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Organizational Identity and Esports in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

The concept of organizational identity, originally developed by Albert & Whetten (1985), can guide the strategic decision making process of executives. In consideration of organizational identity, university administrators, cognizant of the competitive U.S. higher education marketplace, may promote an intended image to distinguish their schools from competitors and gain the attention of attractive student candidates. Despite the rapid emergence of esports at the collegiate level, no data is known to exist that links organizational identity to collegiate esports and its associated issues. The author proposes a research design, using a classification protocol employed by Gioia & Thomas (1996), in anticipation of a study to determine the roles of organizational identity and intended image in collegiate esports. Potential findings may demonstrate the relevancy of the organizational identity and image constructs in higher education in relation to perceptions of esports programs and success.

Keywords

Organizational identity, intended image, esports, higher education

1 INTRODUCTION

Descriptive definitions of electronic sports, commonly known as “esports,” include “a form of sports where the primary aspects of the sport are facilitated by electronic systems; the input of players and teams as well as the output of the esports system are mediated by human-computer interfaces” (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017, p. 211), and “an organized and competitive approach to playing video games” (Seo, 2016, p. 265). Funk, Pizzo, & Baker (2018) note that “not all video gaming” should be considered esports (p. 9). Instead, video games must have structure, organization, and competition (Funk et al., 2018, p. 9). Jenny, Manning, Keiper, & Olrich state that for a game to be considered a sport the criterion of “institutionalization” must be met (as cited in Funk et al., 2018, p. 9), meaning that the game must include governing bodies and regulations. As such, a collective definition (i.e., video games must have structure, organization, competition and institutionalization) utilized by Funk et al. (2018) seems fitting.

The nascent world of collegiate esports presents multifaceted and unique governance challenges to college administrators. In particular, the lack of a position on esports by the National Collegiate Athletic Association, the organization responsible for overseeing athletic programs at Division I, II and III schools, has created a void and has forced schools to make decisions about esports without the guidance of a widely-recognized and established governing body. In its place, the National Association of Collegiate Esports (NACE) was formed (“About - Collegiate Esports Governing Body - NAC Esports,” n.d.) and reports over 160 schools now have varsity esports programs (In Queue: Membership News for July 31, 2019, personal communication, July 31, 2019). Organizational identity (OID) may provide an element of structure for college administrators and other stakeholders responsible for making decisions about esports in a complex environment. However, the lack of data describing the relationship between OID and collegiate esports necessitates the research study outlined in this paper. Potential findings may provide insight into the perceptions of the success of esports programs in higher education.

2 ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY

Originally constructed by Albert & Whetten (1985), the concept of organizational identity was later refined by Whetten as “the central and enduring attributes of an organization that distinguish it from other organizations” (Whetten, 2006, p. 220). On the surface, OID may seem relatively simple. However, scholars have interpreted the concept of OID in many ways (Foreman & Whetten, 2016), the reasons for which become clear if the environmental complexity of organizations is considered. Institutional theory suggests that organizations face isomorphic pressures in three forms: coercive, societal and mimetic (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). These pressures define boundaries of conformity for organizations, such that when environmental factors challenge the survival of an organization, “organizations have the option to conform and risk decline or to resist conformity and engage as change agents” (Turner & Angulo, 2018, p. 53).

Stensaker (2015) outlines how OID could be used to understand and explain significant activities in universities based on the characteristics of the change process (i.e., designed or organic) and key constituencies (i.e., internal and external). In regard to change, Stensaker states that OID “may function as a sort of filter” which stakeholders may use to process new information and determine its importance and relevancy (2015, p. 108). Moreover, given emergent issues and changing environments, the question of whether an organization’s identity is enduring, or subject to change, is pertinent (Gioia & Thomas, 1996). Finally, Stensaker notes that the belief among organizational members that a university is indeed distinct is much more important than “whether claims of distinctive collective identities are actually ‘true’” (2015, p. 111).

3 ESPORTS

Esports consists of multiple genres of games, including multiplayer online battle arenas (MOBAs), first-person shooter, real-time strategy, collectible card games and sports games (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017). Many games are team-based and consist of up to six players on two teams, which may compete remotely or in person. Unlike many other sports, however, the rules and regulations of the games are not determined by coalitions of team owners. Instead, video game publishers wield control in esports since they develop and determine the nuances of the games. Publishers have created leagues and tournaments to promote their game titles. In addition, leagues such as the High School Esports League, a national partner of NACE (“National Partners - Collegiate Esports Governing Body,” n.d.) have been formed to coordinate competition (“High School Esports League Home,” n.d.).

According to a Washington Post-University of Massachusetts Lowell poll of 522 Americans aged 14 – 21, 59% of respondents said they played multiplayer videogames within the past twelve months (Ingraham, 2018). The popularity of esports among young Americans is similar to that of the National Football League (Ingraham, 2018) and tournament prizes have begun to reflect as much. Recently, Fortnite publisher Epic Games awarded \$3 million to a 16-year-old player who won its world cup tournament, an amount more than Tiger Woods won at the Masters Tournament or Novak Djokovic won at Wimbledon in 2019 (Pei, 2019).

4 CONSIDERATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

The popularity of esports has drawn the attention of college administrators, as evidenced by the awarding of scholarships to esports players. In 2014, Robert Morris University–Illinois became the first university to offer scholarships to students for playing esports (Funk et al., 2018), offering awards up to 50% of tuition and 50% of room and board (“RMU becomes first university,” 2014). In 2018, Harrisburg University of Science and Technology offered its 16 inaugural varsity esports team members full athletic scholarships along with housing stipends (“HU reveals Esports team name, roster | Harrisburg University,” 2018). Approximately 200 colleges in the U.S. are now collectively providing about \$15 million in yearly tuition scholarships with an average scholarship amount of \$4,800 (Heilweil, 2019). The growth of the industry suggests universities not yet committed to esports may feel pressure to do so. However, there are multiple issues that administrators may wish to consider.

Pizzo, Jones, & Funk interviewed 16 athletic department and student affairs directors and identified five key areas of concern: (1) uncertainty among university stakeholders, (2) publisher control, (3) incongruence with traditional sport, (4) external regulatory concerns, and (5) gender equity (n.d., p. 17). Funk et al. (2018) examined the implications of esports for sport management and identified additional areas of concern for colleges, including the health impact related to player training, opportunities to diversify student-athlete populations, and “the effect on university academic missions” (p. 11). In addition, they note concerns about the gaming culture, citing Mulkerin’s article about racism, sexism and homophobia in esports (Mulkerin, 2016), as well as cheating, match-fixing, doping and gambling (Funk et al., 2018).

As such, students’ interest in esports may not be a strong enough force to compel university officials to support such a program. The input from multiple stakeholders, such as faculty, student affairs leaders and athletics officials may be necessary. To survive and flourish, an organization (functioning as a coalition) “must engage in complex transactions with the environments” (p. 275) on which it depends and may control (Selznick, 1996). An understanding of the central, enduring and distinctive OID attributes that answer the “Who are we as an organization?” question, and a recognition of the regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive pillars of institutional theory (Turner & Angulo, 2018, p. 55), likely provide higher education administrators with a framework for the high risk decision making process described by Turner & Angulo (2018). Dutton & Dukerich (1991) posit that organizational actions are tied to particular issues, which they define as “events, developments, and trends that an organization’s members collectively recognize as having some consequence to the organization” (p. 518). At the same time, organizational identity limits the interpretations of issues and the actions an organization may take (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991).

Furthermore, an organization must also be cognizant of its intended image, that is, how organizational leaders wish external stakeholders to perceive the organization (Brown, Dacin, Pratt, & Whetten, 2006). The greater the difference between OID and image, the more likely external stakeholders will perceive the incongruity and reject the image (Stensaker, 2015). Based on their study of organizational identity and image in higher education, Gioia & Thomas (1996) suggest that an effective way to change OID is to focus on the desired future image, an influential tactic that may help members of an organization prepare for strategic change. Therefore, if a university wishes to change its organizational identity by implementing an esports program, it should

explain why its desired future image contains an esports component. Alternatively, if an organization wishes to incorporate an esports program and at the same time maintain its identity, it must show stakeholders how esports aligns with its OID. The same reasoning may apply to “maintaining” an esports program. In any case, attributions of success of an esports program may depend on the perceptions of stakeholders.

5 RESEARCH DESIGN

Gioia & Thomas (1996), in their study of strategic change in academia, classify schools by identity type. “Utilitarian” schools are defined as having members who “perceive the organization’s character to be oriented mainly toward economic factors” and “normative” schools are defined as having members who “perceive the organization’s character to be oriented mainly toward ideological and value-based concerns factors” (1996, p. 387). As such, attributions of success likely relate to dissimilar factors.

Proposition 1: Schools defined as more utilitarian will evaluate the success of their esports programs using different factors than schools defined as more normative.

The organizational identity of a college is likely related to the issues administrators care about most. Additionally, organizational identity claims are reflected in an organization’s “unique pattern of binding commitments” (Whetten, 2006, p. 220). Commitments, in turn, should receive requisite support. Therefore, the lack of demonstrated commitment likely signifies that those issues are less important and thus should receive less support. In contrast, demonstrated commitment to an issue likely signifies its higher importance and justification of higher support, a key component necessary for success. Therefore, an organization whose actions and commitments reflect its organization identity are more likely to report success.

Proposition 2: Schools that report greater alignment of their esports programs with their organizational identity will report higher levels of esports program success than schools that report less alignment.

Research is necessary to advance these propositions. A survey is to be distributed to stakeholders at universities with esports programs based on data from NACE and other online sources. Information related to esports issues, identity, image and success will be collected. To minimize issues with validation, the questionnaire tested by Gioia & Thomas (1996, p. 401) to measure identity type, identity strength, present image, and future image (all measured on 7-point Likert scales) will be used.

6 DISCUSSION

Whetten (2006) argues that OID has little relevance in regard to routine decision making but that it “is indispensable for most fork-in-the-road choices, especially when a contemplated course of action might be considered out-of-character by a legitimating audience” (p. 226). Furthermore, internal constituencies are more likely to engage in discussions of OID when facing novel, controversial and consequential strategic choices (Whetten, 2006, p. 227). At many schools, decisions regarding esports likely fall into this category.

Every year, a new class of high school graduates enters the higher education marketplace with more exposure to esports than the last. Each university has a decision to make whether to incorporate esports into its student enrollment and retention strategies. Some stakeholders may argue support of video game competitions is an antithetical position in higher education; however, similar arguments were likely made about online education, international branch campuses (see Wilkins & Huisman, 2012) and the reduced reliance on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) in the college admissions process (Turner & Angulo, 2018). On the other hand, some may find students are interested in both esports and STEM programs while others, like The Ohio State University, may wish to develop courses related to the business of esports to meet student demand (Wootton-Greener, 2019).

A decision to support esports will likely add a new dimension to a school’s organizational identity and, via an imaging viewpoint (Brown et al., 2006), signify to prospective students and peer schools a new identity claim. Given the growth of esports in academia, it remains to be seen how much longer such a claim will add a distinctive element to organizational identity.

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