



## eSports Fever in Iran: Examining Consumer Behaviors and Cultural Dynamics in eSports Consumption

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** Exploring Consumer Behaviors in eSports Consumption in Iran and its Implications for the Cultural Landscape.

**Methodology:** This qualitative research employed a grounded theory approach to investigate Consumer Behaviors in eSports Consumption in Iran. The study utilized situational analysis as the chosen approach within the grounded theory to provide a comprehensive understanding of the context, arena/social worlds, and positions of eSports Consumption.

**Findings:** The findings reveal that Consumer Behaviors of eSports Consumption in Iran are significantly influenced by two key factors: (1) game preferences and (2) social interactions. The study identifies five distinct eSports Consumption positions that emerge from these factors' interplay. These findings contribute to the literature by comprehensively describing consumer behaviors in eSports consumption, shedding light on the cultural dynamics and preferences within the Iranian context.

**Originality:** This research has practical implications for stakeholders, including eSports industry professionals, marketers, and policymakers. The insights gained from understanding consumer behaviors in eSports consumption can inform strategic decision-making processes, such as game development, marketing campaigns, and creating engaging social environments for eSports enthusiasts. By bridging the gap between theory and practice, this study paves the way for developing tailored approaches to cater to the unique needs and preferences of Iranian eSports consumers.

### Keywords

Casual Consumer  
eSports  
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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, new types of sports have emerged, referred to as competitors of traditional sports (Bousquet & Ertz, 2021; Jenny et al., 2017; Summerley, 2019). These sports are commonly known as eSports or eSports, where players compete using personal computers such as laptops, desktops, and various game consoles (Dominteanu et al., 2023; Egliston, 2018; Lepp et al., 2023; Pu et al., 2021). Simply put, eSports is a competitive arena where players engage in video games on computers or consoles, governed by specific rules (Formosa et al., 2022; Funk et al., 2018; Jeong et al., 2023). Some of the most notable eSports leagues include DOTA2, CS: GO, and League Of Legends (Formosa et al., 2022; Johnson, 2021; Oh et al., 2023; Wulf et al., 2018). eSports has garnered immense interest, particularly among young people, leading to increased investments and advertising by various organizations (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017). Consequently, the eSports industry is continuously evolving (Block & Haack, 2021; Kovács & Szabó, 2022; Mangelaja, 2019). Despite its substantial growth, the income of the eSports industry still lags behind that of the most famous traditional sports (Macey et al., 2022; Mangelaja, 2019; Summerley, 2019). In 2019, eSports revenue amounted to 980 million dollars, compared to 7,920 million for the NBA and 15,260 million for the NFL (Kovács & Szabó, 2022).

At present, eSports stands as one of the fastest-growing industries globally. Cunningham et al. (2018) reported 191 million eSports enthusiasts worldwide in 2017. Moreover, Newzoo (2021) predicts that the total number of eSports audiences will reach 435.9 million by 2020, with an estimated 577 million viewers in 2024. Besides these figures, the financial turnover associated with eSports is worth mentioning. Formosa et al. (2022) revealed that video game revenue in 2020 amounted to \$159.3 billion. Furthermore, the growth of eSports in popular press media is also on the rise, with outlets such as Forbes, ESPN, Sports Illustrated, and The Guardian extensively covering eSports-related events (Cunningham et al., 2018). Global reports indicate that by the end of 2019, with the outbreak of COVID-19, participation in traditional sports reached its lowest level, but eSports did not witness such a decline; instead, participation saw an increasing trend (Goldman & Hedlund, 2020; Rietz & Hallmann, 2023). However, it is essential to note that eSports also faced challenges due to the pandemic. Many events had to be canceled at short notice or shifted to online platforms (Anderson et al., 2021; Fakazlı, 2020; Formosa et al., 2022; McLeod et al., 2021; Sweeney et al., 2019).

Despite the increasing legitimacy and resemblance to traditional sports events and competitions, a debate continues regarding whether to classify eSports as a sport (Bousquet & Ertz, 2021; Funk et al., 2018; Huston et al., 2021; Jonasson & Thiborg, 2010; Siuda et al., 2023). There have been discussions about the relationship between eSports and traditional sports (Cunningham et al., 2018; Kovács & Szabó, 2022; Pizzo et al., 2017). Generally, some researchers and experts have agreed that eSports can be considered as sports due to their requirement for skill, competitive nature, level of stability (e.g., coaches, sponsors, and a large following), and institutionalization of rules, records, and standards (Cunningham et al., 2018; Formosa et al., 2022; Funk et al., 2018; Hallmann & Giel, 2018; Pizzo et al., 2017). According to Jenny et al. (2017) eSports refers to organized video game competitions, often in the form of tournaments. Pizzo et al. (2017)

state that eSports encompass various platforms, including personal computers and gaming consoles, covering genres such as sport-themed games like FIFA Online 3 and real-time strategy (RTS) games like StarCraft II. [Johnson \(2021\)](#) also notes that sport-themed and RTS games rank among the most popular genres in eSports. Sport-themed eSports simulate physical sports, while RTS games depict fighting or military battles ([Örsoğlu et al., 2023](#); [Wulf et al., 2018](#)). Like traditional sports, eSports use comparative measures to assess players' performance within the game. In sport-themed eSports, these measures may align with the rules of the corresponding physical sport ([Crawford & Gosling, 2009](#); [Johnson, 2021](#)). In the realm of modern video games, various genres exist, including first-person shooter games (FPS), fighting games, racing games, real-time strategy games (RTS), massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG), and multiplayer online battle arena games (MOBA). Notably, sports-themed video games (SVG) have emerged as pioneers in the convergence of sports and gaming ([Egliston, 2018](#); [Formosa et al., 2022](#); [Jeong et al., 2023](#); [Oh et al., 2023](#)).

eSports features organized tournaments and leagues with structured rules, formats, and schedules akin to traditional sports ([Jeong et al., 2023](#)). These competitions often boast substantial prize pools, professional teams, and dedicated eSports organizations overseeing the events, paralleling professional leagues and governing bodies in traditional sports ([Siuda et al., 2023](#)). eSports fosters a dedicated community, fan clubs, and online forums, creating a vibrant fan culture akin to traditional sports ([Steinkuehler, 2019](#)). eSports events are broadcast extensively and streamed online, generating viewership numbers that rival or surpass traditional sports. eSports broadcasts offer commentary, analysis, and production elements akin to traditional sports broadcasts ([Dominteanu et al., 2023](#); [Wohn & Freeman, 2019](#)). eSports consumption encompasses activities, engaging people through various eSports-reports-indices ([Anderson et al., 2021](#); [Formosa et al., 2022](#); [Lepp et al., 2023](#)). Viewers can stream live matches, tournaments, and championships online through platforms, drawing millions of viewers. Live events in arenas provide a unique atmosphere for fans to connect, cheer for their favorite teams, and experience the excitement firsthand ([Johnson, 2021](#); [Sweeney et al., 2019](#); [Wohn & Freeman, 2019](#)). The scope of activity and consumption of eSports differs from that of traditional sports ([Huston et al., 2021](#)). eSports consumers include gamers -professional or amateur- and spectators who watch others play through dedicated streaming platforms or up close in stadiums ([Lee & Schoenstedt, 2011](#)). Watching online or streaming, which involves observing others playing video games, has gained significant attention ([Macey et al., 2022](#); [Wohn & Freeman, 2019](#)).

Twitch is the most popular and widely used streaming platform for eSports, acquired by Amazon in 2014 for approximately \$1 billion ([Lettieri & Orsenigo, 2020](#); [Wohn & Freeman, 2019](#)). Online viewership records are equally impressive, with the League of Legends Finals, the most popular eSports tournament, attracting over 27 million viewers, surpassing the 18 million viewers of the 2014 NBA Finals ([Jenny et al., 2018](#); [Oh et al., 2023](#); [Steinkuehler, 2019](#)). In the US professional sports industry, a new trend involves professional sports teams, like the Philadelphia Sixers, acquiring professional eSports teams to expand their presence in digital arenas and reach new sports consumers ([Huston et al., 2021](#); [Jang & Byon, 2020](#)). Additionally, major companies such as Microsoft,

Samsung, and Red Bull are showing increased interest in the industry as eSports becomes more organized and attracts a broader audience of consumers and participants (Pizzo et al., 2017). Identifying consumer behavior in eSports is crucial for various reasons. Firstly, it provides insights into the preferences and expectations of stakeholders such as game developers, event organizers, sponsors, and advertisers, informing product development, marketing strategies, and business decisions. Understanding consumer behavior helps eSports organizations engage fans by creating personalized experiences and content. Thirdly, consumer behavior insights are essential for revenue generation in the eSports industry. Fourthly, identifying consumer behavior aids in demonstrating the value of eSports as a marketing platform to potential advertisers and sponsors. It helps industry stakeholders identify emerging trends and opportunities, facilitating strategic planning and investment decisions. Finally, understanding consumer behavior is vital for market understanding, fan engagement, revenue generation, sponsorship, and advertising, enabling organizations to make informed decisions and build sustainable relationships with their target audience in the dynamic world of eSports.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Understanding eSports consumption and cultural dynamics through Bourdieu's social capital theory

Pierre Bourdieu's social capital theory provides a robust framework for analyzing consumer behavior and cultural dynamics within eSports consumption (Mostafa, 2021). This theoretical perspective centers on three interconnected concepts: habitus, field, and capital, offering insights into how individuals navigate and participate in social spaces (Siisiainen, 2003). In Bourdieu's framework, habitus refers to the dispositions and inclinations individuals develop through socialization (Bourdieu, 2011). Within the esports, habitual engagement with gaming and digital culture shapes consumers' preferences and consumption patterns. Those who grew up gaming likely possess a habitus that predisposes them to view eSports as legitimate entertainment and competition, influencing their preferences and behaviors within the eSports field. Bourdieu conceptualizes fields as arenas where individuals and groups compete for resources and recognition (Bourdieu, 2018). The eSports ecosystem constitutes a distinct field with its power dynamics, hierarchies, and rules (Block & Haack, 2021). This field encompasses various stakeholders, including players, teams, sponsors, organizers, and fans, each vying for different forms of capital. Bourdieu (2011) identifies three primary forms of capital: economic, cultural, and social. Economic capital manifests in eSports through financial investments from sponsors, advertisers, and tournament organizers. Cultural capital refers to the knowledge, skills, and credentials valued within the field, such as gaming expertise, familiarity with gaming culture, and recognition within the community. Social capital pertains to the networks and relationships individuals leverage to access resources and opportunities, ranging from professional connections to broader fan networks.

In Iran, eSports has garnered significant traction, with a growing number of players, teams, and tournaments. Popular games like Dota 2, League of Legends, Counter-Strike:

Global Offensive (CS: GO), and FIFA have established substantial player and viewer bases in the country. The Iran Computer Games Foundation (ICVGF) serves as the primary association for eSports in Iran, annually releasing statistics on eSports in the country (DIREC, 2019). According to the latest ICVGF report published in early 2023, there are 34 million active gamers in Iran, with 58% engaging in online play. Interestingly, there is a relatively balanced gender representation among gamers, with 59% being men and 41% women. The average age of gamers is 23 years old, with the most significant demographic (34%) falling within the 18-34 age group. On average, gamers spend 95 minutes per day playing games, with male gamers spending nearly twice as much time gaming as female gamers (DIREC, 2019). The report highlights smartphones as the most popular and attractive gaming platform, likely due to the affordability of smartphones compared to gaming consoles and their portability. The total number of Iranian gamers has steadily increased from 2010 to 2022, with a compound annual growth rate of 7%, and the initial years of the 2010s witnessed higher growth, driven by the popularity of mobile games and increased internet penetration, providing more comprehensive access to mobile devices and the internet. Among the gamer population in Iran, 4 million individuals are considered professional or advanced gamers, dedicating more than 21 hours per week to gaming. This group constitutes 12% of all gamers. The largest segment of the eSports market consists of casual gamers who play between 1 and 5 hours a week, making up 45% of the population, totaling 15.5 million people (DIREC, 2019). According to ICVGF statistics (2019), 48% of Iranian gamers are interested in watching games, with 38% doing so on YouTube. Notably, 86% of gamers' expenses are allocated to purchasing hardware, especially game consoles. The strong growth of the exchange rate and its direct influence on hardware prices have resulted in a significant financial turnover in the gaming industry.

Habitual engagement with gaming and digital culture shapes Iranian consumers' preferences and consumption patterns within the eSports field. This includes factors such as familiarity with gaming mechanics, preferred game genres, and cultural norms within the gaming community (Bourdieu, 2004; Huang, 2019). The Iranian eSports ecosystem represents a distinct field with its power dynamics, hierarchies, and rules. This includes interactions between players, teams, sponsors, organizers, and fans, competing for various forms of capital within the eSports landscape. Economic, cultural, and social capital are evident in Iranian eSports. Economic capital is reflected in financial investments from sponsors and advertisers, while cultural capital encompasses gaming expertise, familiarity with gaming culture, and recognition within the Iranian eSports community. Social capital is crucial in accessing resources and opportunities, such as professional connections and fan networks. By applying Bourdieu's social capital theory to studying Iranian eSports consumption, this research provides insights into the complex interplay of habitus, field, and capital in shaping consumer behavior and cultural dynamics. Understanding how individuals and groups accumulate, deploy, and contest different forms of capital offers valuable insights for stakeholders, including eSports marketers in Iran, aiding decision-making, market segmentation, and developing effective marketing strategies. Overall, the eSports landscape in Iran is thriving, with a diverse and engaged gaming community, indicating the immense potential and popularity of eSports in the country. Identifying

consumer types, motivations, and consumption behaviors in eSports can benefit stakeholders, especially eSports marketers in Iran. It can aid them in making decisions, planning marketing strategies, and implementing tactics such as market segmentation. Moreover, conducting this research can partially bridge the existing gaps in the cultural studies of eSports consumption and provide a more comprehensive and systematic understanding of Iranian eSports consumers.

### **3. Methodology**

In our current research, we utilized the Situational Analysis (SA) method, which was introduced by Clarke (2003). Grounded theory researchers find SA valuable for gaining a detailed and nuanced understanding of complex social phenomena within their specific context (Clarke, 2003; Clarke et al., 2017). SA offers a data-driven framework for analyzing information and developing theories, enabling a deeper comprehension of the social world being studied (Clarke, 2021). SA involves creating visual maps based on qualitative data to illustrate the characteristics and connections among different components constituting the phenomenon under investigation. These maps, including situational maps, arena/social worlds maps, and positional maps, help identify the critical human and non-human factors involved and explore their relationships. Arena/Social world maps focus on the actors, significant non-human elements, and areas of involvement that contribute to understanding organizational situations. On the other hand, positional maps outline the critical positions taken (or not taken) in response to the complex issues related to the phenomenon being studied (Clarke, 2003, 2022). We chose the SA method as our grounded theory approach because it enables us to provide a comprehensive description of the context, arena/social worlds, and positions related to eSports consumption in Iran.

#### **3.1. Participants**

In the present study, participant recruitment was carried out through a multi-stage process to ensure the inclusion of diverse perspectives within the Iranian eSports community. Initially, potential participants were identified through purposive sampling, aiming to include individuals with varied roles, expertise, and experiences related to eSports consumption in Iran. This approach involved selecting participants from key stakeholder groups, including academics, website and online forum managers, gamers, game fans, policymakers eSports managers, and eSports experts. Within the purposive sampling framework, maximum variation sampling was employed to capture various perspectives and characteristics among participants. This approach facilitated the inclusion of individuals with diverse demographic backgrounds, levels of involvement in eSports, and viewpoints on the subject matter. To supplement the initial participant selection and identify additional individuals with specialized knowledge or unique insights, a snowball sampling technique was utilized. This method involved asking participants to refer other individuals who they believed could contribute valuable perspectives to the study. The final sample size comprised 43 individuals, selected through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling methods. The selection criteria focused on ensuring representation



from various segments of the Iranian eSports community, including players, enthusiasts, industry professionals, and policymakers for a comprehensive understanding, [Table 1](#) presents a detailed overview of the characteristics of the participants involved in the current study.

**Table 1.** Characteristics of research participants.

Variables	Division	N	Percentage
Gender	Female	11	25.82
	Male	32	74.18
Age	18 to 30 years	6	13.95
	31 to 40 years	13	30.25
	41 to 50 years	12	27.90
	51 to 60 years	9	20.93
	61 years and older	3	6.97
Degree of education	Diploma and under	12	27.90
	BA	19	44.21
	MA	5	11.62
	PhD	7	16.27
Field of activity	Esports experts and researchers	7	16.28
	Amateur gamer	7	16.28
	Professional gamer	7	16.28
	Directors of ICVGF	4	9.30
	Esports manager and PPolicymaker	6	13.96
	Managers of gaming forum	7	16.28
	Esports Club owners	5	11.62
Duration of activity on Esports	1 to 2 years	6	13.95
	3 to 4 years	13	30.23
	5 to 6 years	10	23.25
	7 to 8 years	8	18.61
	More than 8 years	6	13.96
Sum		43	100

### 3.2. Data collection

In-depth interviews were conducted as the primary method of data collection to explore individuals' perceptions of eSports consumption in Iran. Open-ended questions were utilized to elicit detailed responses and insights from participants. Questions included: "What factors and elements are involved in the consumption of eSports?", "How is eSports consumption changing?", and "What forms of consumption are there in eSports?"

Interview Procedures are as follows:

- Each interview lasted between 60 to 85 minutes, allowing for in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives.
- Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim.
- Following transcription, data were coded using thematic analysis techniques. Initial codes and categories were extracted from the transcripts to identify recurring themes and patterns.
- Analytical memos and notes were written during and after the interviews to capture important points, reflections, and emerging ideas. These memos aided in the refinement of codes and categories through iterative analysis.
- Two focus groups were convened among the research participants to further explore and validate emergent themes and concepts identified in the individual interviews. Focus Group Procedures are as follows:
- Each focus group comprised 6 and 5 participants, respectively, selected from the initial pool of interviewees.
- Participants were grouped based on their diverse perspectives and experiences related to eSports consumption.
- Focus group sessions lasted approximately 75 minutes and were facilitated by the researcher, who provided general concepts and categories for discussion.
- Key questions addressed during the focus group discussions included: (1) why is eSports consumption experiencing significant growth? (2) What factors influence the consumption of eSports? And (3) what forms of consumer behaviors are observed in eSports consumption?
- Field notes were recorded during the focus group discussions to capture participant interactions, insights, and responses.
- Audio recordings of focus group sessions were transcribed promptly after each session for subsequent analysis.
- Analytical memos and notes were generated during and after the focus group discussions to document participant experiences, perceptions, and feelings regarding eSports consumption. These memos played a crucial role in refining emerging themes and theories.

Transcribed interview and focus group data were analyzed using thematic analysis techniques. Themes, patterns, and categories were identified, refined, and compared across individual interviews and focus groups to develop a comprehensive understanding of eSports consumption behaviors and cultural dynamics in Iran.

### ***3.3. Data analysis***

The data analysis process was iterative and conducted concurrently with data collection, allowing for constant comparison of data and initial ideas to refine the emerging theory. To complement primary data sources, various supplementary sources were utilized, including gaming social networks, eSports-related documents, observations from eSports competitions, published interviews with professional gamers, statistics published by the Iran Computer Games Foundation (ICVGF), and media reports from news agencies.



Following Clarke's suggestions (Clarke, 2003, 2021), multiple sources of information were employed to enrich the situational analysis and enhance the refinement of the emerging theory.

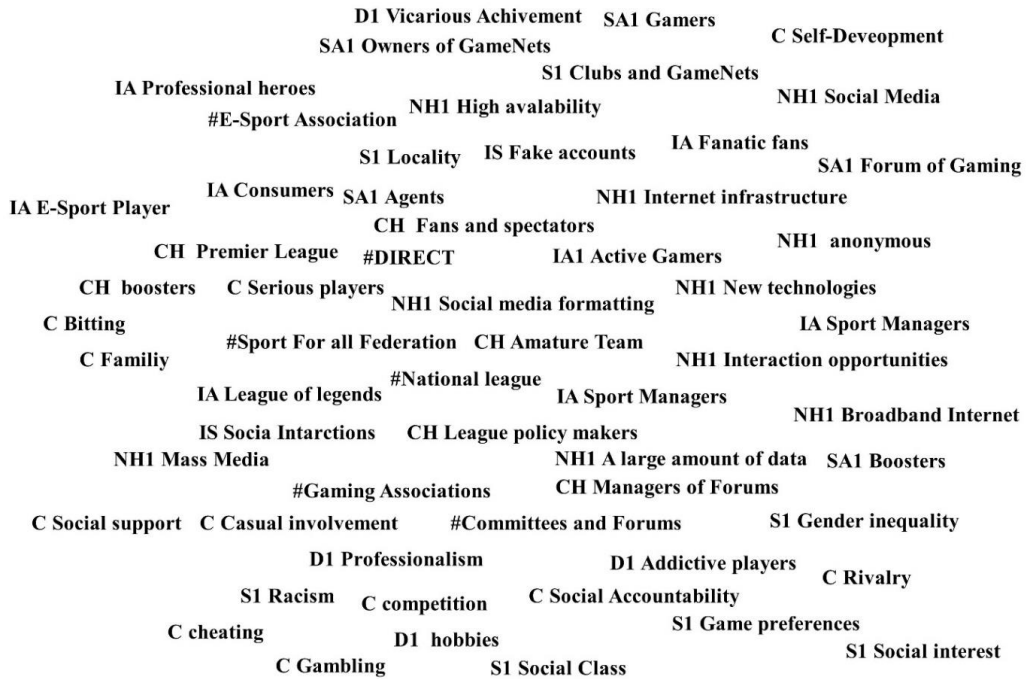
The researcher systematically collected and analyzed relevant data from primary and supplementary sources to identify patterns, establish relationships, and assess the trustworthiness of the findings. The analysis was conducted using situational analysis methodology, as outlined by Clarke (2003, 2021), which involves the creation and refinement of situational maps to comprehensively represent all elements and components of the phenomenon under investigation. Initially, messy situational maps were constructed, incorporating all identified components derived from data collection instruments. This stage facilitated the identification of important categories and their relationships with related concepts.

Abstract Relational Maps were then developed to categorize and integrate identified concepts, following Clarke (2003, 2021)'s instructions. This process enabled the researcher to visualize and organize complex relationships among various elements. Subsequently, arenas/social worlds related to eSports consumption were depicted to further categorize and integrate identified concepts, reflecting the involvement of various individuals, organizations, institutions, and communities in eSports consumption. An Abstract Positional Map was drawn to illustrate five positions of consumer behaviors in eSports consumption based on game preferences and social interactions. Throughout the analysis, data was collected and analyzed simultaneously with a critical perspective, ensuring thorough exploration and interpretation of the data. The maps were revised and rewritten multiple times until data saturation was achieved, in line with Clark's recommendation (2022) to refine maps effectively. Supplementary sources played a vital role in enhancing the refinement and modification of the maps, providing additional context and insights throughout the analysis process.

## **4. Results**

### ***4.1. Abstract messy situational map***

This map illustrates the various elements associated with the dissemination of eSports consumption, encompassing both human and non-human factors, as well as material and symbolic/discursive aspects. The creation of this map involved gathering data from interviews with participants and focus groups, along with supplementary materials. The primary objective was to comprehensively review and analyze all the components of the situation without imposing any constraints. The map was constructed by recording all the information obtained from the participants and information materials on separate sheets, followed by multiple revisions and iterations of the concepts and components. As a result, the map appears untidy and lacks a specific logical or analytical structure, as it includes all components without any predefined order. [Figure 1](#) provides a representative example of this abstract and unordered situational map.



**Figure 1.** Abstract messy situational map of esports consumption.

Following the creation of the initial disorderly and chaotic map, a relational map was subsequently devised to demonstrate the interconnections among the diverse components and concepts. By establishing links based on logical relationships and analytical frameworks, this map presents a visual depiction of the intricate associations and interactions between the various elements, thereby aiding in gaining a more profound insight into the investigated phenomenon. [Figure 2](#) illustrates an example of these connections between the components.

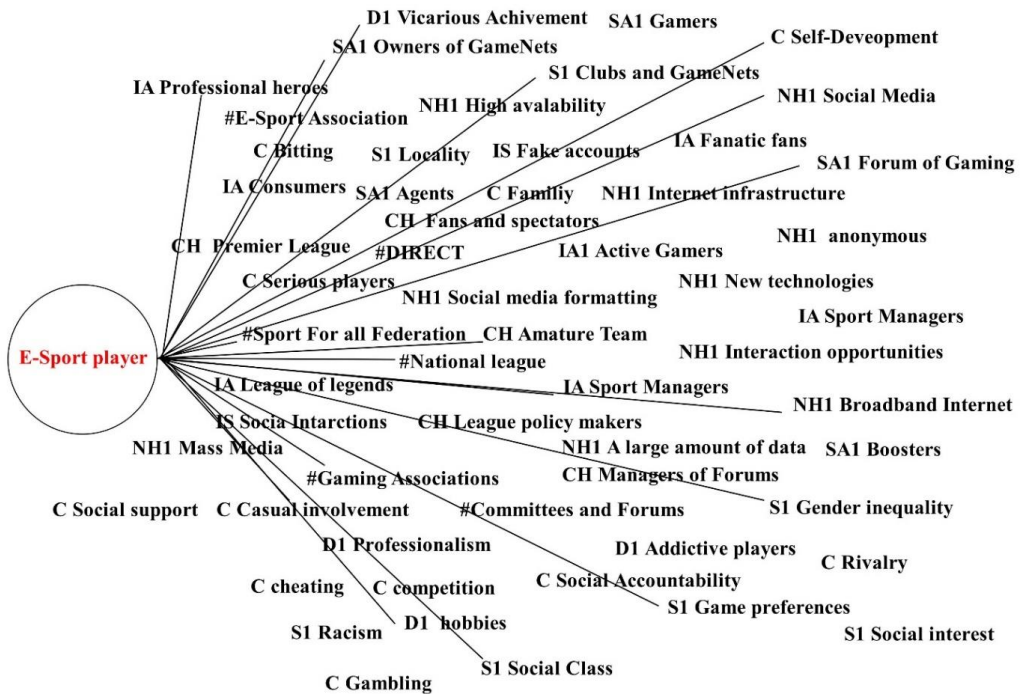


Figure 2. Abstract relational map of esports consumption.

4.2. Abstract ordered situational map

After consulting multiple sources and thoroughly examining the concepts discussed in the interviews and focus groups, the original disorderly and abstract situational map was refined into a more structured format. This newly organized map offers a lucid and condensed representation of the different elements related to the eSports consumption phenomenon and their interconnections. The ordered situational map, which outlines the components involved in eSports consumption, can be seen in Figure 3.

<p><b>Individual Human Elements/Actors:</b> Gamers, Active gamers, Fake accounts, Managers, Players, Managers of Forums, Fake gamers, Families, Brokers, Agents, Boosters, Consumers, Serious players</p>	<p><b>Nonhuman Elements/Actants:</b> Social media, Internet infrastructure, Broadband Internet, New Technologies, Gaming Platforms, Interaction algorithms, Formats of competitions, News agencies</p>
<p><b>Collective Human Elements/Actors:</b> Owners of GameNets, Social classes, Fans, Spectators, League of Legends, Sport for all Federation, Teams, PPolicymakers Sports managers, Committees and associations, Forum of gaming, DIRECT</p>	<p><b>Implicated/Silent Actors/Actants:</b> Politicians, Ordinary players, Owners of the games, Wealth Status, Academics actors, owners of the premier league, shadow gaming Associations</p>
<p><b>Discursive Constructions of Individual And/Or Collective Human Actors:</b> The celebrification of Active players, Professional heroes, Branding the Teams, supporting the Player, Social Activism, Professionalism, Wining all costs</p>	<p><b>Discursive Constructions of Nonhuman Actants:</b> Gaming as a collective entertainment, fandom in the new world, Extreme rivalry, Gaming as a serious leisure, Vicarious achievement, Gaming addiction</p>
<p><b>Political/Economic Elements:</b> Sponsors of players, Sponsors of clubs, Games boosters, Cultural politics of gaming, Economic disturbances, Political sanctions, Social accountability</p>	<p><b>Sociocultural /Symbolic Elements:</b> Gender, Nationality, Ethnicity, Social capital, Logos of Games, National champions, E-sport legends, Social interest</p>
<p><b>Temporal Elements:</b> Casual involvement, Suspension of players, Increased activity during holidays, Holding simultaneous sports events, Holding periodical mega-events, Premier League, Social support</p>	<p><b>Spatial Elements:</b> the multicultural position of teams, high availability, Ease of involvement, The possibility of anonymity, Shared hobbies, Interaction opportunities</p>
<p><b>Major Issues/Debates (Usually Contested):</b> Cheating, Biting, Immorality of players, Economic scandals, Breaking the norms, Insulting social groups and minorities, Marginalization of competitors, Gambling, Racism</p>	<p><b>Related Discourses (Historical, Narrative and/or Visual):</b> Emphasis on winning all costs, Instrumentalization of players, Game preferences, Social media formatting, Directing the games, Abusing of young gamers</p>
<p><b>Other Kinds of Elements:</b> Economic crisis, Self-censorship of players, social replacement of players, Conspiracy for rival teams, Media crises</p>	

**Figure 3.** Abstract ordered situational map of esports consumption.

#### 4.4. Abstract social worlds/arenas map

Clark (2003, 2021) has highlighted one of the key strengths of grounded theory in the SA (Situational Analysis) approach, which lies in its Meso-level analytical framework. This framework is effectively illustrated using the social worlds/arenas map. According to Clark (2022), the Meso-level analysis captures the interplay and overlaps between discourses, social arenas, and organizations. The social worlds/arenas map presents a comprehensive view of the situation, incorporating social worlds, arenas, regimes of action, current discourses, and other pertinent structures and agencies. By utilizing this map, researchers can conduct a thorough analysis of the investigated phenomenon (Clarke, 2021). This map facilitates an insightful examination of the interconnected relationships between actors, social arenas, and organizations that contribute to the development of eSports consumption. In this particular study, Figure 4 portrays the social worlds/arenas involved in the formation of eSports consumption.

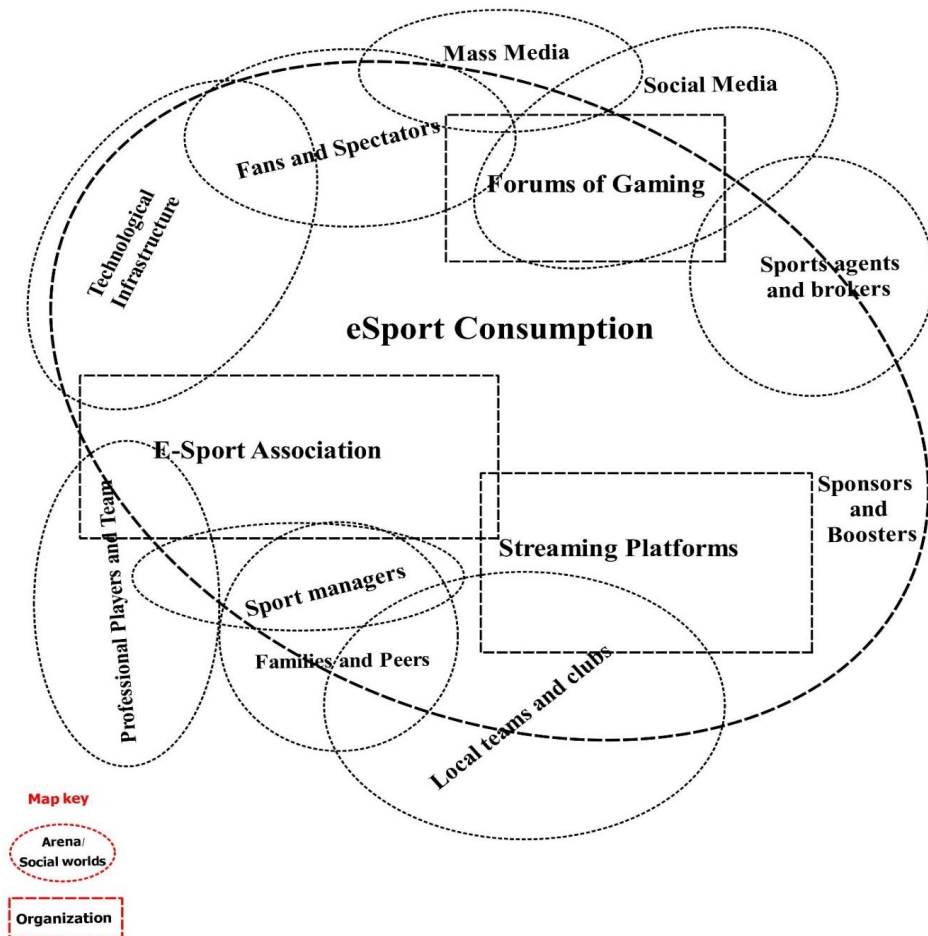


Figure 4. Abstract social worlds/arenas map of esports consumption.

#### 4.5. Abstract positional map

Abstract positional maps serve as effective tools for simplifying and identifying the adopted and un-adopted positions within a given situation (Clarke, 2003). When creating positional maps, it is crucial to accurately represent the existing diversity and distinctions. Hence, in this study, we aimed to elucidate the differences between various forms of consumer behaviors in eSports consumption using two indicators: (1) game preferences, and (2) social interactions. By utilizing these indicators, we successfully identified different consumer behavior patterns related to eSports consumption and described their respective positions within the phenomenon. The resultant abstract positional map of consumer behaviors in eSports consumption is displayed in Figure 5.

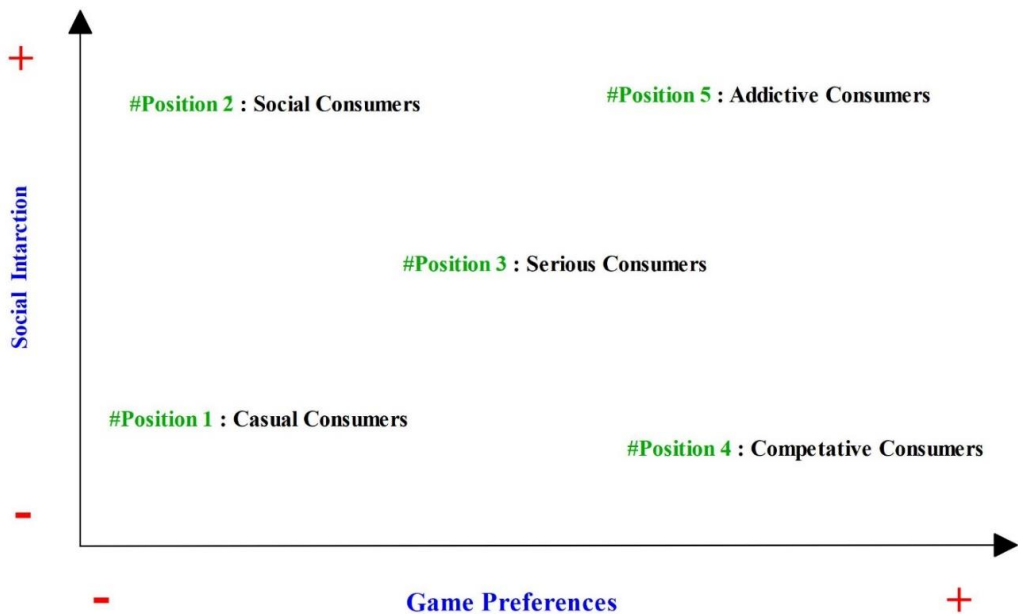


Figure 5. Abstract positional map of consumer behaviors of esports consumption.

#### 4.6. Generated grounded theory of Consumer Behaviors of eSports Consumption in Iran

We can develop the following theory in light of your research's conclusions regarding the popularity of eSports in Iran. The consumption of eSports in Iran is a cultural and social phenomenon that is influenced by the intricate interplay of many different elements. The process of consuming eSports involves both human and non-human components and is influenced by social, political, economic, and cultural factors. These factors are further directed by various discourses and social arenas. People from all walks of life can now take part in eSports thanks to the growth of online and internet platforms, which has greatly increased their accessibility and popularity. The high accessibility of eSports in Iran, which are less common in this type of sports despite the restrictions on traditional sports, is one of the most significant issues raised by this theory. The growing popularity



of these sports in Iran is evidence that people can still participate in them despite the country's economic difficulties and international sanctions. Numerous Key Components make up eSports consumption. Cultural and social influences come first. Iran's cultural and social fabric is heavily woven with the consumption of eSports. Two main factors affect how eSports fans are formed. (1) Game Preferences: Individuals' levels of commitment and involvement in eSports consumption are greatly influenced by the kinds of games they enjoy playing. (2) Social Interactions: Both online and offline social interactions within the eSports community help to define different consumer types. Five different types of eSports fans are identified based on how these two factors interact: (1) *Casual Consumers*: People who occasionally watch eSports and do so primarily for fun and entertainment. (2) *Social Consumers*: eSports fans who value the social component of gaming and participate in eSports events to socialize. (3) *Serious Consumers*: People who show a lot of interest in and dedication to eSports and consider it to be a significant hobby or pastime. (4) *Addictive Consumers*: Individuals who engage in compulsive actions and have a strong dependence on eSports viewing. (5) *Competitive Consumers*: People who actively compete in eSports and aim to succeed in competitive gaming environments. The theory contends that eSports consumption in Iran is a complex and dynamic phenomenon, where several variables interact to influence the attitudes and preferences of various eSports consumers. Understanding these components can aid in creating focused strategies for encouraging sustainable and responsible eSports consumption and advancing the development of the eSports sector in Iran.

## 5. Discussion

One of the key findings from the research is that the consumption of eSports can be analyzed based on two factors: Social Interaction and Game Preferences. Social Interaction refers to the opportunity eSports offer for communication, group interactions, community formation, and shared experiences. On the other hand, Game Preferences encompass the desire to play, compete, and challenge others, or even oneself. Through the lens of Bourdieu's social capital theory (Bourdieu, 2011), these factors reveal how our social networks and the cultural capital we gain through them shape our engagement with eSports. The desire for social interaction within eSports reflects the pursuit of social capital. Watching matches with friends, discussing strategies in online forums, or joining a team all contribute to building this capital. These connections provide access to exclusive information, shared experiences, and a sense of belonging to a specific community. Game preferences can also be understood through social capital. High engagement with competitive aspects of eSports (playing, competing) signifies a desire for cultural distinction. Mastering a specific game and achieving high ranks signifies possessing valuable cultural capital within the eSports community. This capital grants access to recognition, respect, and potentially, opportunities within the professional scene. The interplay of these two factors gives rise to five distinct types of eSports consumer behaviors. The first type is known as casual consumers, characterized by low levels of both social interaction and game preferences. Casual consumers in the realm of eSports are individuals who show an interest in eSports but do not engage with it at a highly

competitive or professional level. Instead, they may enjoy watching eSports events, following teams and players, playing eSports genres, or interacting with eSports content purely for entertainment and leisure purposes. Their social capital comes from the connections and shared experiences within the community. For casual consumers, eSports is akin to traditional sports or other forms of media content, providing them with enjoyment and excitement. According to the Diffusion of Innovations Theory proposed by Rogers (2014), which explains the spread of innovations (in this context, eSports) within a social system, casual consumers can be considered part of the "early majority" or "late majority" groups (Jenny et al., 2021). These consumers adopt eSports after the initial innovators and early adopters have already embraced it. They follow the trend set by the majority of society and groups, gradually turning to the consumption of eSports.

Drawing from Bourdieu's theory of social capital, the second type of eSports consumers is identified as Social Consumers. Within this category, social interaction takes precedence, while the level of Game Preferences remains relatively low. Social consumers in the realm of eSports are individuals who actively engage with eSports content and communities to foster social interactions, build networks, and establish relationships with like-minded individuals. They perceive eSports as a platform that enables them to connect with others, discuss shared interests, and be part of a larger gaming community. Social consumers frequently participate in discussions, forums, and social media platforms related to eSports to remain updated and immersed in the eSports scene. They actively comment on social media posts, share content, and engage in live chat during eSports streams. Additionally, these consumers often exhibit strong attachments to specific eSports teams or players. They provide unwavering support to their favorites, cheering for them during matches, and cultivating a sense of belonging and loyalty within the community. Social Identity Theory can be used to explain the behavior of social consumers. This theory explores how individuals derive their self-concept from group affiliations (Hogg, 2016). In the context of eSports, social consumers may identify strongly with eSports communities or specific teams, using this affiliation to reinforce their social identity. To maintain their active engagement, social consumers utilize various online platforms associated with eSports, such as Twitch, YouTube, Reddit, Discord, Twitter, and dedicated eSports forums. These platforms serve as channels for staying connected, sharing content, and discovering new information about the eSports scene (Gros et al., 2017; Sjöblom et al., 2017; Wulf et al., 2018). It is important to note that while some social consumers may casually play eSports genres, their primary involvement lies in being spectators. They derive immense enjoyment from watching eSports tournaments and events, often participating in watch parties or viewing live streams alongside fellow fans.

The third type of eSports consumers is referred to as Serious Consumers. Within this category, there exists a moderate level of both social interaction and game preferences. Serious consumers in the eSports realm are individuals who consider eSports an integral part of their lifestyle and are deeply committed to it. They invest substantial time, effort, and resources into various eSports-related activities, which may include competitive gaming, closely following professional leagues, attending events, and staying abreast of the latest industry trends. Serious consumers often harbor a profound passion for eSports

and may be dedicated professional gamers or enthusiastic enthusiasts. Drawing from Bourdieu's theory of social capital (Bourdieu, 2011), Serious consumers integrate eSports into their lifestyle, investing significant time and resources. They actively participate in competitive gaming, follow professional leagues, attend events, and stay updated on trends. By experiencing a balance of social interaction, skills development (competence), and community belonging (relatedness), Serious Consumers demonstrate sustained engagement with eSports. The pursuit of social and cultural capital alongside personal needs fulfillment fuels their commitment to the eSports world. Their engagement with eSports aligns well with the principles of the Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which helps elucidate the underlying motivations and behaviors of individuals heavily involved in eSports activities (Qian et al., 2022). According to SDT, proposed by Deci and Ryan (1985), human motivation is influenced by three innate psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2012). Autonomy reflects the need to feel in control of one's actions and decisions. Serious eSports consumers actively participate in gaming activities based on their interests and preferences. They exercise autonomy in choosing the games they play, the roles they adopt, and the teams they support, enabling them to make decisions that resonate with their gaming objectives (Reitman et al., 2019; Wu et al., 2021). Competence, on the other hand, pertains to the need to feel capable and effective in one's actions. Serious eSports consumers are highly motivated to develop and exhibit their gaming skills. They consistently strive to enhance their performance, advance in rankings, and achieve success in competitive settings, thereby satisfying their need for competence in the gaming sphere. Furthermore, serious eSports consumers often find a profound sense of community and belonging within the eSports ecosystem (Bányai et al., 2019; Trail & James, 2001). They establish connections with fellow players, fans, and content creators who share their passion for gaming, thus fulfilling their need for social connection. By experiencing a sense of autonomy, competence, and social connection within the eSports community, Serious Consumers are more likely to demonstrate sustained participation and commitment to eSports-related activities (Biegun et al., 2020).

The fourth type of eSports consumers is known as Competitive Consumers. Within this category, Game Preferences are highly pronounced, but Social Interaction is relatively low. Competitive consumers in the realm of eSports are individuals who place significant emphasis on competitive games and actively engage in sports competitions, leagues, and other competitive events. Their driving force is the desire to excel in gameplay, earn recognition within the eSports community, and compete at a high level. These consumers dedicate substantial time and effort to practicing and refining their skills, aiming to be among the top players in their chosen titles. Skill development and improvement in gameplay take precedence in their pursuit of excellence. Competitive consumers demonstrate a profound understanding of the eSports industry, including professional players, teams, tournaments, and game updates. The behavior of competitive consumers in eSports aligns closely with the principles of the Achievement Motivation Theory (Bányai et al., 2019). They exhibit distinct characteristics and behaviors indicative of their strong motivation to succeed in the gaming context. Bourdieu's social capital theory (Bourdieu, 2011) helps us understand their motivations. Competitive consumers prioritize honing their skills and excelling in eSports. They

actively participate in competitions, leagues, and events, driven by the desire to accumulate cultural capital within the community. Their relentless pursuit of mastery and recognition translates to a strong desire to be among the top players. By consistently practicing, refining their skills, and achieving success, they gain respect and admiration from their peers. Social interaction holds less significance for Competitive Consumers compared to others. While they might connect with other players for strategy discussions or training purposes, building a broader social network within the eSports scene isn't their primary focus. Goal orientation is a prominent feature, as they set specific and challenging objectives related to their game performance, such as achieving higher ranks, winning tournaments, or improving particular aspects of their gameplay (Wagner, 2006). Furthermore, competitive consumers derive satisfaction and fulfillment from outperforming their opponents, climbing the ranks, and gaining recognition within the eSports community. This desire for success in competitive games serves as a powerful motivating force. Persistent and dedicated, competitive consumers invest significant effort in enhancing their gaming skills. They willingly devote time and energy to training and practicing, all in pursuit of their objectives. Their drive to excel and surpass previous records and achievements is evident (Bányai et al., 2019; Rietz & Hallmann, 2023). Receiving recognition from peers, teammates, or the wider eSports community serves as a reinforcement for their continued efforts. Such acknowledgment reinforces their determination to persistently strive for improvement.

The final type of eSports consumers is Addictive Consumers. Within this category, both the level of social interaction and game preferences are extremely high. Addictive consumers in the realm of eSports refer to individuals who display compulsive and excessive behaviors concerning their involvement with sports activities. They may spend an excessive amount of time playing eSports genres, watching eSports events, or consuming eSports content, to the detriment of other important aspects of their lives. Prioritizing eSports over other responsibilities, their gaming habits may have negative effects on their physical and mental health. They may struggle to control the time they spend on eSports, frequently losing track and playing for longer than initially intended. The behavior of addictive consumers of eSports closely aligns with the World Health Organization's (WHO) Gaming Addiction Framework. According to this framework, a mental health condition known as gaming disorder is characterized by diminished control over gaming activities and persistent gaming despite adverse effects on various aspects of one's life (Balhara et al., 2020; Kuss & Griffiths, 2012). Addictive consumers may become excessively preoccupied with gaming, constantly thinking about it, planning their gaming sessions, and prioritizing it over other responsibilities and interests. Based on this framework, it can be inferred that eSports addiction may be driven by a need for escape, where addicted consumers use gaming as a means to escape from real-life stress, problems, or negative emotions. Despite experiencing negative consequences in their physical health, psychological well-being, relationships, or academic/professional life, addictive consumers may persist in excessive gaming (Kuss, 2013; Wu et al., 2021). eSports addiction can disrupt the daily lives of these consumers, impacting their sleep patterns, eating habits, and overall performance. Therefore, it is crucial for eSports organizations, families, and individuals to recognize the signs of addiction and to seek

professional help and support when necessary to address and manage eSports addiction healthily and productively. In summary, the study of eSports consumer behavior in Iran provides valuable insights into the factors influencing the popularity of eSports in the country. By recognizing the different types of eSports consumers and their motivations, policymakers, eSports organizations, and stakeholders can develop strategies to foster a holistic eSports ecosystem.

## **6. Conclusion**

Iran's eSports scene is flourishing thanks to the active use of streaming services like YouTube by gamers and eSports enthusiasts to produce and share content. It is crucial to understand that the world of eSports is constantly changing because it is a sociocultural domain that has been influenced by numerous factors. The development of different gaming preferences and the involvement of various social classes in Iran show how eSports is becoming a more popular sport. Comparing eSports to traditional sports, it stands out for its high accessibility and opportunities for participation. According to official statistics, this has helped to lessen gender inequality in Iranian eSports. The noteworthy 41% participation rate of women in these sports demonstrates improved opportunities for female engagement, a departure from the norms seen in traditional sports. Furthermore, it is essential to acknowledge the multiple behaviors and social arenas that influence eSports consumption. Various human and non-human elements determine and direct the level of access and participation opportunities. Nevertheless, the two primary factors influencing eSports consumption are the degree of social interaction and game preferences. These two factors give rise to five distinct consumer behaviors in the context of eSports, each exhibiting specific characteristics. Understanding these consumer behaviors and their preferences is critical for the success of eSports businesses and marketing activities in Iran. Some characteristics are culturally and socially specific, while others have universal appeal. To ensure success, eSports players must take into account global trends in eSports and tailor their marketing and advertising efforts to resonate with the Iranian audience.

## **7. Implications for policy and future research**

The knowledge of various consumer types can be used by eSports organizations and developers to customize their offerings. They can appeal to a wider audience and boost engagement by finding a balance between competitive gameplay and supporting social communities. This might entail planning both competitive tournaments and social gatherings that promote communication between players and spectators. The eSports industry has identified Addictive Consumers, which calls for proactive action to address gaming addiction. To educate gamers, parents, and educators about the warning signs and potential dangers of gaming addiction, policymakers and mental health specialists should work together to create awareness campaigns and educational initiatives. Public health programs can encourage people to play responsibly and strike a healthy balance between their gaming and other responsibilities. Additionally, eSports organizations can add tools

and features to their platforms that encourage players to take breaks, set time limits on their gaming, and offer resources for getting help if addiction problems develop.

The overall gaming experience can be improved by giving eSports fans more chances to interact with their favorite players and teams. This can strengthen the relationship between players and their audiences. Policymakers may need to take into account the best regulations as Iran's eSports market expands to guarantee fair competition, player welfare, and consumer protection. As well as addressing potential problems with match-fixing and doping, this may entail establishing guidelines for eSports organizations regarding player contracts, salaries, and working conditions. Due to the global nature of e-sports, Iranian policymakers can engage in international cooperation with other countries to share best practices, promote cross-cultural understanding, and develop joint initiatives to drive the growth and positive impact of eSports globally.

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## تب ورزش‌های الکترونیکی در ایران: بررسی رفتارهای مصرف‌کنندگان و پویایی‌های فرهنگی در مصرف ورزش‌های الکترونیکی

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### کلیدواژه

تحلیل موقعیتی  
ترجیحات بازی  
مصرف‌کننده جدی  
مصرف‌کننده گام‌به‌گام  
ورزش الکترونیکی

### نوع مقاله

پژوهشی اصیل

### چکیده

**هدف:** این پژوهش به بررسی رفتارهای مصرف‌کننده در مصرف ورزش‌های الکترونیکی در ایران و پیامدهای آن در چشم‌انداز فرهنگی می‌پردازد.

**روش:** این پژوهش کیفی از رویکرد گراند تئوری برای بررسی رفتارهای مصرف‌کننده در مصرف ورزش‌های الکترونیکی در ایران استفاده کرده است. علاوه بر این، این مطالعه از تحلیل موقعیتی (SA) به‌عنوان رویکرد منتخب در گراند تئوری برای ارائه درک جامعی از زمینه، عرصه/جهان‌های اجتماعی و موقعیت‌های مصرف ورزش‌های الکترونیکی استفاده کرده است.

**یافته‌ها:** یافته‌ها نشان می‌دهد که رفتارهای مصرف‌کننده در حوزه مصرف ورزش‌های الکترونیکی در ایران به‌طور قابل‌توجهی تحت تأثیر دو عامل کلیدی است که عبارت‌اند از: (۱) ترجیحات بازی و (۲) تعاملات اجتماعی. این مطالعه پنج موقعیت متمایز از مصرف ورزش‌های الکترونیکی را که از تأثیر متقابل این عوامل دیدید می‌آیند، شناسایی می‌کند. این یافته‌ها با ارائه توصیفی جامع از رفتارهای مصرف‌کننده در مصرف ورزش‌های الکترونیکی به ادبیات کمک می‌کنند، و پویایی‌ها و ترجیحات فرهنگی در بافت ایران را روشن می‌کنند.

**اصالت و ابتکار مقاله:** این تحقیق پیامدهای عملی برای ذینفعان مختلف از جمله متخصصان صنعت ورزش الکترونیکی، بازاریابان و سیاست‌گذاران دارد. بینش‌های به‌دست‌آمده از درک رفتارهای مصرف‌کننده در مصرف ورزش‌های الکترونیکی می‌تواند به فرآیندهای تصمیم‌گیری استراتژیک، مانند توسعه بازی‌ها، کمپین‌های بازاریابی، و ایجاد محیط‌های اجتماعی جذاب برای علاقه‌مندان به ورزش‌های الکترونیکی کمک کند. این مطالعه با پر کردن شکاف بین تئوری و عمل، راه را برای توسعه رویکردهای مناسب برای پاسخگویی به نیازها و ترجیحات منحصربه‌فرد مصرف‌کنندگان ورزش‌های الکترونیکی ایرانی هموار می‌کند.

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