
The Utopia of Gender-Neutral and Inclusive Competitions? Esports, Gender, and Disability in the French-Language Press (1996–2026)

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Résumé

While sport has historically been a powerful vector of discrimination, inequality, and exclusion, competitive video gaming - emerged in the 1990s with the promise that thanks to digital technologies enabling participants to transcend the body and physical strength (Haraway, 1991; Turner, 2008) - people of different genders, ages, and physical abilities could compete on an equal footing. However, in recent years, research has highlighted the ableist and hypermasculine character of esports culture, as well as the discrimination experienced by marginalized groups (Rogstad, 2022; Ripetta & Silvestri, 2024; Legierse & Ruotsalainen, 2024). Within e-sports itself, associations and collectives (such as Women in Games and Handigamer) have emerged to promote more inclusive e-sports.

Situated within cultural history and drawing on media framing theory (Van Gorp, 2007) and the sociology of public problems (Aubin et al., 2022), this study examines the role of the press in the normalization of a more or less egalitarian and inclusive form of esports since 1996. To this end, the discourses of 9,330 general-interest and sports news articles in our corpus were subjected to a media frame analysis (Van Gorp, 2010).

The analysis highlights the role of the "utopian" frame in constructing the ideal of an inclusive and gender-neutral sport, as well as in its reconfiguration over the past 30 years. Since 2016, discrimination against women and disabled athletes in esports has been highlighted and made public through the "(in)justice" frame. Inseparable from media editorial logic and initiatives, these minority frameworks are nevertheless challenged by the dominant "sports discipline" frame. The analysis highlights his role, which promotes hegemonic masculinity, (re)establishes the traditional gender order of sport, and leads to the reproduction of differentiated framing of athletes with disabilities (Pate & Hardin, 2024) and women athletes (Bernstein & Edward, 2024) in media coverage related to esports.

Mots-Clés: esport, gender, disability, masculinity, sport media complex

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