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Framing Esports' JEDI Issues:

A Case Study in Media Irresponsibility

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Framing Esports' JEDI Issues:  
A Case Study in Media Irresponsibility

**Abstract**

**Purpose:** This investigation analyzes Asian, European, and North American coverage of esports' justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI) issues as a case study of media organizations' communications on these topics.

**Design/methodology/approach:** This quantitative content analysis describes coverage of esports' race, gender, age, and social class issues to draw inferences about media organizations' abilities to meet their social responsibilities when reporting on organizational JEDI issues.

**Findings:** There were significant differences across continents; however, most stories only mentioned gender and age, seldom noting esports' race or social class issues.

**Research limitations/implications:** Although all stories analyzed were published in English, the findings extend research suggesting culture may shape the tones, frames, and salience of social justice issues in the media.

**Practical implications:** JEDI issues were not the most prominent topic in at least 80% of the coverage, indicating the normative framework guiding professional journalism since the Cold War fails to guide responsible engagement with contemporary social justice issues.

**Originality/value:** As one of the first studies analyzing media coverage of organizational JEDI issues, the results of this content analysis ( $N = 763$ ) provide a quantitative basis for a critique of media organizations' social responsibility when reporting on these issues.

**Keywords:** eSports, video games, social responsibility, justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion

### Framing Esports' JEDI Issues:

#### A Case Study of Media Irresponsibility

After expressing concerns over sexism in the video game industry, Zoe Quinn and Anita Sarkeesian were targeted in a 2014 harassment campaign known as GamerGate. More recently, legal action against Activision Blizzard, one of the world's largest video game and esports companies, alleged women employees experienced "constant sexual harassment, unequal pay, and retaliation" (Grind, 2022, para 4). These proceedings resulted in 40 executives' dismissals, about \$8 billion in stock losses, and Microsoft's take-over of the brand (Fox, 2021; Sun, 2022). These events also inspired our interest in exploring media coverage of esports' widespread and persistent justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI) issues.

Even though most people learn about an organization's JEDI issues indirectly from the media rather than through first-hand experience in particular industries, research on the media's coverage of these issues is extremely limited. This lack of research is troubling not only because the media are important information sources, but also because their coverage shapes public opinion (Levin *et al.*, 1998; Vogler and Eisenegger, 2021). Thus, their communications about JEDI issues are important elements of the media's social responsibilities because it influences public perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors (Austin, 2010; Bardhan, 2016; Maier and Ravazzani, 2019; Pasztor, 2019; Suh and Lee, 2016). However, coverage of the Me Too and Black Lives Matter movements not only failed to empower women and Black people, but also supported the status quo's hegemonic power structures that disadvantage them (Banks, 2018; Blodgett, 2020; Carney and Kelekay, 2022; Noetzel *et al.*, 2022). Moreover, this type of coverage may feed widespread distrust of the global media's ability to engage with important social issues responsibly (Brenan and Stubbs, 2020; Knox, 2022; Watson, 2022).

Based on these propositions, we selected esports, the fastest-growing competitive market in the world (Stoever, 2021), as the context for a case study analyzing media coverage of organizational JEDI issues. We focused on the eight years between the Gamergate and Activision Blizzard scandals when esports grew into a major global industry (Gough, 2021). Further, we limited our analysis to the media in Asia, Europe, and North America where more than 90% of esports fans and revenue are concentrated (Gough, 2022a). This project's goal is to describe coverage of esports' race, gender, age, and social class issues as a basis for drawing inferences about the media's abilities to communicate about JEDI issues responsibly.

### **Esports' JEDI Issues**

The esports industry's lack of equity and diversity are apparent when analyzing how players engage with the games. For example, the equipment supporting esports play are costly and preclude participation from gamers in lower socio-economic classes. Further, PC-based gaming is even more expensive than console-based gaming, which segregates the more affluent and mostly Asian or White males into the Overwatch League (OWL) or the League Championship Series (LCS) competitions while larger numbers of Black and Latino gamers compete in console gaming tournaments such as Madden and Call of Duty (Johnson, 2019). Not only are these competitions separate, but they are also unequal. For example, Johan Sundstein, the highest-earning PC-based competitor, has won more than \$7 million, while Ian Porter, the highest-earning console player, has won \$1.3 million, and Sasha Hostyn, the highest earning woman competitor, has won about \$420,000 (Esports Earnings, 2022).

Moreover, popular stereotypes of gamers as young, affluent, Asian, or White males are misleading because at least 41% of African and Hispanic Americans, but only 25% of White Americans, identify as avid or casual esports fans (Gough, 2022b). Additionally, about 39% of

gamers are women, and most are age 30 or older (Statista, 2021). However, female participation at the highest levels of esports competitions is frequently as low as 5% due to “persistent sexual harassment and a toxic environment for women” (Pettegrew, 2021, para. 14). Further, racist, sexist, homo- and trans-phobic comments are frequent features of chat dialogues and streaming feeds during esports competitions (Mulkerin, 2016).

### **Corporate Communications and JEDI Issues**

Broadly, organizational communications about JEDI issues have been classified as either proactive corporate social responsibility (CSR) strategies or reactive crisis communication strategies implemented after JEDI issues disrupted their abilities to function (Mundy, 2016; Zhang and Swanson, 2006; Wills, 2020). These issues have also evolved since the 1990s when diversity and inclusion were considered economic and legal concerns due to the costly lawsuits and negative publicity that resulted when organizations failed to comply with nondiscrimination regulations (Bardhan, 2016). More recently, diversity and inclusion have become ethical considerations at the nexus of CSR and diversity management (Hansen and Seierstad, 2017; Maier and Ravazzani, 2019; Suh and Lee, 2016). Thus, organizations promote their diversity and inclusion policies not only as sound business strategies for mining diverse markets, but also as socially responsible guides for daily operations (Laskin *et al.*, 2021).

On the other hand, media coverage of social justice movements is not as encouraging. For example, Blodgett (2020) concluded: “#GamerGate presented these (alt-right) communities, where the toxic and angry mindset of entitled masculinity can find a home, with a valuable handbook that allows them to see what kinds of actions elicit news media attention” (p. 196). Similarly, coverage of the #MeToo movement individualized its focus on rich and famous White women rather than the institutional structures supporting hegemonic masculinity (Benedictus *et*

*al.*, 2019; Starkey *et al.*, 2019). Likewise, coverage of the Black Lives Matter movement “reflected an encompassing pro-white/anti-black master-frame that presented Black Americans as inadequate, lawless, criminal, threatening and at times biologically different. Conversely, whites were presented favorably as ‘protectors’ and ‘virtuous’ (Lane et al., 2020, p. 790). Collectively, these analyses suggest the media may not communicate about JEDI issues responsibly because the normative standards guiding their responsible practices are outdated.

### **Media Social Responsibility**

The first articulation of media social responsibility emerged in a 1947 report from the U.S. Commission on the Freedom of the Press, or the Hutchins Commission. This report contended that the press must remain free from both governmental restrictions and commercial pressures in order to serve society responsibly. About a decade later, Siebert and colleagues (1956) developed the first formal theory of media social responsibility based on the presses’ power to shape public opinion and political outcomes. They conceptualized Social Responsibility as a normative ideal for the media’s role in western democracies that contrasted with the Authoritarian, Libertarian, and Soviet models under other governments (Siebert et al., 1956).

Beyond the United States, a United Nation’s resolution encapsulating the Hutchins Commission’s principles passed unanimously in 1980. Soon thereafter, Habermas’ discourse ethics and theory of the public sphere furthered our understanding of the connections among public deliberations and democratic governance. Habermas’ work identified three necessary conditions for an ethical media industry: preventing information monopolies; engaging with pluralism or diverse perspectives; and maintaining objectivity by covering different sides of issues so audiences can formulate their own judgments (Middleton, 2009, p. 5).

Through the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century, most media organizations and journalists embraced these

neoliberal perspectives specifying accuracy, fairness, objectivity, pluralism, and freedom from government or commercial pressures as the basis for socially responsible practices (Christians & Nordenstreng, 2004). However, contemporary conditions may have made the voluntary ethical codes enshrining these principles outdated. Indeed, many scholars reject the conventional view that journalism's professionalization as an industry was a positive development. Instead, they argue today's media organizations are big businesses and "bastions of narrow and elitist interests rather than of overall societal and democratic interests" (Middleton, 2009, p. 13).

This critical perspective represents a shift away from a paradigm that conceptualized the media as owners of rights and freedoms to a citizen-centered paradigm in which society holds those rights (Christians & Nordenstreng, 2004). This shift is justified because media social responsibility theory was developed in a Cold War context that is much different from the current socio-political and media environment (Sandoval, 2014). Further, professional journalism has become a highly routinized practice with a voluntary ethical code requiring self-censorship rather than "universal, ethical principles that could make social responsibility theory credible internationally in the 21st century" (Christians & Nordenstreng, 2004, p. 13). To substantiate this argument, scholars have called for more cross-cultural case studies to describe how the media support existing power structures in different contexts (Combs *et al.*, 2018; Middleton, 2009).

### **Cross-Continental Tones, Frames, and Salience**

Thus, we developed a quantitative content analysis to compare coverage of esports' JEDI issues across Asia, Europe, and North America because cultural values may influence the media's tone, framing, and JEDI issue salience in distinctive ways (Harcup and O'Neill, 2017; Lewis and Weaver, 2015; Makki, 2020; Reese, 2010; Van Gorp, 2007). This argument is predicated on the premise that culture is a collective pattern of thoughts distinguishing groups of



people from each other, so the media reflect those beliefs and values to connect with their audiences and create social reality (Fung & Scheufele, 2014). We used a cross-continental framework because we expect differences in (1) the media's social roles and (2) JEDI issue conceptualizations to result in distinctive coverage of esports' race, gender, age, and class issues. Moreover, this framework allows us to draw inferences about both the contrasts and the commonalities in the coverage across the continents.

### *Tone*

First, we expect differences in the coverage's tone (i.e., negative, neutral, or positive) to convey sentiment about esports' JEDI issues in ways that are distinct to Asia, Europe, and North America. This expectation is based on differences in the media's social roles and attitudes toward JEDI issues across continents. For instance, the Asian media do not have a traditional watchdog or social critic role typical among the western press, and they are generally less free than those in Europe or North America (Freedom House, 2021). The Asian media's relative lack of freedom frequently results in coverage that is less critical of the status quo than in western democracies (Strömback *et al.*, 2010). Further, the Asian media may use less negative but more positive tones than the western media (Painter *et al.*, 2010), including when reporting on an organization's socially responsible behaviors (Tang, 2011).

Compared to Asia, the European media are freer and more independent (Freedom House, 2021). However, European countries more actively regulate media companies and their content than North America governments (Fukuyama and Grotto, 2020). Further, publicly owned media are more socially responsible than commercial media organizations, and they are more common and influential in Europe than in Asia or North America (Ingenhoff & Koelling, 2012; Matsa, 2018). On the other hand, private European media organizations are more likely to explicitly

support particular ideological viewpoints than Asian or North American media (Hallin, 2005). Overall, these differences may translate into the European media providing more negative coverage than the Asian press, and less neutral coverage than the North American media (Painter *et al.*, 2010; Strömbäck *et al.*, 2010).

Finally, North American media are not only freer than Asian media and subject to less governmental control than European media, but also the population's attitudes toward diversity and inclusion policies are more positive (Drake and Poushter, 2016; Wike *et al.*, 2016). Since no prior cross-cultural research has analyzed coverage of organizational JEDI issues, though, we do not have adequate grounds for predictions. Thus, we asked:

RQ1: What was the tone of the Asian, European, and North American media coverage of esports' JEDI issues?

#### *Issue and Source Frames*

In addition to the coverage's tone, we also expect cultural values to influence the way the media frame or use central organizing ideas to define esports' JEDI issues across continents (Jiang *et al.*, 2016). For instance, North American organizations have adopted more active roles in diversity and inclusion policymaking than Asian or European companies because "having a workforce that mirrors the customer base is comparatively more important in North America than elsewhere" (SHRM, 2009, p. 33). Alternately, Asian media scholars and practitioners have engaged in de-westernization processes over the past several decades that have resulted in more distinctive media practices and content (Iwabuchi, 2010).

Specifically, we wanted to analyze the coverage's framing because it is one of the most informative and productive frameworks for understanding the media's content and effects relate to social justice issues (e.g., Teresa, 2022). Likewise, we focused on issue and source frames

because they are two of the most influential frame categories, powerfully shaping public perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors (Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2009). For instance, issue frames may contextualize topics by presenting them as examples of broader economic, business, governmental, or other organizational concerns (Entman, 1993). Since we wanted to understand how the media on each continent used issues to contextualize their stories, we asked:

RQ2: What were the most prominent issue frames in the Asian, European, and North American media coverage of esports' JEDI issues?

In addition to issue frames, source frames influence public opinion because they identify the perspectives and experiences included in the coverage. For example, the news media more frequently quote people with dominant identities than people with minority identities, even when accounting for population proportions (Entman and Rojecki, 2000). This biased sourcing suggests that the experiences of the people adversely affected by social justice issues may seldom be heard (Poindexter et al., 2003). Likewise, if esports competitors are not quoted in stories about the industry's JEDI issues, their experiences may also remain unknown. Since we wanted to understand the perspectives included in the media's coverage of esports' JEDI issues, we asked:

RQ3: What were the most prominent source frames in the Asian, European, and North American media coverage of esports' JEDI issues?

### *JEDI Issue Salience*

Along with the tones and frames, we expect cultural values to influence the salience of particular JEDI issues in the esports' coverage. Our expectation that cultural values will influence the salience of these issues is based on their differing conceptualizations on the three continents. For example, many Asian countries' cultural values combined with their relatively

homogenous racial populations have resulted in their operationalization of JEDI issues largely in terms of gender diversity (Cooke *et al.*, 2020). Alternately, Germany and France are two of the many European countries that do not collect data on race or ethnicity (Oltermann and Henley, 2020; Shendruk, 2021). These policies have focused the European business community's diversity and inclusion efforts on gender and age (Farndale *et al.*, 2015).

In North America, on the other hand, businesses have expanded their diversity efforts to include more than gender and age (SHRM, 2009). In fact, fewer than a third of North Americans said their diversity efforts were focused on women, compared to more than 50% of Asians and Europeans (SHRM, 2009). Further, North American companies were more attentive to racial diversity than were those in Asia or Europe. Based on these differences, we wanted to analyze the salience of race, gender, age, and social class issues on the three continents. Specifically, we wanted to compare how frequently they were mentioned as well as how frequently they were the most prominent issue in the coverage. Thus, we posed our final two research questions:

RQ4: How frequently did the Asian, European, and North media coverage mention esports' race, gender, age, and social class issues?

RQ5: How frequently were race, gender, age, and social class issues the most prominent topic in the Asian, European, and North American coverage?

## **Method**

### *Data*

To answer the research questions, we conducted a quantitative content analysis of media coverage of esports' JEDI issues between 2014 and 2021. To locate the coverage, we executed Boolean searches on the *Newsbank* database for articles that included "esports" in the headline and a series of keywords related to race, gender, age, and social class in the text. These keywords

included: “affluent, age, Asian, Black, class, demographic, discrimination, diversity, ethnic, ethnicity, equity, gender, Hispanic, inclusion, justice, Latin, men, old, poor, privilege, race, racism, rich, sex, social justice, young, wealthy, and White.” Articles meeting these search criteria and published in news sources (e.g., *China Daily*, *Sunday Telegraph*, *Associated Press*) and trade publications (e.g., *Nikkei Asian Review*, *Digiday*, *International Business Times*) in Asia, Europe and North America were retrieved from the database. These continents were selected because they are home to about 95% of the esports’ market (Gough, 2022a). Since there were not enough stories in each country to conduct valid analyses, Table One shows the number of articles from each country within the three continents that the *Newsbank* search yielded.

*Table 1: Continents, Countries, and Articles*

Locations	Articles
Asia	156
China	39
Japan	28
Korea	32
India	31
Philippines	13
Singapore	13
Europe	206
UK	82
France	51
Germany	73
North America	401
Canada	118
USA	283
Total	763

Although *NewsBank* is one of the most frequently used archives in scholarly research, returning more robust and less biased results than other databases (Lacy *et al.*, 2015), it may also introduce bias. For instance, the *NewsBank* database only indexes English-language articles, and it archives more North American than European or Asian publications. While these limitations may bias the results, we also must consider how analysis of English-only publications facilitates more uniform comparisons of the coverage across continents, since translations and idiosyncratic

language issues could also introduce biases. In fact, this limitation may also become a strength of this study because analyzing English-only coverage may homogenize the content, confounding our ability to identify significant differences across continents.

### *Coding Protocol*

The *Newsbank* search process yielded a universe of 763 articles, all of which were coded. Each article was considered a single unit of analysis and was coded for continental origin; tone; issue and source frames; mentions and prominence of race, gender, age, and social class issues. These dependent variables were intentionally selected because they are the most frequently used characteristics and operationalizations of JEDI issues not only at the organizational level, but also among scholars (Harwood and Anderson, 2002; SHRM, 2009; Yousman et al., 2020). Thus, this framework provides a quantitative basis for drawing critical inferences about the media's ability to communicate about these issues responsibly.

First, in terms of tone, coders assumed the coverage was objective and neutral unless specific words were used, particularly in the headline and/or lede. For instance, words such as gain, success, asset, growth, and honor were coded positive while loss, unsuccessful, liability, failure, unfair, and unequal were coded as negative. Unless the article was overwhelmingly either positive or negative, it was coded as neutral. Next, the coders determined which issue was the most prominent in each story based on its placement and length. The issue frame categories were adapted from prior research (Kozman, 2017; Woods, 2019) and included: (1) Business (finance, economics, and related transactions); (2) Human Interest (profile stories); (3) Events (tournament and other event reports); (4) Schools (esports programs); (5) Government (regulatory, legal, and military roles); and (6) JEDI (gender, race, age, social class) issues.

To analyze how the coverage used source frames, coders noted the most prominent source quoted in each story based on placement and length. The source frame categories included: no quote, esports competitor, gaming industry employee, non-gaming industry employee, academic/expert, or other. Next, coders determined which JEDI issues were mentioned in each article. To make this determination, the coders noted whether each article mentioned the racial or gender identities, the ages, and/or social classes of the people in the story. Then, based on that content's placement and length, coders noted whether a particular gender, race, age, and/or social class issue was the dominant topic in the story.

#### *Intercoder Reliability*

Two coders double coded 25% of the total sample. Intercoder reliability was determined using Krippendorff's alpha and Cronbach's alpha. The reliabilities ranged from 0.88 to 1.0, with an average alpha score of .93, suggesting the results are reliable.

### **Results**

The first research question asked about the tone of esports' JEDI coverage. As shown in the top rows of Table Two, the results of a cross-tabulation with Pearson's chi-square indicated the tone was significantly different: it was more positive in Asia, more negative in Europe, and more neutral in North America. For example, *The Financial Post* (Europe) published a negative story and *Ars Technica* (North America) objectively reported on Garena Games' policy limiting gay and transgender female players at the Asian League of Legends' tournaments. However, this story received no coverage in Asia. While these tonal differences are interesting, Table Two also shows that the proportions of positive, neutral, and negative stories were more similar than different across continents.

*Table 2: Tones, Dominant Issue and Dominant Source Frames by Continent (in percentages)*

	Asia (n = 156)	Europe (n = 206)	North America (n = 401)	Total (N = 763)	X <sup>2</sup>	p	V
<b>Tones</b>							
Positive	67	52	49	53	38.79	.00	.13
Neutral	33	36	46	41			
Negative	0	12	5	6			
<b>Issues</b>							
Business	59	48	64	59	53.30	.00	.33
Human Interest	0	6	8	6			
Events	22	14	6	11			
Schools	4	6	12	9			
Government	4	6	2	3			
JEDI Issues	11	20	8	12			
<b>Sources</b>							
Game Employee	32	59	57	52	110.02	.00	.29
Other Employee	14	9	19	15			
Academic	11	6	12	10			
Competitor	7	12	1	5			
Other	3	4	4	4			
None	33	10	7	14			

The second and third research questions asked about the issue and source frames in the coverage. As shown in the middle rows of Table Two, the results of a cross-tabulation with Pearson's chi-square indicated the most prominent issues were significantly different across continents. In particular, business issues were most prominent topics on all continents, but especially in North America. Additionally, JEDI issues were more prominent in the European media coverage, and the Asian coverage included no human-interest stories. Next, as shown in the bottom rows of Table Two, the results of a cross-tabulation with Pearson's chi-square indicated that the dominant sources were also significantly different because the Asian stories more frequently included no quotes while the European coverage quoted esports competitors the most and the North American media did so the least frequently.



These differences notwithstanding, the total column in Table Two indicates business and events were the most prominent topics in 70% of the coverage while esports industry employees and their partners were the most prominent sources in 75% of the coverage. For instance, *Kyodo News* (Asia) interviewed an industry employee in an article listing the growing numbers of Japanese firms involved in esports because of its appeal to young audiences. Similarly, industry employees were the most prominent sources in a *Le Monde* (Europe) story about Sony using esports to engage young customers, and the *Toronto Star* (North America) reported on a movie theater chain using esports to draw the gamer demographic into their cinemas.

*Table 3: Mentions of Race, Gender, Age, and/or Social Class by Continent (in percentages)*

	Asia (n = 156)	Europe (n = 206)	North America (n = 401)	Total (N = 763)	X <sup>2</sup>	p	V
Race	7	9	4	6	4.52	.10	.06
Gender	55	48	32	41	31.02	.00	.20
Age	66	42	38	45	32.51	.00	.17
Class	4	3	11	7	15.62	.00	.14

The fourth and fifth research questions asked about the salience of esports' race, gender, age, and social class issues among the continents. To answer these questions, we first analyzed how frequently race, gender, age, and/or social class were mentioned in the coverage. As shown in Table Three, the results of a series of cross-tabulations with Pearson's chi-square indicated mentions of gender, age, and class were significantly different across continents. Specifically, the Asian and Europe coverage included significantly more mentions of gender than the North American coverage, which included more frequent mentioned social class.

These differences notwithstanding, the commonalities in the coverage shown in Table Three's Total columns indicate mentions of race were not significantly different, occurring in less than 10% of any continent's coverage, and social class issues was even less seldom

mentioned. For example, *Animation Xpress* (Asia) published a story on Indian women in esports and a *Deutsche Welle* (Europe) story explained the strategies women esports competitors use to deal with harassment and abuse. Alternately, a story in *AdAge* (North America) elaborated on a Nielsen study that indicated esports fans are largely middle-class males between the ages of 18 and 34 in households with an average annual household income of at least \$64,000.

Next, we analyzed how frequently race, gender, age, and social class were the dominant issues in the coverage. As shown in Table Four, the results of a cross-tabulation with Pearson's chi-square indicated there were significant differences among the continents. Specifically, gender was more frequently the most prominent issue in the Asian and European than the North American coverage, where age was more frequently prominent. For example: a *Macau Daily Times* (Asia) article explained how women in esports bolstered the industry's market and revenue. Alternately, *The Guardian* (Europe) described the death threats a woman esports analyst received on International Women's Day, and a *Mashable* (North America) story explained how *Disney* uses esports to appeal to younger audiences. However, Table Four also shows that (1) neither race nor social class was the most prominent issue on any continent's coverage; (2) age was not the most prominent topic in the Asian or European coverage; and (3) JEDI issues were not the most prominent topic in at least 80% of any continent's coverage.

*Table 4: Stories Primarily about Race, Gender, Age, and/or Social Class (in percentages)*

	Asia (n = 156)	Europe (n = 206)	North America (n = 401)	Total (N = 763)	X <sup>2</sup>	p	V
Race	0	0	0	0			
Gender	20	20	8	14			
Age	0	0	5	3	39.78	.00	.23
Class	0	0	0	0			
None	80	80	87	84			

### Discussion

This case study's purpose was to describe how the Asian, European, and North American media covered esports' JEDI issues as a case study of their reporting on organizational race, gender, age, and social class issues. To achieve this goal, we compared the tones, frames, and frequencies of race, gender, age, and social class issues in esports' JEDI coverage between 2014 and 2021. Overall, the findings indicate there were significant differences in the coverage among the continents. These results suggest cultural values may influence media organizations' reporting on organizational JEDI issues.

Across the continents, however, most of esports' JEDI coverage was positive or neutral, presenting esports as a growing business rather than an industry with persistent disparities in race, gender, age, and social class. For example, gender and age were relatively frequently mentioned in the coverage, but race and social class were seldom noted. Moreover, none of these JEDI issues were the most prominent topic in 80% of any continent's coverage. Thus, the implications of coverage's differences and its similarities across the continents are compelling.

#### *Theoretical Implications*

Our finding that most of esports' JEDI coverage was positive reflects the industry's rapid growth and increasing popularity. That said, the lack of negative coverage, particularly in Asia, is both remarkable and aligns with previous studies indicating the Asian media are less negative than western media and avoid covering controversial stories (Wang, 2012; Yeo, 2001). Likewise, the finding that the coverage was more negative in Europe than in North America also aligns with research suggesting North American media are more neutral and European media are more negative (Hallin, 2005; Painter *et al.*, 2010). These differences notwithstanding, the proportions and totals of the coverage's tones were more similar than different across the three continents.

Next, our finding that the overall coverage most frequently mentioned gender and age issues was intuitive because the esports market skews young and male, and gender is the most prominent JEDI consideration in Asia and Europe. These relatively frequent mentions of gender and age, however, starkly contrasted with the much rarer references to race and social class. In fact, most of the coverage only mentioned the esports market in vague and general terms (e.g., young, male, Gen Z, or Millennial), identifying it as a desirable demographic for marketers without describing its racial or social class characteristics. Indeed, at least 80% of all the coverage was primarily about the business of esports and only mentioned race, gender, age, or social class issues. Thus, comparing differences in the remaining 20% of the coverage, nearly all of which was focused on gender, may be less compelling than trying to understand why so few stories focused on esports' disparities in race, age, and/or social class.

This scarcity of negative stories focused on esports' JEDI issues begs questions about the media's ability to report on race, gender, age, and social class issues in socially responsible ways. From a critical perspective, this scarcity suggests most of the coverage was falsely positive or toxically neutral. This characterization is apt because most articles focused on the positive aspects of the industry's rapid economic growth, glorifying its superficial diversity efforts that fail to address systemic inequities, and depicting its fanbase as a prime target for marketers to engage affluent, young, White, or Asian men who are difficult to capture on other channels. This false positivity focused the coverage on the organizations' perspectives, quoting industry employees and proponents, but excluding competitors with minority identities. For example, a positive *Forbes* story in 2021 interviewed a London entrepreneur who founded an esports organization that sponsors anti-racism campaigns, but the article does not quote competitors with

minority identities, nor does it describe the problems this program was designed to combat: frequent and persistent discrimination and abuse.

The coverage's neutral tone was also problematic because it legitimizes voices opposing justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion under the guise of being objective, fair, and balanced. Rather than addressing JEDI issues directly, these toxically neutral stories establish a false equivalency between those benefitting from the status quo (i.e., industry executives) and those victimized by the current system (i.e., gamers with minority identities). For instance, an objective and lengthy 2016 *New York Times*' report on the industry's inclusivity efforts explained how esports is attracting more women gamers, but only briefly mentioned the rape and death threats they frequently receive. Overall, these discouraging findings also align with research on coverage of contemporary social justice movements suggesting the coverage empowers people benefitting from systematic racism, hegemonic masculinity, ageism, and classism (Banks, 2018; Blodgett, 2020; Carney and Kelekay, 2022).

Considering that most media organizations rely on advertising revenue that fluctuates based on popularity, and that affluent men have traditionally owned and staffed media organizations, their complicity in upholding hegemonic power structures plaguing the competitive gaming industry may be disappointing, but also is expected. What is surprising, however, is that the media lag far behind other organizations that have adopted diversity and inclusion as key principles guiding their daily operations and communications. For example, it is an open secret that cost of admission to esports competitions is not only financial because players must be able to afford the technology, but also psychological because gamers with minority identities must tolerate pervasive discrimination, harassment, and abuse. Just like the open secrets surrounding Harvey Weinstein's treatment of women, police violence against Black

people, or the treatment of minorities in the gaming industry, however, the media seem to lack the vocabulary, the will, and/or the ability to engage with these issues directly - until they become prominent social media campaigns (e.g., #Gamergate, #MeToo, and #BLM). Then, once these movements gain grassroots support, the media legitimize oppositional voices supporting systemic inequalities.

This pattern of media irresponsibility leads us to question these organizations abilities to serve society. In particular, media organizations' abilities to communicate about JEDI issues in ways that are socially responsible are predicated on their independence from commercial interests. However, the environment is more competitive and media organizations depend on advertising revenue, making them beholden to private interests today more than ever. Moreover, since advertising revenue fluctuates based on popularity, journalists and media organizations may hesitate to report on JEDI issues because they fear alienating their audiences. Indeed, the risks of offending viewers or advertisers through investigative stories highlighting the industry's JEDI issues outweigh the rewards of socially responsible journalism when the cancellation of advertising contracts or the loss of readership is an existential threat.

Overall, this case study's results further arguments that the voluntary ethical codes underlying socially responsible media practices are ineffective because their coverage is explicitly biased against stakeholders with minority identities, and it fails to amplify diverse perspectives so viewers can formulate their own judgments. Thus, this case study in media social irresponsibility suggests these organizations may be unable to report on organizational JEDI issues in socially responsible ways. Indeed, esports' JEDI coverage largely omits minority voices and focuses on the industry's economic rather than social interests. Thus, the coverage is not objective, but biased – framing issues through the perspectives of those who construct and

maintain power (Parsloe & Campbell, 2021). This lack of socially responsible coverage is especially worrisome as media globalization and consolidations combined with historically low levels of public trust further their reliance on advertising, which diminishes their abilities to communicate about JEDI issues responsibly (Gilens & Hertzman, 2000; Metz, 2018).

### *Practical Implications*

These issues are even more problematic when considering their practical implications. Since the media's tones and framing may convey sentiment, assign responsibility, and make judgments about esports' JEDI issues, this false positivity and toxic neutrality may lead audiences to assume the industry's inequities have been resolved. Moreover, since the media do not make organizational JEDI issues salient issues in their reporting, public pressure on the esports industry to address them is largely non-existent. But women in esports continue to face discrimination and sexual harassment (Lorenz and Browning, 2020), and gamers with minority identities openly discuss the harassment they experience (ESPN, 2020), and these stories have never been a secret among industry insiders (Krell, 2019). However, they became salient on July 20, 2021, when legal actions against Activision Blizzard documented the organization's equal pay violations, sex discrimination, and sexual harassment. Except for such rare but sensational stories however, the media coverage promoted an illusion of positivity in its focus on the industry's rapid growth, and it appears to continue to do so, at least until the next crisis in the industry erupts.

### *Limitations and Future Research*

As with all research projects, this case study also has its limitations. First, as previously explained, we only analyzed articles written in English and retrieved from the *Newsbank* database, and we limited the scope of our case study to the three continents dominating the

esports industry. However, *Newsbank* is commonly used in academic research, we coded the population of 763 articles rather than a sample, and the effect sizes in most of our results were moderately strong.

Finally, much of the research on media framing focuses on their effects instead of their contents. Since this case study only analyzed the content, however, future research could test the influence of this coverage on viewers' responses. Moreover, future research may elaborate on the ways media organizations could operationalize JEDI issues as guiding principles in their daily operations like other major business organizations. This operational transition could also help the media develop strategies for covering organizational JEDI issues in ways that do not empower oppositional voices supporting the status quo's systemic inequalities.



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