and commitment to advocate for and legitimize esports' practice (McCauley *et al.*, 2020).

Movements for societal and institutional change are common attributes of human organizing (King and Pearce, 2010), but knowledge about the emergence of individuals' engagement in institutionalization efforts of digital contexts is still in its infancy (Johnson and Abarbanel, 2022; Pizzo *et al.*, 2022). Socio-psychological studies on collective action suggest legitimacy – the general perception that an entity is appropriate (Suchman, 1995) – particularly the lack thereof, is an important determinant of actors' mobilization in collective action and efforts for institutional change (van Zomeren *et al.*, 2008). Research has started exploring how legitimacy judgments form at the individual level (Bitektine and Haack, 2015), adding theoretical nuance to the relation between perceptions of legitimacy and efforts for institutional change. Nevertheless, little is known about how legitimacy personal experiences shape collective action (Prichard *et al.*, 2021).

While studies on the internet and collective action have emphasized social media's role in facilitating and shaping activist movements (Jost *et al.*, 2018; Kende *et al.*, 2016; Lee and Littles, 2021), less attention has been paid to the role played by experiences of legitimacy in individuals who form these movements. Research repeatedly highlights the need to understand legitimacy in esports, but the focus remains on the field level (Hamari and Sjöblom, 2017; Kelly *et al.*, 2022; McCauley *et al.*, 2020; Nyström *et al.*, 2022; Scholz, 2019) or, if focused on actors' legitimacy perceptions (Johnson and Abarbanel, 2022; Pizzo *et al.*, 2022), not attended collective action. Esports research is relatively young and presents opportunities to develop theory with multidisciplinary applications (Reitman *et al.*, 2020). For example, esports' consumer-led and cultural practices are an important complement to the growing commercial and corporate interests and the power asymmetries between players and businesses (Pizzo *et al.*, 2022; Scaraboto *et al.*, 2020; Witkowski, 2023).

Accordingly, this research is guided by the question: *how do personal experiences of legitimacy shape collective action within esports?* Qualitative research is warranted to generate insights on experiences of legitimacy supporting the need for theory development. We address our research question qualitatively in the contested field of esports in Sweden, where different activist organizations compete to legitimize their practices. We employ interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), an effective method for interpreting actors' beliefs, to examine how six actors in two organized grassroots esports movements in Sweden understand their individual experiences and actions.

We find details on core aspects of the tensions between personal convictions and wider perceptions of the legitimacy of esports as an activity, explaining how actors get motivated to act for institutional change and get activated in collective action projecting legitimacy aspirations. Details on these processes anticipate the form of these movements. Our findings contribute to a better understanding of the role of legitimacy judgments in collective action for institutional change within the wider need to understand the role of actors' personal

biographies in social movements (Bitektine and Haack, 2015; Prichard *et al.*, 2021; Seo and Creed, 2002). Building on theories of legitimacy, change agents, and collective action, our study is the first to evaluate mobilization for collective action in esports. Our theoretical arguments explain the fragmentation observed in the field (Kelly *et al.*, 2022; Nyström *et al.*, 2022; Witkowski, 2023), but also identify aspects that may facilitate its cohesion. This knowledge can be extended to other community groups and subcultures online. Hence, this study's insights contribute to practice by providing an understanding of individual-level experiences behind modern youth-driven collective action within esports and beyond. Social movement leaders, policymakers, and organizational actors can benefit from a better understanding of these personal experiences. These are crucial to explain individual states of mind, engagement, and action, but are often overlooked in the agitation of collective action.

Background

Institutional change agents, collective action, and legitimacy

Institutionalization efforts in esports are often led by committed individuals (McCauley *et al.*, 2020). A significant body of research exists addressing individuals' different strategies to initiate institutional change (Greenwood *et al.*, 2002). Change agents include institutional entrepreneurs who use their legitimacy, influence, and resources to pursue their goals (Battilana *et al.*, 2009), or institutional challengers who support or magnify other players' disruptive efforts (Bertels *et al.*, 2014). Although scholars present these individuals as resourceful agents with foresight who stand up for the potential benefits of their intended institutional shift, a common question arises: why and how do these change agents mobilize? Esports emerged from grassroots participation in community initiatives (Taylor, 2012), thus actor mobilization for institutional change in esports requires understanding of collective action.

Socio-psychological perspectives on collective action have explained actors' mobilization because of perceived injustice, perceived efficacy, and social identity (van Zomeren *et al.*, 2008). Perceive injustice – the subjective experience of inequality (Walker and Smith, 2002) – triggers collective action, particularly when perceptions of differences result from social comparisons with other groups and are loaded with emotions (Smith and Ortiz, 2002). Perceived efficacy also contributes to collective action. Actors tend to mobilize if they believe it will contribute (Mummendey *et al.*, 1999) to change. Finally, social identity – the identification with a group of similarly disadvantaged others (e.g. Kelly and Breinlinger, 1996) – explains collective action, especially when the group is a social movement organization and identity becomes politicized (Stürmer and Simon, 2004). Therefore, mobilization in collective action – also in esports – emerges from combined perceptions of injustice and efficacy regulated by social identity (van Zomeren *et al.*, 2008).

Often, perceptions of inequality that anticipate collective action are accompanied by emotions. For example, studying gender discrimination in the workplace, Iyer and Ryan (2009, p. 791) showed that “appraisals of illegitimacy and feelings of anger” predict collective action. Research on the interplay between illegitimacy perceptions and social identification further suggests that legitimacy appraisals are important for emotions and collective behavior (Hansen and Sassenberg, 2011; Jetten *et al.*, 2014). Thus, legitimacy, particularly the perception of a lack thereof, when accompanied by anger and social identification, is considered a crucial driver of collective action toward institutional change.

Legitimacy – a prominent issue in esports (Nyström *et al.*, 2022) – is central to how actors' subjective experiences of inequality and social identity trigger collective action (van Zomeren *et al.*, 2008). As a psychological property of a social arrangement, legitimacy “leads those connected to it to believe that it is appropriate” (Tyler, 2006, p. 375). In institutionalism, legitimacy is the generalized perception that an entity's actions are “appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions” (Suchman, 1995, p. 574).

Consistent with social psychology and organizational institutionalism, legitimacy is “the judgment that an entity is appropriate for its social context” (Tost, 2011, p. 688).

Legitimacy judgments

Multilevel theories of the legitimacy process (Bitektine and Haack, 2015) have started to explain how agency for institutional change can emerge from legitimacy micro processes. Building bridges with social psychology, Tost (2011) proposed that, at the micro level, individuals form their legitimacy perceptions by combining two perceptual inputs: their perceptions of the entity’s properties or behaviors (propriety judgments) and social norms they perceive as dominating at the collective level (validity judgments). While propriety judgments are based on the personal belief that some action, behavior or organization is acceptable and desirable (Dornbusch and Scott, 1975), validity judgments depend on the appearance of a consensus that some entity is collectively considered appropriate in its social context (Tost, 2011). Research suggests that perceptions of validity strongly influence individuals’ assessments of propriety judgments (Muchnik *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, dominant validity judgments reduce the likelihood of initiatives aimed at institutional change (Walker *et al.*, 1988). Individuals could still desire institutional change if exposed to institutional contradictions triggering a reflective shift (Seo and Creed, 2002).

Central to the understanding of institutional change efforts is how the interplay between experiences of institutional contradictions and personal motivations shapes the emergence of change actors. In line with social psychology, studies providing actor-level explanations of the occurrence of independent, evaluative-mode propriety judgments, and the later emergence of these alternative judgments in public hint at the central role of personal perceptions of legitimacy (Tost, 2011) and its interplay with feelings (Haack *et al.*, 2014). Nevertheless, we still have little empirical evidence of the emergence of activists “as a function of personal histories,” and the role played by personal experiences of legitimacy judgments in their mobilization and collective activities (Prichard *et al.*, 2021, p. 4).

Legitimacy, collective action, and the internet

There has been a rise in studies on how individuals come to participate in activist movements, shaping identities and organizations (Elidrissi and Courpasson, 2021; Skoglund and Böhm, 2020), although rarely concerning the digital. Internet research has documented how digital news and social media facilitate collective action (Jost *et al.*, 2018; Kende *et al.*, 2016). For example, in their study of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, Lee and Littles (2021) analyzed the mobilization of individuals in collective action through social media platforms, but did not address the role of experiences of legitimacy in these processes nor a digital-related object of legitimation – as esports is.

Traditionally, research on internet phenomena concerns favorable evaluations of online phenomena, such as tracking (Makhortykh *et al.*, 2022), e-commerce (Stockdale and Standing, 2002; Tseng *et al.*, 2023), cloud computing (Wang *et al.*, 2019), and crowdfunding (Liu *et al.*, 2018). Although not directly engaged with legitimacy theory, nor concerned with collective action for social change, these studies highlight the relevance of judgments of appropriateness about digital entities and activities.

Legitimacy, collective action, and esports

Esports provides a uniquely rich empirical setting to study individual-level legitimacy issues and the emergence of collective action for institutional change. Classifications and definitions of esports are fragmented by the diverse research fields engaging with this nascent and ever-evolving context (Cranmer *et al.*, 2021; Pizzo *et al.*, 2022). Three essential characteristics define

esports features: human (players), digital (video game), and competitive (Scholz and Nothelfer, 2022). In framing this paper's arguments, we conceptualize esports as: video game play between humans with a formal or semi-formal competitive framework, specifically when organized into leagues and tournaments (Hamari and Sjöblom, 2017). Esports is facilitated through online and offline platforms at casual, amateur, and professional levels across several genres and games. The audience engages through various roles, including spectators, players, and community members.

Esports emerged from the early 1990s local area network parties through grassroots actors mobilizing participation in community play events (Taylor, 2012) and has experienced significant and sustained growth driven by advancements in the capabilities of online platforms, increased accessibility (Cranmer *et al.*, 2021), and a rapid influx of corporate investment and advertising (Scholz, 2019). Thus, esports represents a nascent context rooted in the social, economic, and political aspects of online culture, while operating in an online-offline reality (Scholz, 2019) at global, regional, and local levels (McCauley *et al.*, 2020; Scholz, 2020; Witkowski, 2023). The audience of players and spectators continues to be central to the current ecosystem, engaging through multifaceted activities rooted in social identity (Seo and Jung, 2016).

Most academic work concerning esports conveys its importance, whether in purely numerical (number of active viewers) or in relativistic terms (rate of growth) (Macey *et al.*, 2022). Such practices indicate the need to convince readers that esports is a topic of significance and its study is legitimate. This approach is consistent with other mainstream media representations of esports. Despite its size, esports rarely features in established media channels in comparison to traditional sports. When esports is featured, stigma and stereotypes about the video gaming culture prevail (Huettermann *et al.*, 2020), offering a controversial and contested dominant picture of the esports industry (Kordyaka *et al.*, 2020; Pizzo *et al.*, 2019). Esports is not sufficiently institutionalized within wider society and its lack of established history and social presence means it is still criticized by mainstream actors.

Prior work on legitimacy in esports focuses on the macro level. First, research has centered on how the esports definition impacts the formalized structures guiding participation (Holden *et al.*, 2017; Jenny *et al.*, 2017). The issue most succinctly encapsulating this approach is the ongoing debate of whether esports is a sport. This issue has many practical ramifications for all areas of the esports ecosystem, such as the long-term viability of collegiate esports programs, or grassroots organizations often depending on access to funding afforded to traditional sporting activities (McCauley *et al.*, 2020). Similarly, Seo and Jung (2016) highlighted 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. Games have long been viewed as being "for kids" and are not considered as having cultural value in the same way as other pursuits (Smuts, 2005).

Second, research has focused on issues of legitimacy emerging from the disparity of stakeholders (Scholz, 2019), lack of structured frameworks (Cranmer *et al.*, 2021), governance models (Witkowski, 2023), and governance failures at the professional and grassroots esports levels (Koot, 2019). Consequently, grassroots actors often must build local networks and institutions, and deal with existing societal prejudices on a personal level (McCauley *et al.*, 2020). This must be achieved while operating in the face of direct opposition from larger bodies, including intellectual property rights holders (Law and Jarrett, 2019). For instance, the sporting context around the game *Super Smash Bros.* was developed and legitimized by volunteers without clear monetary rewards for their efforts, rather than by the publisher Nintendo (Koch *et al.*, 2020). Thus, although individuals still see the need to legitimize esports, often by developing grassroots movements (Nyström *et al.*, 2022), we still know little about the emergence of collective action in esports and the role of individual experiences therein.

Although not primarily interested in legitimacy, Law (2016) showed how participants' experiences in video game events enable social networks and shape identity. Johnson and

Abarbanel (2022) – studying tolerance of cheating practices – revealed the explanatory power of personal experiences in esports legitimacy perceptions. Pizzo *et al.* (2022) identified sense-making micro strategies that helped already mobilized actors to integrate and legitimize esports within a sports franchise. Finally, Witkowski (2023) described the various models of national esports associations and the challenges they face. Altogether, this research hints at the relevance of actors' experiences in legitimacy issues in esports, suggesting its potential to also study the emergence of collective action. For the study of the personal experience of legitimacy and actor mobilization for collective action, esports combines the prominence of lack of legitimacy issues at the field level that permeate individual level experiences; and the emergence of grassroots movements by actors engaged in advocating esports as legitimate.

Method

This research employs IPA – a qualitative research methodology exploring how individuals understand their lived experiences (Smith and Osborn, 2003) – to explain personal experiences of legitimacy in esports activities. Legitimacy is rooted in social psychology research, where it is considered an important property of an authority, institution or social arrangements partly explaining how social systems work (Tyler, 2006). This psychological dimension of legitimacy is central to our exploration of *how personal experiences of legitimacy shape collective action within esports*. Management, digital, and online gaming research have successfully adopted IPA to study actors' perceptions and experiences (Hill *et al.*, 2015; Kaur and Kumar, 2021; Whitty *et al.*, 2011). IPA supports the collection and in-depth analysis of participants' narratives to reveal the idiosyncratic and socially constructed meanings behind personal experiences (Muñoz and Cohen, 2018). Therefore, IPA demands interpretative analysis in two stages (Smith and Osborn, 2007): participants' interpretations of their experiences; and researchers' interpretations of participants' sense-making. This permits in-depth exploration of underlying meanings of informants' experiences and requires smaller sample sizes than alternative approaches.

Sampling

Much research on the emergence of collective action has relied on intentions and attitudes, rather than on actual engagement (van Zomeren *et al.*, 2008). In our sampling, we identified two prominent esports associations in Sweden, “Esports for Change” and “Sporty Esports” (both anonymized). Esports for Change is a large Swedish grassroots esports organization with over 25,000 members and is an umbrella brand for other Swedish grassroots organizations. Sporty Esports represents Swedish esports as part of the European Esports Federation and has a large base of engaged members who regularly participate in its activities. Both organizations emerged from the grassroots communities within Sweden and received financial support as nongovernmental organizations.

Research suggests that individuals who highly identify with their groups are more likely to notice inequalities, have emotional reactions to them, and evaluate them as relevant for the group (Iyer and Leach, 2008). To obtain richer insights from participants, we identified and recruited three active members within each organization with extensive histories in esports and their organizations. The six participants were males aged 23 to 37, with a minimum of 10 years' experience as engaged actors on the scene. Three participants were senior members with formal executive leading roles in their organizations.

Data collection and analysis

Fifteen interviews were conducted in English with the six interviewees, who were informed of the project's scope and assured of anonymity, providing verbal consent to participate. Each interview lasted 30–180 min. A professional transcription firm transcribed the

interviews. The research conformed to all ethical guidelines and requirements of the host institutions.

One participant from each organization was interviewed twice by author A via Skype (round one). These four interviews were transcribed and used to develop an interview guide utilizing an inductive approach to coding (Galehbakhtiari and Pouryasouri, 2015). As participants’ meanings are not explicit, this approach supports the interpretation of their experiential sense-making across multiple readings of, and reflections on, each transcript (Smith and Osborn, 2003). Authors A and B analyzed these interviews and identified emergent themes, which were examined to develop additional questions for the second round of interviews.

Author B conducted semi-structured interviews with all participants (round two). To clarify crucial details in our emergent themes, authors A and B performed additional interviews with informants (round three). Fifteen interviews were performed, with two to four conversations per participant.

In each interview, notes were taken for analysis. Information obtained via the interviews was complemented by archival data, including websites, strategic documents, and other materials from each organization. Table 1 details the interviews performed.

Before the primary analysis of the interviews, an intercoder agreement was developed based on the coding scheme inductively developed in round one (Guest et al., 2006). Subordinate themes were extracted via multiple readings, which were translated into emerging themes, leading to the development of a final coding scheme to clarify and distinguish between emergent and superordinate concepts. Continuing the first step of IPA’s four-step process (Smith and Osborn, 2003), the final coding scheme was applied to subsequent transcripts and extended as new subordinate themes were identified. Iterative comparison and discussion resulted in a few discrepancies that were easily reconciled. Consolidated similarities, refined codes, and definitions were reapplied to all transcripts (Gioia et al., 2013). Through this iterative process, we 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, with author C being excluded initially to ensure impartiality at this stage. All three authors finalized the master table and built the narrative account with verbatim extracts to support the analytic account. During these steps, we ensured that – in our interactions with the collected material and within the research team – our interpretations and connections fit what the participants said. This process allowed the research team to understand the participants’ accounts of their sense-making of their lived experiences, reaching the kind of second-order interpretations that IPA is expected to produce (Smith and Osborn, 2003).

Grassroots organization	Participant	Role in organization	Interviews	
			Sessions	Minutes
Esports for change	Rasmus	General secretary	3	222
	Alex	Active member	2	190
	Jonas	Active member	2	105
Sporty esports	Mart	Member of the board	4	210
	Lucas	President	2	130
	Mattias	Active member	2	120
Total			15	

Source(s): Author’s own creation/work

Table 1.
Data collected

Findings

Themes extracted from the data proved that, for all six participants, collective action was shaped by three core aspects of an underlying tension between personal conviction (“propriety”) legitimacy judgments and wider perceptions of communal (“validity”) legitimacy judgments of esports as an activity. First, personal experiences of legitimacy shape how agents *get motivated to act* in early stages of critical reflection, which interacts with conflicting propriety and validity legitimacy judgments as well as the emotionally charged personal experience of a puzzling lack of validity. Second, as agents *get activated in collective action*, the identification of efficacy lines around valid domains associates with the mobilization of the focal actor, triggering emotionally charged collective endeavors. And third, personal experiences of legitimacy shape how particularities in these early experiences *project legitimacy aspirations* that orient validity ends, aspired values and ideals, and the form of grassroots movements in the collective legitimizing actions undertaken by these actors.

Figure 1 details the relationships between the emergent themes, the building blocks of the narrative, and the second-order and aggregate themes that gave structure and meaning to the narrative. As per Figure 2, double arrows reflect the strong interactions between second-order themes at each stage and the possibility that aggregate themes, presented by our informants as linear stages, are simultaneously constituted or retroactively rationalized motives and reasons. Tables 1–4 provide supporting evidence for all themes.

Getting motivated to act

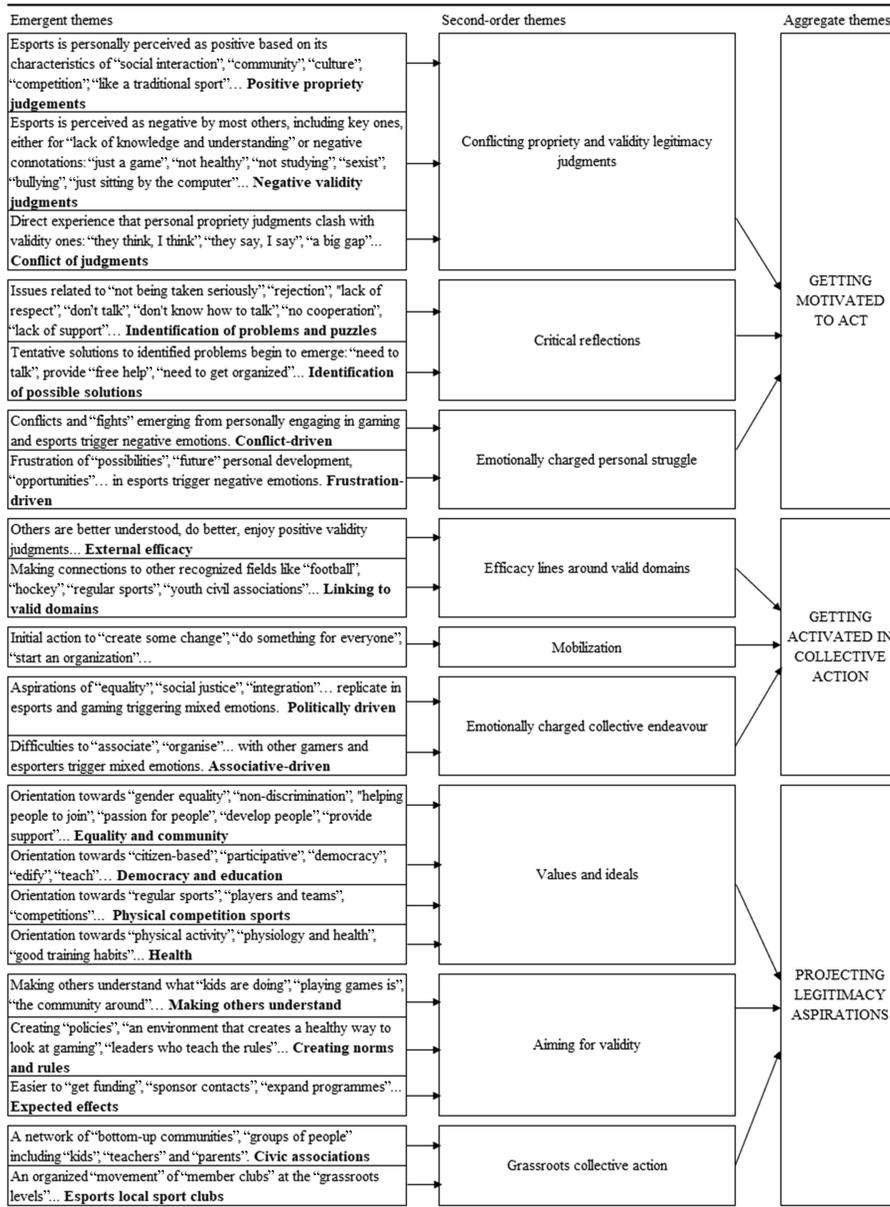
Conflicting propriety and validity legitimacy judgments. Participants commonly expressed conflicts between the propriety they experienced in their gaming activities and the lack of validity of these judgments outside their immediate esports circle. For example, Lucas enjoyed esports because of the feeling of being good at playing, which was “better than real life” and resembled traditional sports: “There are some similarities, if you look at all the sports, parts of it, between the traditional sports and *Counter-Strike* [a popular game], and I think that was why I liked it so much.” However, Lucas’ parents did not understand esports’ personal relevance; his propriety judgments lacked validity and this conflict of judgments was general. He explained: “If a kid wants to play football, would the parents go to the tournament? They are like, ‘Yeah, of course.’ Now, would they go to DreamHack [a gaming event]? No, they wouldn’t.”

Alex offered a contrasting view, stating the greatest attraction of esports for him is the social aspect and having “friends on the mic,” adding: “This kind of social interaction has been the most important part for me. I mean, that’s more fun than actually the game.” However, this propriety judgment did not align with validity judgment, as Alex indicated, “People say ‘Oh you shouldn’t be playing video games’ . . . they don’t understand it . . . There is this kind of idea that playing on a computer is a waste of time.”

Critical reflections. Informants’ conflicting judgments interacted with critical reflections, including the identification of problems and solutions. Mattias articulated how critical reflections included the identification of issues like lack of communication:

The parents have no idea what the kids are doing online, there’s a big gap between the parents and the kids . . . 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 [all the bad things about games] posted on *Aftonbladet* [Swedish tabloid].

All informants described similar reflections identifying root problems in their experiences of conflicting legitimacy judgments. Critical reflections also included early identifications of possible solutions to esports’ legitimacy problems. In the participants’ statements, these early solutions were basic and abstract approaches directly linked to the problems they had identified. For



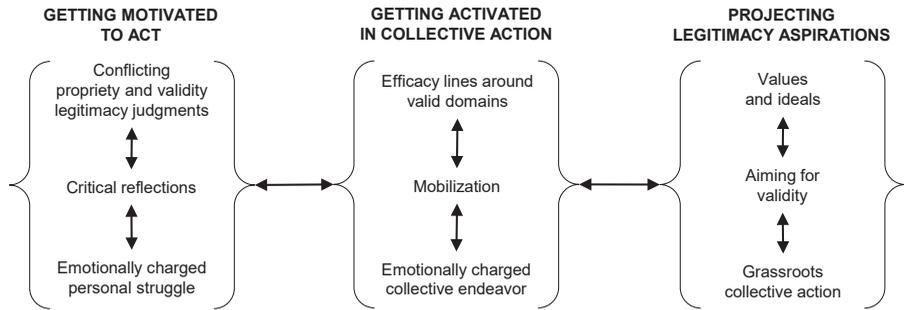
Source(s): Author’s own creation/work

Figure 1. Emergent and superordinate themes

example, Lucas highlighted the “skepticism toward what they were doing . . . [It’s] hard to talk about esports to a level that everyone understands,” and mentioned the need to discuss esports.

Emotionally charged personal struggle. Some participants revealed how the lack of legitimacy became an emotionally charged personal struggle with others (i.e. authority figures)

Figure 2.
The process of the emergence of grassroots collective action in esports



Source(s): Author's own creation/work

displaying negative attitudes toward esports. These struggles could be conflict-driven, such as for Rasmus: "My parents did not want to have me playing, and I would not want anything else but to play. So, there was a struggle for some years . . . heavy fights with my mother."

Struggles could also involve less direct conflict, but still be driven by frustration. Mart from Sporty Esports realized he "could get better than everybody so [he] wanted to do this and maybe make some money, but they didn't pay out the prize money, there was no salaries, there was no future in it." Although not interested in the competition rewards, Alex shared a similar frustration: "I got kind of annoyed at the situation, that there were no possibilities . . . it was quite emotional. I was frustrated." Informants linked this intimate struggle between wanting to do something and not being allowed or able to do it by external circumstances to their mobilization into collective action in esports.

Getting activated in collective action

Efficacy lines around valid domains. The participants claimed getting motivated to act was a preliminary step to their mobilization in a collective action. They were compelled to organize grassroots collective action as they identified efficacy lines (directions for actions they thought could work). These efficacy lines linked desired outcomes to other already valid domains. For example, Lucas from Sporty Esports linked his critical reflection of skepticism toward esports with the need to "talk about esports" like "traditional sports," and explained that traditional sport clubs did better than gaming groups and teams. "The parents understand what their kids are doing there," suggesting gaming teams could work better if they became "more like sport clubs." That is, observations of efficacy in established external domains allowed participants to identify efficacy lines that required linking their esports activities to those domains. The identification of these efficacy lines by participants strongly interacted with their mobilization.

Mobilization. All participants were strongly mobilized actors active in the foundation or development of esports activist organizations, wanting to make an impactful change in esports. The interviews were populated with expressions like "I wanted to create some type of change" or "I had to do something." The participants linked the dynamics of the origins of their mobilization to emotionally charged encounters in their esports engagement. These encounters included not just the personal struggles that had motivated them to act, but also the form of collective endeavors resulting from their emerging mobilization.

Emotionally charged collective endeavor. In some participants, mobilization originated in emotionally charged encounters within collective endeavors connected to their esports engagement. Collective endeavors could be politically or associative-driven, with participants

Getting motivated to act

Conflicting propriety and validity
legitimacy judgments

Positive propriety judgments

“This kind of social interaction has been the most important part for me. I mean, that’s more fun than actually the game.” (Alex, Esports for change).

“There are some similarities, if you look at all the sports, parts of it, between the traditional sports and Counter-Strike, and I think that was why I liked it so much.” (Lucas, Sporty esports)

Negative validity judgments

“People say ‘oh you shouldn’t be playing video games’ . . . they don’t understand it . . . there is this kind of idea that playing on a computer is a waste of time.” (Alex, Esports for change).

“If a kid wants to play football, would the parents go to the tournament? They are like, ‘Yeah, of course.’ Now, would they go to Dreamhack [a gaming event]? No, they wouldn’t.” (Lucas, Sporty esports)

Conflict of judgments

“I am like, ‘you watch TV passively for five hours, [and it is] OK, well I communicate and engage and problem solve all these wonderful things [while playing].’” (Alex, Esports for change).

“My mom thought that I should play more football or ice hockey . . . that kind of distance between the kids playing and the parents and the grownups is too wide.” (Lucas, Sporty esports)

Critical reflections

Identification of problems and puzzles

“I thought everyone was like me more or less . . . but not everyone [is] thought . . . I don’t think parents want to interact and communicate with the kids . . . the problem we have with eSports in that the parents have not engaged.” (Alex, Esports for change).

“One of the issues is that when you’re eating your dinner you don’t talk about how the Counter-Strike match went.” (Lucas, Sporty esports)

Identification of possible solutions

“This is one problem that this kind of free help that you get from parents and interested people don’t exist in esports the same way than in other social activities.” (Alex, Esports for change).

“I realised that I need to talk about esports and compare it a lot to the traditional sports.” (Lucas, Sporty esports)

Emotionally charged personal
struggle

Conflict-driven

“My parents did not want to have me playing, and I would not want anything else but to play. So, there was a struggle for some years . . . heavy fights with my mother.” (Rasmus, Esports for change)

Frustration-driven

“I realized that I could get better than everybody so I wanted to do this and maybe make some money, but they didn’t pay out the prize money, there was no salaries, there was no future in it.” (Mart, Sporty esports).

“I got kind of annoyed at the situation, that there were no possibilities . . . it was quite emotional. I was frustrated.” (Alex, Esports for change)

Source(s): Author’s own creation/work

Table 2.
Representative quotes
for the theme “getting
motivated to act”

explicitly linking their collective action to difficulties in their engagement in collective endeavors. Lucas illustrated hardships of associative-driven collective endeavors:

I had organized clubs and been in other organizations before . . . I got the tip to create a gaming club . . . it was hard to create all these clubs that train and educate young people to be better at esports.

Getting activated in collective action

Efficacy lines around valid domains

External efficacy

“Everyone who plays football joins a football club . . . it’s important for the players, for their personal development and for the clubs’ development . . . all these sporting clubs are recognized and get funding for educating coaches and so on.” (Lucas, Sporty esports)

Linking to valid domains

“We have all these sport clubs. It could be ice hockey, or football or anything that plays the game . . . and some parts of these clubs over have a professional team. They have all these. So that’s something that’s missing in the esports movement.” (Lucas, Sporty esports).

“It is about civic organizing. We are using the model of youth local organizations in the Swedish system. The model is already there.” (Rasmus, Esports for change)

Mobilisation

“I wanted to do things that create some kind of change somewhere, it could be big, it could be small, it doesn’t matter, I need to change something. I know the culture, I dream about the culture.” (Lucas, Sporty esports)

“I wanted to get back into the scene and do something. And I said, let’s do something but let’s do something for everyone.” (Alex, Esports for change)

“We started a brand new community. I talked with some friends, we wanted to be one of the biggest Swedish organizations for that.” (Rasmus, Esports for change)

Emotionally charged collective endeavor

Politically-driven

“I got into this [Sporty Esports] because I got into social justice work . . . the things happening in my hometown during the 90s. I grew up in a town where, where Nazi activities were rapidly growing. So, I was organized like in the radical-left. That was for self protection as we can. It started with the social democratic youth movement.” (Mattias, Sporty esports)

“I work with questions of [gender] equality in some kinds of jobs and in society itself, so that made me interested in esports.” (Jonas, Esports for change)

Associative-driven

“I had organized clubs and been in other organizations before . . . I got the tip to create a gaming club . . . it was hard to create all these clubs that train and educate young people to be better at esports . . . and I wanted to be one of those who did that.” (Lucas, Sporty esports)

Source(s): Author’s own creation/work

Table 3.
Representative quotes
for the theme “getting
activated in collective
action”

Early mobilization collective endeavors were often politically driven. For example, Jonas joined his organization because he worked “with questions of [gender] equality in some kinds of jobs and in society itself.” Mattias elaborated on his mobilization: “I got into this [Sporty Esports] because I got into social justice work.” Both cases experienced conflicting propriety and validity judgments driving critical reflections about esports, yet it was how this motivating reflexivity interacted with wider collective endeavors as they mobilized for esports collective action. Thus, the “overwhelming effect” of these emotionally charged encounters in the esports practice – shaped by conflicting legitimacy judgments and critical reflections – drove these individuals to engage further in legitimizing actions. These legitimizing actions also projected collective aspirations in a patterned way.

Projecting legitimacy aspirations

Values and ideals. The two organizations were distinct in their approaches. The projected values and ideals common to both organizations included equality, community, and health.

Projecting legitimacy aspirations

Values and ideals	<p><i>Equality and community</i></p> <p>“We work with gender equality where there aren’t male gamers and female gamers, they’re only gamers.” (Jonas, Esports for change)</p> <p>“Yes, you have the competitiveness that’s in the sports, the feelings, the spectators, but then you also have the community around it. It is helping people come into the community and start playing and teaching them how to be online and the code of conduct and stuff like that.” (Jonas, Esports for change)</p> <p>“The purpose of the organization is to be one of the biggest Swedish communities in esports . . . there is a passion for people to win as well, but there is a bigger passion in the hearts of people that want to develop other people in the community.” (Rasmus, Esports for change)</p> <p><i>Democracy and education</i></p> <p>“[Our movement] is citizen-based . . . we don’t want to stagnate like all the rest of the sports.” (Rasmus, Esports for change)</p> <p>“We create an organisation to democracy. So they have to start edify people maybe in a team. It is part of the education.” (Alex, Esports for change)</p> <p><i>Physical competition sports</i></p> <p>“We are trying to find what can we copy from other sports. If you look at regular sports, in the beginning, it was also the players, it was also the community, it was just kids that want to play against each other and then they started up teams.” (Mart, Sporty esports)</p> <p>“Esports need to be treated as a sport . . . we set up national standards for esports and for competitions.” (Mattias, Sporty esports)</p> <p><i>Health</i></p> <p>“Physical training is really about teaching the students the value of the physical activity, connect it to esports. Make them see the connection.” (Mart, Sporty esports)</p> <p>“I would want to use the old stuff that is great like physiology and health. And combine that with all the new parts that are a part of Esport.” (Rasmus, Esports for change)</p>
Aiming for validity	<p><i>Making others understand</i></p> <p>“Parents should understand what their kids are doing. If it’s playing the guitar or if it’s playing Counter-Strike, the parents should understand the community around it to help support the kids.” (Alex, Esports for change)</p> <p>“I need to convince people what playing games is . . . this is a basic knowledge, it’s something we still need to talk about. What is playing games, and what kids do. And I can see a big improvement in the general public today about the knowledge about games. Because it’s a big part of our lives in a way that it wasn’t 10 years ago, or even five years ago. And . . . but there is still a long way to go.” (Lucas, Sporty esports)</p> <p><i>Creating norms and rules</i></p> <p>“We want to create policies and create an environment that creates a healthy way to look at gaming on all levels.” (Lucas, Sporty esports)</p> <p>“We need to start from the bottom, when there’s a six-year-old starting to play, who takes care of him and who teaches him the rules . . . we need leaders who can teach them that you’re not supposed to tell your friends that they suck when they play. This does not happen on a soccer field, because the coach would slap you silly. But right now, still, today, esports is Wild West, kids do whatever they want because the parents are not involved.” (Alex, Esports for change)</p> <p><i>Expected effects</i></p> <p>“Getting recognized would open up a lot more possibilities to educate kids and to make the programs much deeper than they are right now . . . this will also make it easier to get funding to have a place where the kids can meet and practice . . . and there’s also legal facts.” (Mart, Sporty esports)</p> <p>“This could be so much more. We could get more fundings for projects that would matter. We could get so much more profitable sponsor contacts.” (Rasmus, Esports for change)</p>
Grassroots collective action	<p><i>Civic associations</i></p> <p>“I’ve been in communities before but this was just something else. It was wanting to create different groups of people . . . a bottom-up process that builds up from the base: that is the direction that I think that we should continue to go.” (Alex, Esports for change)</p> <p>“We work a lot with from the grassroots levels.” (Jonas, Esports for change)</p> <p><i>Esports local sport clubs</i></p> <p>“We are focusing on our members, the local clubs around Sweden . . . you need to be able to create a movement, you need to know how you create the club, you need to make easy to create the club.” (Lucas, Sporty esports)</p> <p>“I think that we would be able to get these grassroot levels that could excel even beyond where the players today are.” (Mart, Sporty esports)</p>

Source(s): Author’s own creation/work

Table 4.
Representative quotes
for the theme
“projecting legitimacy
aspirations”

Both organizations shared concerns and priorities around these values and ideals, including providing access to resources for disadvantaged youth, increasing gender equality, reducing gatekeeping and promoting democratic values within the sporting community, and bringing structure to amateur esports.

Nevertheless, our organizations diverged in some values and ideals. Interestingly, the differentiating values and ideals shaping collective action in the two organizations in esports were traced to individual trajectories of propriety and validity conflicts experienced by participants. Esports for Change relied on democracy and education ideals, demonstrating obvious links to the personal experiences of two of its key members. For Alex, propriety judgments about esports rested on “social interaction,” an aspect lacking validity because “[others] don’t understand it,” with the emergent solution being to provide “free help.” Rasmus’ approach of “educating parents” resulted from his struggles with his parents’ lack of understanding and acceptance. These unique referential ideals oriented the organization toward a *föreningsliv* (association) approach. In Sporty Esports, Lucas also experienced negative validity judgments from his parents, with the lack of validity emanating from esports not being a regular sport. Additionally, Mart’s plans “to do esports and maybe make some money” confronted the lack of validity of esports compared to other recognized sports, as “there was no salaries, there was no future in it.” Like Esports for Change’s aspirations, Sporty Esports wanted “parents to understand” and oriented toward the creation of “rules.” However, its approach was distinctively different, as traditional sports became the referential template for organizing. Lucas imagined a future of esports with similar structures to other sports that would secure “funding for local clubs and teams,” while Mart actively organized and defended a bid to the *Riksidrottsförbundet* (the Swedish Sports Confederation) that, if successful, would have officially declared esports a sport in Sweden.

Aiming for validity. Regardless of the values and ideals shaping their legitimacy aspirations, participants shared a common end in their organizations, namely legitimizing esports by creating new validity perceptions – that is, making esports accepted by those not already engaged. Interestingly, validity aims in participants transcended the simple goal of achieving general acceptance for esports. Largely informed by preexisting valid domains where their distinct values and ideals originated, these aims included efforts to make others understand esports, attempts to create norms and rules in esports, and expected effects from legitimacy for esports.

Aiming for validity implies expanding those early identified efficacy lines around valid domains for all participants. In Esports for Change, this is linked to the model of civic organizations in Sweden (*föreningsliv*), as Rasmus explained: “It is about civic organizing. We are using the model of youth local organizations in the Swedish system. The model is already there.” In Sporty Esports, the valid domain was regular sports. Mart stated: “We’re trying to find an approach that everybody’s comfortable with. We are trying to find what we can copy from other sports.” Whether based on models of *föreningsliv* or regular sports, aspirations combined to increase understanding in those not engaged in esports, and to create norms and rules. Alex eloquently made both points: “Parents should understand what their kids are doing. If it’s playing the guitar or if it’s playing *Counter-Strike*, the parents should understand the community around it to help support the kids”; and “when there’s a six-year-old starting to play, who takes care of him and who teaches him the [social] rules . . . today, esports is [the] Wild West, kids do whatever they want because the parents are not involved.”

Furthermore, aiming for validity included explicit aspirations for the expected effects it would generate. All participants projected collective aspirations embodying their validity aims. Mart felt that “getting recognized would open up a lot more possibilities to educate kids . . . This will also make it easier to get funding to have a place where the kids can meet and practice . . . And there’s also legal facts.” All participants shared a drive for “new possibilities” to “do much more.”

Grassroots collective action. Shaped by validity aims and despite various personal circumstances, all participants felt the most appropriate means of securing legitimacy for esports is by building strong grassroots support. Mart asserted: “I think that we would be able to get these grassroot levels that could excel even beyond where the players today are.” Similarly, Alex supported “a bottom-up process.” Most participants were critical of top-down attempts to promote esports, sharing that many larger organizations or companies exploit esports’ popularity without understanding or supporting it.

Although participants shared a commitment to establishing legitimacy via grassroots collective action, their approaches differed in the form of their organizations and the strategies employed to build legitimacy. While Sporty Esports was actively building a network of local esports clubs and applying for Swedish Sports Confederation (*Riksidrottsförbundet*) membership, Esports for Change opted for a network of civic associations. Esports for Change focused on education, teaching parents, national organizations, and authorities about the benefits of esports and gaming; educating players about the demands of esports, including physical and mental health; educating coaches and trainers; and introducing dedicated esports programs to educational institutions. Sporty Esports was more concerned with 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 increased access to training; and teaching the value of physical activity.

Discussion

Our findings add theoretical insights to how actors’ mobilization and the form of collective action attempting institutional change are motivated and oriented by emotionally charged experiences of legitimacy conflicts in change agents’ personal stories. These insights demonstrate the potential of studying propriety and validity judgments as distinct, but also deepen understanding of the personal experience of legitimacy judgments about Internet entities and their effects on collective action. The findings from two distinct esports activist organizations contribute a better understanding of alternative forms of gaming communities and legitimizing strategies in esports.

This research adds to the micro processes of legitimacy (Bitektine and Haack, 2015) of institutional change agents (Seo and Creed, 2002) and collective action (van Zomeren *et al.*, 2008). Our findings suggest that conflicts between propriety and validity judgments in individuals give rise to the reflective shift in consciousness that in prior theory (Seo and Creed, 2002) explains the emergence of change agents exposed to institutional contradictions. Our participants evaluated esports as legitimate because it is congruent with their social norms (propriety judgment), but these judgments contradict the dominant collective judgments (validity judgment) of key evaluators in their environment, triggering critical reflections. In extant research, collective action is associated with inequality when perceived as illegitimate (Jetten *et al.*, 2014), yet by exploring validity and propriety legitimacy judgments, we contribute to a more complete view of how legitimacy appraisals work. Rather than just injustice or deprivation, collective action is motivated by the critical reflections that conflicting propriety and validity judgment allow.

In addition, our findings challenge received legitimacy theory, which in the context of institutional stability expects contradictions between proprietary and validity judgments to suppress independent judgments, resulting in individuals practicing defensive avoidance to reduce anxiety (Voronov and Vince, 2012), further reinforcing institutional stability (Bitektine and Haack, 2015). Contrastingly, our findings explain how if conflicting legitimacy judgments triggering individual reflexivity interact with emotional struggles, they motivate individuals to act upon them and become organized. While prior work has

stressed the importance of personal feelings of anger in action tendencies (Hansen and Sassenberg, 2011; Iyer and Ryan, 2009), our findings offer a more complete repertoire of emotional encounters and roles in collective action. Although emotionally charged personal struggles are connected to legitimacy appraisals and their capacity to trigger critical reflections that motivate individuals to act, early stages of action in collective endeavors often generate emotionally charged responses that – beyond action tendencies – contribute to further mobilization in specific collective action.

This study brings theoretical insights to collective action relevant to Internet research by revealing how conflicts in legitimacy judgments anticipate the form of collective action. Traditional accounts of institutional change identify its emergence in processes of “deinstitutionalization” (Oliver, 1992). Research suggests perceived efficacy (Mummendey *et al.*, 1999) – often affected by social media platform cues (Lee and Littles, 2021) – is needed for this to occur. Our findings add to this research by exploring activists’ personal stories (Prichard *et al.*, 2021) and connecting perceived efficacy to legitimacy judgments. We show how workable lines of action – those that become sources of validity (Bitektine and Haack, 2015), allowing actors to imagine alternatives to the status quo and coalesce around unifying collective efforts – can be traced back to valid offline domains that actors had to confront when experiencing conflicting legitimacy judgments about their online activities.

Moreover, our findings offer important insight to Internet research and the emergence of collective action around digital-related phenomena. Since collective action about digital phenomena is rooted in legitimacy judgments where digital and non-digital domains are compared, propriety and validity judgments about esports are not bounded by digital values and ideals. In legitimacy judgments, esports is compared to valid physical sports and civic associations in the tradition of pre-digital social life; it is continuously evaluated against non-digital established alternatives. This explains why legitimizing actions of digital phenomena rely on validating sets of rules, norms, and ideals often anchored in the non-digital world and why comparative research on traditional and new forms of collective action have not found a sharp divide between them (Thomas *et al.*, 2015).

Finally, this research illustrates alternative forms and strategies in grassroots efforts to legitimize esports. Esports literature has made calls to explore issues of a lack of legitimacy (McCauley *et al.*, 2020; Scholz, 2019; Seo and Jung, 2016). Pizzo *et al.* (2022) explored how actors legitimize esports within organizations, but no study has explained how esports grassroots movements mobilize. We explain how early experiences of legitimacy in esports actors contribute to individual mobilization and the form of collective action taken. These personal narratives give context to the development and role of personal passion in early-adopter associations identified in recent work (Witkowski, 2023). This way, we also highlight how individuals and movements contribute to national esports associations. Esports grassroots are shaped by several separate norms and practices initially traceable to conflicting legitimacy judgments in the personal trajectories of their actors, thereby informing the development of competing organizations within the same sphere, a situation dubbed the “substitute mode” (Witkowski, 2023). This explains remarks about the complex and multifaceted participation within esports (Hamari and Sjöblom, 2017), where players’ roles evolve beyond play into interrelated practices (Seo and Jung, 2016). This observation may also explain the fragmented nature of esports governance and validates the need for policy interventions to ensure a sustainable future (Kelly *et al.*, 2022; Nyström *et al.*, 2022).

This study’s findings have practical implications, as they provide insight into effective strategies to ensure long-term viability of the esports – and other digital – ecosystems. For example, the subthemes associated with *projecting aspirations* highlight how approaches directly connect esports legitimacy to wider social issues, such as gender equality and online toxicity. Furthermore, while esports organizations often hold shared values and common goals, effective action can be restricted by perceived rivalry among alternative valid

templates for action. Communication between groups increases likelihood of successful collective action through directed common action and may provide other benefits, including more targeted use of limited resources. Such lessons may benefit members of other subcultures struggling to obtain validation or acceptance within wider society, particularly those centered around online communities and behaviors. An example of this is fan-fiction writers whose creative endeavors are often dismissed (Flegel and Roth, 2014) – by making explicit connections between their communities’ shared values and ideals and the potential economic rewards, they can change perceptions of their community’s legitimacy.

Limitations and future research

Our IPA methodology aimed to render rich details about participants’ sense-making processes. Therefore, our insights may be constrained to retroactively rationalized motives and reasons. Longitudinal research designs allowing real-time data collection could be useful in this direction. The ever-evolving conditions of esports provide opportunities to explore topics, such as governance, legitimacy, and social movements. Since esports actors are willing to engage and collaborate with researchers (Nyström *et al.*, 2022), there are opportunities for insights not commonly found in other contexts. Moreover, although our small data set is adequate for IPA, its insights cannot be easily generalizable; thus, future research may benefit from an increased pool of interviewees. Similarly, our sampled organizations are grassroots movements in Swedish esports and our insights may be specific to this context. Interviews with activists in other environments and collective actors may provide relevant counterfactuals.

Esports and gaming represent a rich environment for understanding a relatively young and engaged audience in the digital environment. For many participants, games represent the core of their social digital life and are often the starting point for other interests and pursuits. Researchers interested in the practices of online communities and social movements could consider more niche movements rooted in gaming and esports identities, including digital work and content creation or the movements toward increasing diversity and equality.

Conclusion

This research evaluated how experiences of legitimacy shape collective action within internet-based practices seeking to establish legitimacy through grassroots. Our findings highlight how personal experiences of legitimacy motivate and orient actor mobilization and collective action within the esports ecosystem, while contributing to theories of micro legitimacy, change agents, and the emergence of collective action for institutional change. This work empirically proves how actors become motivated to act in critical reflections linked to conflicting legitimacy judgments and emotionally charged personal struggles. It also shows how these actors’ collective action interacts with the identification of efficacy lines around valid domains and emotionally charged collective endeavors. Lastly, the study shows how particularities in these early experiences project legitimacy aspirations that orient collective action toward validity ends and values and ideals shaping these actors’ grassroots movements.

This study theoretically explains why research has found more similarities than differences between traditional and digital forms of collective action. Our analysis of mobilization for collective action in esports also explains the fragmentation of esports. Our theoretical insights can be extended to other instances of collective action about online activities. Esports parallels many modern grassroots movements seeking change that originated online and are driven by young passionate change agents. Understanding and supporting those who utilize the internet to affect positive changes in the globalized society is imperative. Hence, researchers can add value through tracking the salient issues within esports and games, enhancing our understanding of the digital society.

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