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Competition, Legitimacy, and the Moral Economy of Merit in Gamer Subculture: The Case of Super Smash Bros. Ultimate in Spain

Competencia, legitimidad y economía moral del mérito en la subcultura gamer: el caso de Super Smash Bros. Ultimate en España

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Abstract:

Over the past decades, geek subcultures have shifted from the margins to an increasingly central position within digital media ecosystems. This article examines the Spanish competitive Super Smash Bros. Ultimate community through the concept of the moral economy of merit to explore how identity, legitimacy, and belonging are constructed within a contemporary gaming subculture. Adopting a sociocultural and communication-oriented perspective, the study employs a qualitative approach based on 14 in-depth interviews with high-level players from the Spanish competitive scene. The findings show that competitive identity is built upon a pre-existing fan identity and consolidated through identification with a main, which functions as a performative extension of the player. Competitive play operates as a cultural practice sustained by shared match analysis, informal mentoring, and offline tournaments, where visibility and recognition are collectively negotiated. The findings also reveal a tension between the dominant meritocratic narrative and structural constraints related to resources, access, and public visibility. The concept of the moral economy of merit is proposed to explain how symbolic recognition is distributed within this hybrid ecosystem of leisure, cultural production, and professional aspiration. The study contributes to rethinking esports as an expression of the “other” cultural industry.

Keywords: gamer subculture, Super Smash Bros. Ultimate, participatory culture, esports, digital identity, moral economy of merit, networked communities.

Resumen:

En las últimas décadas, las subculturas *frikis* han transitado de la marginalidad hacia una creciente centralidad en los ecosistemas mediáticos digitales. Este artículo analiza la comunidad competitiva española de Super Smash Bros. Ultimate para comprender, desde el concepto de economía moral del mérito, cómo se construyen identidad, legitimidad y pertenencia dentro de una subcultura contemporánea de los videojuegos. Desde una perspectiva sociocultural y comunicativa, se adopta un enfoque cualitativo basado en 14 entrevistas en profundidad a jugadores de alto nivel del circuito nacional. Los resultados muestran que la identidad competitiva se construye sobre una identidad

previa como aficionado y se consolida mediante la identificación con un personaje principal, que opera como extensión expresiva del jugador. La competencia funciona como práctica cultural sostenida por análisis compartido, mentoría informal y torneos presenciales, donde la visibilidad y el reconocimiento se negocian colectivamente. Asimismo, emerge una tensión entre la narrativa meritocrática dominante y condicionantes estructurales vinculados a recursos, acceso y exposición pública. Se propone el concepto de economía moral del mérito para interpretar cómo el reconocimiento simbólico se distribuye en este ecosistema híbrido entre ocio, producción cultural y aspiración profesional. El estudio contribuye a repensar los deportes electrónicos como expresión de “la otra” industria cultural.

Palabras clave: subcultura de los videojuegos, Super Smash Bros. Ultimate, cultura participativa, deportes electrónicos, identidad digital, economía moral del mérito, comunidades en red.

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, so-called geek subcultures—including manga and anime fans, video game players, cosplay enthusiasts, and technology aficionados—have shifted from cultural marginality to an increasingly central position within contemporary media ecosystems. Far from representing mere consumer niches, these communities have evolved into spaces of cultural production and identity negotiation, driven by digitalisation and the expansion of social platforms that enable fans not only to consume content but also to reinterpret, remix, and redistribute it.

As Benkler (2006) argues, the networked economy has fostered decentralised models of social production in which peer collaboration transforms traditional markets and structures of authority. Within this context, digital communities can organise themselves without formal hierarchies (Shirky, 2008), generating forms of reputation and recognition that reshape legitimacy (O'Neil, 2011; Reagle, 2010). However, this apparent horizontality coexists with sociotechnical infrastructures that structure

visibility and interaction (Star & Ruhleder, 1996; van Dijck, 2013), placing geek culture in a constant tension between autonomous participation and platform logics.

Within this broader landscape, the competitive video game ecosystem—particularly fighting games—provides a revealing case. Although esports are commonly examined through the lenses of performance or professionalisation, we propose an alternative perspective that understands competitive play as a situated cultural practice embedded within gaming subculture, where identity, belonging, and legitimacy are performatively constituted. This approach engages with critiques of the dominant meritocratic discourse surrounding gaming culture. Paul (2018) argues that the notion of toxic meritocracy frames competitive success as the exclusive outcome of individual effort and skill, while obscuring structural inequalities related to access to resources, time availability, public visibility, and support networks. Within this context, competitive identity emerges not solely from technical performance but also from sustained participation in the community, public exposure, and identification with a player-selected main, which functions as a symbolic extension of the player.

This article examines the Spanish competitive Super Smash Bros. Ultimate (SSBU) community as a case study to explore how identities, symbolic hierarchies, and communicative dynamics are constructed within a gaming subculture. Building on Postigo's (2003) account of the transition from leisure to labour in digital culture, and engaging with Paul's (2018) critique of meritocracy, we investigate how competitive practice blurs the boundaries between playful engagement, structured discipline, and professional aspiration. From this dialogue, we propose the concept of the moral economy of merit, understood as a symbolic system in which competitive recognition depends not only on performance but also on visibility, community participation, and collective processes of validation.

Drawing on in-depth interviews with high-level players from the Spanish competitive circuit, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do competitive SSBU players construct their identities within the Spanish gaming subculture?

2. Which communicative practices and community rituals sustain belonging and recognition within the competitive ecosystem?
3. How are authority and legitimacy negotiated in an environment that presents itself as meritocratic while operating within specific sociotechnical infrastructures?
4. How does competitive play reconfigure the boundaries between leisure, cultural production, and professionalisation within geek culture?
5. What tensions emerge between community participation, public visibility, and structural precarity within the competitive context?

These questions shift the analytical focus away from individual performance towards the cultural and communicative dynamics that sustain the community. Rather than conceptualising the competitive player solely as a digital athlete, we position them as a cultural actor who actively participates in the symbolic production of gaming subculture.

The study contributes to debates on the "other" cultural industry by demonstrating how the competitive player embodies a hybrid figure within an ecosystem where recognition depends not only on victory but also on the circulation of reputation, public visibility, and collective validation.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AND COMMUNITIES OF MEANING

Contemporary geek subcultures can be understood as communities of meaning, in which belonging is articulated through shared practices, cultural codes, and symbolic capital (Jenkins, 2006). From the perspective of participatory culture, fans are not merely consumers but active participants who produce meaning, knowledge, and recognition within their communities.

Benkler (2006) argues that the networked economy fosters decentralised models of social production in which peer collaboration reshapes traditional market dynamics and structures of authority. Within these environments, identity is constructed not only

through thematic affiliation but also through sustained and visible contributions to the community ecosystem.

Within gaming culture, this participatory logic is embodied in practices such as modding, through which players transform cultural artefacts while occupying hybrid roles as both consumers and producers (Postigo, 2003). Likewise, from its inception, gameplay has been fundamentally networked, with interaction among players shaping both progression and identity (Contreras-Espinosa et al., 2014). The relational dimension is therefore not an ancillary feature of play but a constitutive element of its social and cultural significance. Within the Spanish context, research on modding communities has shown that participation is primarily driven by technical interests, identity formation, and community engagement, organised around self-expression, collaboration, and peer recognition (Contreras-Espinosa & Eguia-Gomez, 2019).

Beyond content creation practices, competitive gaming communities have developed distinctive forms of knowledge production and circulation. Within the Fighting Game Community (FGC), learning has historically relied on collaborative processes of observation, shared practice, and the informal transmission of strategies, where reputation is established not only through competitive performance but also through sustained participation within the community (Harper, 2014). This combination of competition and cooperation has made the FGC one of the most consolidated communities of practice within gaming culture (Taylor, 2012; Aguilar Vázquez & Vidal Fernández, 2025).

From this perspective, competitive player identity can itself be understood through the lens of communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), in which learning and belonging are closely tied to progressive participation in socially situated activities. Within this framework, identifying with a player-selected main represents a turning point in the process of situated learning: players move beyond peripheral participation to establish a recognisable role within the competitive ecosystem. This commitment is not merely technical; rather, the choice of a main functions as a projection of identity within the game world.

Following Vella (2015), the main may be understood as the embodiment of the ludic self—the means through which players express their presence and agency within the virtual environment. In competitive settings, this dimension becomes even more pronounced, as the main serves as a performative vehicle for a player's style and strategic consistency, ultimately becoming a recognisable signature within the competitive circuit (Taylor, 2012). Consequently, the relationship between the player and their main does more than organise technical practice; it also facilitates recognition and symbolic consolidation within gaming subculture.

This perspective is consistent with research that conceptualises competitive gaming communities as spaces of social learning, in which identity emerges through sustained processes of interaction, collaboration, and peer recognition rather than through individual performance alone (Gray, 2020; Aguilar Vázquez & Vidal Fernández, 2025).

2.2. COMMUNICATIVE PRACTICES AND SOCIOTECHNICAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Digital communities are sustained by sociotechnical infrastructures that organise interaction, the circulation of knowledge, and the distribution of recognition. Star and Ruhleder (1996) conceptualise infrastructure as an underlying framework that shapes social practices while remaining largely invisible in everyday use. Within the contemporary gaming ecosystem, this infrastructure takes the form of a platform ecology in which different platforms fulfil distinct functions. Within the Fighting Game Community (FGC), these platforms play complementary roles: Discord facilitates everyday coordination and collaborative training among players, whereas Twitch and YouTube enable tournament broadcasting, match analysis, and the public construction of reputation—all of which are fundamental to the consolidation of competitive recognition (Taylor, 2018). These platforms are neither equivalent nor neutral; rather, they support different forms of symbolic capital and distinct pathways for the accumulation of reputation.

In line with Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington (2017), fan communities are structured through processes of mediation and recognition that consolidate collective identities across digitally interconnected environments. However, as van Dijck (2013) argues, the

culture of connectivity is governed by algorithmic logics that hierarchise attention and distribute visibility unevenly. Consequently, community belonging depends not only on technical performance but also on the capacity to embed that performance within digital circuits of circulation and amplification.

Recent research on competitive gaming communities has likewise shown that these infrastructures mediate communication while shaping which forms of knowledge circulate, which players gain visibility, and which trajectories ultimately become recognised as legitimate within the competitive ecosystem (Aguilar Vázquez & Vidal Fernández, 2025).

Shirky (2008) argues that the reduction of coordination costs facilitates forms of organisation without formal hierarchies, whereas Reagle (2010) emphasises that such communities rely upon implicit norms of reputation, reciprocity, and good faith. Repeated interaction, strategic discussion, and informal mentoring therefore function as mechanisms of cohesion that consolidate players' trajectories within the competitive circuit.

In the case of SSBU, the social dynamics of the competitive scene are organised around sustained practices of interaction, mutual recognition, and the ritualisation of tournaments. Offline events function as intensive chronotopes of socialisation, enabling the transition from digital interaction to embodied community experience, as noted by Aguilar Vázquez and Vidal Fernández (2025). The competitive ecosystem therefore constitutes a hybrid network in which identity and legitimacy are constructed at the intersection of physical presence and digital mediation.

This infrastructure not only sustains the community but also shapes the circulation of knowledge, reputation, and competitive recognition. Visibility, the archival recording of competitive results, and the strategic circulation of gameplay footage function as mechanisms through which particular competitive trajectories acquire collective legitimacy. These dynamics provide the foundation for our proposed concept of the moral economy of merit.

2.3. AUTHORITY, LEGITIMACY, AND MERITOCRACY

Although many digital communities present themselves as horizontal, authority emerges through informal and relational processes. O'Neil (2011) demonstrates that legitimacy within online tribes is constructed through accumulated reputation and collective recognition. Likewise, Reagle (2010) argues that authority in open collaborative environments depends upon adherence to shared norms and validation by peers.

Within competitive gaming, rankings function as visible mechanisms of legitimation. Meritocracy, however, cannot be reduced to numerical outcomes alone. Benkler (2006) describes this process as part of a networked reputation economy, in which symbolic capital circulates within specific communities. Paul (2018) argues that competitive gaming culture constructs a narrative of merit grounded in individual effort and skill while obscuring structural inequalities associated with access to resources, visibility, and opportunities for participation.

Research on esports and live-streaming culture has similarly shown that processes of professionalisation reinforce these meritocratic discourses by emphasising discipline, perseverance, and individual talent, even though such dynamics remain deeply shaped by structural inequalities related to resources, visibility, and social capital (Taylor, 2018; Woodcock & Johnson, 2019). Competitive authority is therefore negotiated at the intersection of performance, public visibility, and community validation. From this perspective, merit should be understood as a socially constructed phenomenon whose recognition depends not only on performance itself but also on the collective processes through which that performance is legitimised.

2.4. LEISURE–LABOUR HYBRIDISATION AND PERFORMATIVE PROFESSIONALISATION

Postigo (2003) identifies a gradual transition from leisure to labour within digital culture, whereby practices that originate as forms of play acquire symbolic value and economic potential. Jenkins (2006) describes this convergence as a space in which production and consumption become increasingly intertwined, giving rise to hybrid figures situated between fandom and cultural production.

Within the contexts of live streaming and esports, this hybridisation becomes even more pronounced. Taylor (2018) demonstrates how competitive gaming is transformed into a form of public performance, while Woodcock and Johnson (2019) examine the affective and performative labour involved in streaming on platforms such as Twitch. These dynamics reinforce public visibility as a mechanism of legitimisation, making visibility itself a central resource in the construction of competitive careers.

Competitive play in SSBU operates within this hybrid logic. Systematic training, intensive time investment, and the pursuit of public recognition reconfigure gameplay as a productive cultural practice. The competitive player thus embodies a hybrid figure positioned at the intersection of playful engagement, disciplined practice, and professional aspiration.

2.5. STRUCTURAL TENSIONS: VISIBILITY, PRECARIETY, AND INEQUALITY

The culture of connectivity described by van Dijck (2013) implies that visibility is mediated by platforms that distribute attention unevenly. Although networked production expands opportunities for participation (Benkler, 2006), it does not eliminate asymmetries related to economic resources, social capital, or the availability of time.

Postigo (2003) further argues that the transition from leisure to labour may generate forms of unpaid or precarious work. Within competitive gaming, intensive commitment—including prolonged training, travel to tournaments, and investment in equipment—does not necessarily translate into economic stability.

Within the Spanish context, the expansion of the competitive gaming ecosystem has created new opportunities for professionalisation, although these remain concentrated among a relatively small number of actors (Establés Heras et al., 2019; AEVI, 2024). Most players occupy an intermediate position in which symbolic recognition does not necessarily translate into economic capital.

These tensions suggest that competitive gaming subculture should be understood as a space in which recognition depends simultaneously on competitive performance, visibility, and the capacity to sustain participation within specific sociotechnical

infrastructures. From this perspective, we propose the concept of the moral economy of merit to explain how competitive recognition is collectively negotiated, thereby extending Paul's (2018) critique of competitive meritocracy.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts an interpretive qualitative approach aimed at understanding the identity-related, communicative, and symbolic dynamics that structure competitive gaming subculture. Consistent with the research questions, an exploratory research design was employed to examine how participants discursively construct belonging, legitimacy, and recognition within the competitive Super Smash Bros. Ultimate (SSBU) ecosystem. The study is grounded in a sociocultural perspective that conceptualises competition not merely as individual performance but as a situated cultural practice.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews (lasting approximately 60–90 minutes) combined with retrospective think-aloud techniques, enabling participants to reflect on specific strategic decisions and competitive experiences. This approach facilitated both the examination of competitive performance and the exploration of the meanings participants attributed to their competitive practice.

The sample comprised 14 highly ranked Spanish players from the national SSBU competitive circuit (Table 1). All participants were male. Thematic saturation was reached when additional interviews no longer generated new analytical categories or insights. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on three criteria: regular participation in both offline and online tournaments, a high ranking within national competitive standings, and recognised standing within the competitive community. The sample was therefore strategically composed of players with substantial competitive experience.

Participants ranged in age from 19 to 33 years. All had extensive experience within the competitive circuit and were actively engaged in gaming-related online spaces, including Discord, Twitch, X (formerly Twitter), and YouTube.

Table 1. Participants' Sociodemographic and Competitive Characteristics

Code	Age	Region	Main Character	Spain Ranking	Regional Ranking	Competitive Level
P1	24	Madrid	Inkling	5	-	High (Top 10 Nationally)
P2	22	Andalusia	Palutena	6	-	High (Top 10 Nationally)
P3	20	Catalonia	R.O.B.	10	3	High
P4	23	Basque Country	Captain Falcon	15	-	High
P5	19	Catalonia	Banjo Kazooie	26	5	High
P6	27	Catalonia	Steve	33	9	Upper-Intermediate
P7	33	Catalonia	Pit	38	2	Upper-Intermediate
P8	25	Galicia	Peach	45	-	Upper-Intermediate
P9	20	Catalonia	Wolf	50	11	Upper-Intermediate
P10	29	Catalonia	Falco	-	6	Upper-Intermediate (Regional)
P11	20	Catalonia	Roy	-	8	Upper-Intermediate (Regional)
P12	24	Catalonia	Samus Zero	-	10	Upper-Intermediate (Regional)
P13	32	Catalonia	Ness	-	12	Upper-Intermediate (Regional)
P14	19	Catalonia	Ness	-	16	Upper-Intermediate (Regional)

Source: Own elaboration.

The interviews were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim. The interview protocol was organised around four main themes: (1) participants' personal trajectories and the construction of their identities as competitive players; (2) community experiences and communicative practices, including training, mentoring, strategic discussions, and tournament participation; (3) perceptions of legitimacy, authority, and meritocracy; and (4) tensions between leisure, intensive commitment, and aspirations towards professionalisation. Additional questions explored financial investment, travel to tournaments, material sustainability, and participants' perceptions of opportunities within the competitive ecosystem.

Stimulated recall was employed during the analysis of selected matches to explore participants' decision-making processes and their reflections on recognition and community validation. The interview data were analysed using thematic analysis following an inductive–deductive approach. During the first stage of analysis, the transcripts were read openly to identify emergent themes related to identity,

community, legitimacy, and professionalisation. In the second stage, these themes were reorganised and interpreted in light of the theoretical framework.

The analytical process was structured around five overarching dimensions: identity construction; communicative practices and sociotechnical infrastructure; authority, legitimacy, and meritocracy; leisure–labour hybridisation; and structural tensions.

The relatively small sample size reflects the qualitative and interpretive nature of the study and was not intended to support statistical generalisation. Rather, the findings should be understood as a situated account of the Spanish Super Smash Bros. Ultimate competitive ecosystem.

4. FINDINGS

The analysis identified the five analytical dimensions outlined above. The interview excerpts presented below illustrate how participants themselves conceptualise their sense of belonging and their competitive trajectories within the Spanish competitive gaming subculture.

4.1. IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION: FROM FAN TO COMPETITIVE PLAYER

Participants described their trajectories as a gradual transition from casual play to sustained competitive engagement. This transition was not framed solely in terms of technical improvement but rather as a process of identity redefinition within gaming subculture.

Across several interviews, participants located their initial engagement with the game in early childhood, driven by their fascination with the Nintendo universe and its characters: "I first saw it when I was about seven or eight years old... I already knew Pikachu, Link, and Mario... and it immediately caught my attention." (P1). "I could play with all my favourite Nintendo characters... Yoshi, Pikachu, Mario... and fighting with them was incredible." (P11)

The game's character roster emerged as a central element in this initial attraction: "The roster is what first drew me to the game... seeing characters I already knew." (P1)

At a later stage, several participants identified the discovery of an organised competitive community as a turning point in their trajectories: "I searched for 'Smash tournaments Catalonia', and that's when I discovered everything... that's when I realised it was something much bigger." (P14)

Competitive identity was constructed through several recurring elements across the interviews: identification with a main, sustained participation in tournaments, explicit recognition from other players, and the incorporation of systematic training routines. Together, these elements constitute a performative identity that is legitimised through continued participation in the competitive circuit.

With regard to players' main, identification extended well beyond strategic utility. Rather than representing a purely technical choice, the selected character functioned as a symbolic marker of style, personal trajectory, and community belonging. Participants described a connection that combined previous affinity with the franchise, preferred playstyle, and self-expression: "I can't play a character if I haven't played their original series... I already had a connection with Inkling before using them in Smash." (P13). "Roy is really simple and really fast... if you lose focus for even a second, you're dead. I love that." (P10). "Wolf lets me express myself to the fullest... he's the character that comes closest to the way I want to play Ultimate." (P14)

The main therefore functions as an identity marker that integrates technical competence with personal narrative, positioning players within a community of practice where recognition is built through both competitive performance and stylistic consistency. Competitive identity thus emerges through a process of mutual recognition in which technical skill and community belonging reinforce one another.

Several interviewees also emphasised that being competitive entails a long-term commitment to continuous improvement and public exposure. Belonging depends not exclusively on ranking but on sustained and active participation within the competitive ecosystem: "Without commitment, I wouldn't still be here after eleven years." (P12)

Overall, competitive gamer identity emerges as a form of belonging grounded in active engagement with the community, in which long-term participation in the competitive circuit and identification with a specific main occupy a central role.

4.2. COMMUNICATIVE PRACTICES AND COMMUNITY RITUALISATION

The interviews reveal that the competitive ecosystem is sustained through recurring communicative practices that function as rituals of legitimation. The most prominent of these include: (1) collaborative match analysis; (2) informal peer mentoring; (3) strategic discussions on Discord; (4) live-streaming and the collective following of tournaments; and (5) travelling to offline events.

Collaborative match analysis emerged as a central practice in competitive improvement. Participants described post-tournament discussions in which they collectively reviewed mistakes and strategic decisions: "After every tournament, we sit down and analyse our matches together... that's where you really learn." (P7)

Informal mentoring also played a prominent role. Rather than relying on formal coaching structures, learning was embedded in personal relationships within the community: "I've got a friend who's really good, so I ask him for advice... I write things down and then try to put them into practice." (P9)

Strategic discussions on Discord constituted an everyday space for knowledge exchange. Participants described these channels as extensions of the competitive environment, where character matchups, technical decisions, and playstyles were discussed.

Live-streaming and the collective following of tournaments further reinforced participants' sense of community. Even when they were not competing themselves, players followed events online and discussed results, thereby strengthening a shared competitive experience.

Offline tournaments were consistently described as moments of intensified community engagement, where belonging was experienced in a more tangible way. Face-to-face interaction reinforced relationships that had previously developed in digital environments: "At tournaments, I get much more emotional... winning feels like pure

euphoria." (P13). "The community is what really matters. If this were just about playing alone at home, I wouldn't still be here." (P12)

Travelling to tournaments also required considerable logistical effort, reinforcing the collective dimension of competitive participation: "I live in central Catalonia... getting to tournaments takes between an hour and a half and two hours. It's not easy." (P14)

Taken together, these findings indicate that competitive play extends well beyond individual matches. Rather, it is sustained through continuous networks of interaction, shared learning, and recurring participation across both physical and digital spaces.

These practices do not occur within a neutral environment but are mediated by sociotechnical infrastructures that shape the circulation of knowledge, visibility, and competitive recognition. Discord, live-streaming platforms, and offline tournaments sustain the community while providing the spaces in which legitimacy is collectively negotiated.

4.3. AUTHORITY, LEGITIMACY, AND THE MERITOCRATIC NARRATIVE

National rankings emerged as a visible mechanism of legitimation, although their significance extends beyond numerical position alone. Participants acknowledged that rankings provide visibility, yet argued that authority also depends on competitive experience, individual playstyle, and the reputation built within the community.

Some interviewees expressed an explicit performance-oriented mindset: "I go to tournaments to win and take home the prize money." (P10)

Ranking position serves as a public indicator of achievement but is not regarded as the sole basis for recognition. Several participants emphasised that what ultimately matters is how other players perceive their skill and consistency: "If I were really trying hard, I wouldn't be satisfied with being ranked number 38." (P1)

Meritocratic discourse appeared consistently throughout the interviews. Participants attributed improvement to effort, discipline, and perseverance: "Losing frustrates me, but it also gives me a reason to come back and work even harder." (P13)

At the same time, the interviews revealed that this meritocratic narrative coexists with structural factors that shape competitive recognition. Visibility on social media and sustained participation in tournaments amplify legitimacy within the competitive circuit.

Likewise, continued participation in competition depends on economic resources, available time, and the ability to travel: "I don't live in Barcelona... getting to tournaments isn't easy." (P14)

Competitive authority therefore emerges not solely from technical performance but through an ongoing process of negotiation in which performance, visibility, sustained participation, and peer validation converge.

4.4. LEISURE–LABOUR HYBRIDISATION AND COMPETITIVE DISCIPLINE

Participants described a gradual formalisation of their competitive practice. Systematic training, match review, and strategic planning transformed gameplay into an organised activity supported by routines that increasingly resembled professional practice. Several interviewees explained that they had developed consistent training habits, combining individual practice, matches against other players, and post-game analysis: "I train almost every day... if you want to compete seriously, you have to treat it seriously." (P2)

Participants also described routinely reviewing their own performance after competition in order to identify mistakes and alternative strategies (a recurring theme across several interviews).

Some participants expressed a constant drive for self-improvement: "I know I can become even better." (P1)

Although most participants reported that competitive gaming did not provide them with a stable source of income, the commitment required reproduced many of the organisational demands typically associated with work, including time management, travel, and tournament preparation. At the same time, this discipline did not replace the intrinsic enjoyment of play but coexisted alongside it: "When you're having fun, you want to play more—and that's how you improve." (P12)

For some participants, balancing discipline with enjoyment created tensions: "Competing is demanding... these days I mainly go because I want to see everyone." (P1)

Competitive practice therefore emerged as an identity project in which passion, discipline, and sociability coexist, while leisure remains the primary motivation for continued participation in the competitive circuit.

4.5. STRUCTURAL TENSIONS: VISIBILITY, PRECARITY, AND INEQUALITY

Intensive participation in the competitive circuit requires considerable financial investment, including travel expenses, tournament entry fees, and gaming equipment. Participants acknowledged that sustained involvement in the competitive ecosystem depends on factors such as family support, the ability to balance competition with education or employment, and flexible working conditions.

Several interviewees explicitly referred to these constraints: "A lot of the time it depends on whether I can fit it around work or university... you just can't do everything." (P6)

Others highlighted the importance of external support in sustaining their competitive careers (a recurring theme across several interviews).

Visibility also emerged as a strategic resource. Participants recognised that players who maintain a stronger presence through live-streaming or social media are more likely to consolidate their standing within the community: "If people don't see you playing, it's difficult for them to take you into account." (P8)

However, maintaining such visibility requires time and resources that are not equally available to all competitors.

Interviewees also noted that access to opportunities—including tournament invitations, sponsorships, and greater media exposure—depends largely on sustained participation within the competitive circuit and on previously established social connections: "If you're not always around, it's easy for people to forget about you." (P5)

These findings indicate that competitive recognition depends on more than technical performance alone. Remaining active within the competitive circuit requires the

successful combination of competitive performance, public visibility, and sustained participation, highlighting the structural constraints that limit a purely meritocratic understanding of competitive success.

To synthesise the analytical dimensions identified and their relationship to the research questions, Table 2 summarises the main emergent themes, the associated practices, and representative interview excerpts. This synthesis reinforces the coherence between the methodological design, the analytical framework, and the study's findings.

Table 2. Summary of Analytical Dimensions, Associated Practices, and Empirical Evidence

Research Question	Emergent Themes	Associated Practices	Representative Quotes
1. Identity Construction	Fan identity; identification with a main; competitive commitment; belonging to the competitive circuit	Selecting a main; regular participation in tournaments; adoption of structured training routines	"I can't play a character if I haven't played their original series... I already had a connection with Inkling before using them in Smash." (P13)
2. Communicative Practices and Sociotechnical Infrastructure	Informal mentoring; collaborative match analysis; knowledge circulation; digital infrastructures	Strategic discussions on Discord; match review; participation in offline tournaments	"After every tournament, we sit down and analyse our matches together... that's where you really learn." (P7)
3. Authority, Legitimacy, and Meritocracy	Rankings as a source of visibility; community reputation; peer validation; meritocratic discourse	Monitoring rankings; public recognition; platform presence	"I go to tournaments to win and take home the prize money." (P10)
4. Leisure–Labour Hybridisation	Competitive discipline; professionalisation; identity project	Structured weekly training; strategic planning; psychological preparation	"I train almost every day. If you want to compete seriously, you have to treat it like a job." (P2)
5. Structural Tensions	Inequality of access; unequal visibility; competitive precarity	Travel expenses; balancing competition with work or study; visibility-building	"I've stopped going to some tournaments because I simply can't afford all the travel costs." (P5)

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on thematic analysis of interview data.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings invite a reinterpretation of competition in SSBU not merely as a performance-oriented activity but as a cultural phenomenon embedded within the contemporary logic of geek subcultures. The competitive ecosystem functions simultaneously as a sporting community and a community of practice, in which identity, legitimacy, and recognition are continuously negotiated through sustained interaction and sociotechnical infrastructures.

5.1. FAN IDENTITY AND THE MAIN AS AN EXTENSION OF THE COMPETITIVE SELF

The findings indicate that competitive identity is built upon a pre-existing fan identity. Participants' initial attachment to Nintendo franchises and their character roster gradually develops into an identification with the role of competitive player, supporting Jenkins' (2006) argument that participatory culture encompasses not only cultural production but also strategic performance as a form of cultural engagement.

The central role of the main reinforces this process. Rather than constituting a purely technical choice, the selected character represents the convergence of personal affinity, playstyle, and self-expression (Vella, 2015). Within competitive contexts, this identification acquires public visibility and contributes to the consolidation of recognition within the competitive circuit (Taylor, 2012). Competitive gamer identity therefore emerges as a form of belonging constructed through sustained participation and community recognition.

5.2. RITUALISED COMMUNITY AND CHRONOTOPES OF LEGITIMATION

The communicative practices identified in this study—including collaborative match analysis, informal mentoring, strategic discussions on Discord, and the collective following of tournaments—demonstrate that competitive play is sustained by a sociotechnical infrastructure through which knowledge and reputation circulate continuously. Consistent with Shirky (2008) and Reagle (2010), authority emerges primarily through sustained interaction rather than formal hierarchical structures.

Offline tournaments function as privileged spaces of legitimation in which community belonging becomes both experienced and publicly visible. These findings are consistent with Aguilar Vázquez and Vidal Fernández (2025), who argue that face-to-face events consolidate relationships initially established through digital interaction. The combination of digital platforms and offline encounters transforms competitive gaming into a public social experience in which recognition and legitimacy are continually negotiated.

5.3. MERITOCRACY, VISIBILITY, AND THE MORAL ECONOMY OF MERIT

One of the study's principal findings is the coexistence of a meritocratic discourse with participants' recognition of structural constraints. Effort, discipline, and perseverance are consistently presented as the organising principles of competitive recognition; however, participants also acknowledge that their effectiveness depends upon visibility, sustained participation within the competitive circuit, and access to resources. This tension echoes Paul's (2018) critique that meritocracy in gaming tends to obscure the structural inequalities shaping competitive trajectories.

Building on these findings, we propose the concept of the moral economy of merit to describe a system in which competitive recognition is negotiated through shared norms that combine technical performance, public visibility, and commitment to the community. However, this system does not operate under equal conditions. As Postigo (2003) argues, the transition from leisure to labour in digital environments can generate forms of intensive commitment that do not necessarily translate into economic stability. Within the Spanish context, the professionalisation of esports remains concentrated among a relatively small number of actors, while most competitors occupy an intermediate position characterised by fluctuating recognition and economic uncertainty (AEVI, 2024). Consequently, infrastructures of visibility do more than amplify competitive trajectories—they also shape which forms of merit ultimately become recognised and legitimised.

5.4. GEEK SUBCULTURE AND THE "OTHER" CULTURAL INDUSTRY

The case of SSBU provides an opportunity to rethink what might be considered the "other" cultural industry. Competitive gaming subculture is neither fully integrated into the traditional cultural industries nor entirely independent from them. Instead, it occupies a hybrid space in which cultural production emerges from the community while simultaneously relying on corporate infrastructures.

Competitive play generates relatively autonomous symbolic hierarchies, although visibility and recognition remain dependent on digital platforms governed by commercial logics.

An important finding is that the sample consisted exclusively of men, and participants made very few explicit references to gender as an analytical category. This absence should not be interpreted as evidence of gender neutrality but rather as an indication of the naturalisation of a historically male-dominated environment. As Gray (2020) argues, masculinity often functions as an unmarked category within digital gaming spaces, obscuring the structural conditions that sustain its privileged position.

From this perspective, the competitive gaming community can be understood as a decentralised cultural industry in which symbolic production, reputation, and recognition circulate through networked forms of participation. Within this ecosystem, the competitive player occupies a liminal position between fan, cultural producer, and aspiring professional, representing a contemporary expression of geek culture.

This study contributes to the literature in three principal ways:

- It shifts the analysis of esports beyond individual performance towards the communicative and cultural dynamics that sustain competitive communities.
- It provides empirical evidence on the Spanish Super Smash Bros. Ultimate competitive community, an area that remains underexplored within communication research.

- It introduces the concept of the moral economy of merit as a framework for understanding how competitive recognition is negotiated in contexts shaped by structural inequalities.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that competitive gaming should be understood as a cultural phenomenon that reconfigures the boundaries between production and consumption, leisure and labour, and visibility and recognition.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the Spanish Super Smash Bros. Ultimate competitive community demonstrates that gaming subculture can be understood not merely as a space of entertainment but as a sociocultural field in which identity, belonging, and recognition are continuously negotiated. Competitive play extends beyond individual performance and is sustained through community dynamics and sociotechnical infrastructures.

The findings show that competitive identity is constructed through sustained participation in the competitive circuit, identification with a main as an expressive extension of the ludic self, and engagement in collective learning practices. Belonging depends not only on competitive performance but also on participation within a community where reputation, legitimacy, and recognition are continually negotiated.

Furthermore, competitive merit does not circulate within a neutral environment. Digital platforms and offline events constitute a sociotechnical ecology that shapes both visibility and the consolidation of competitive trajectories. Within this context, we propose the concept of the moral economy of merit to explain how competitive recognition emerges from the interaction between performance, public visibility, and community commitment under conditions of structural inequality.

Finally, the absence of explicit references to gender in participants' accounts suggests the naturalisation of a predominantly male-dominated environment. Taken together, these findings show that the competitive player occupies a hybrid position at the intersection of playful practice, digital mediation, and community recognition.

6.1. LIMITATIONS

The findings should be interpreted in light of three limitations. First, although the sample represents players from the Spanish competitive circuit, nine of the fourteen participants were based in Catalonia; consequently, the findings primarily reflect this regional context. Second, the study focuses exclusively on Super Smash Bros. Ultimate, whose competitive dynamics may differ from those of other titles within the Fighting Game Community (FGC). Finally, the sample consisted exclusively of men, limiting the analysis of how gender shapes the construction of competitive recognition. Future research should expand the geographical scope of the study, incorporate additional fighting games, and pursue comparative and intersectional analyses.

7. CONTRIBUTION

	Signatory 1	Signatory 2	Signatory 3
Conceptualization	X		
Data Curation	X	X	X
Formal Analysis	X	X	X
Investigation		X	X
Methodology	X	X	
Supervision	X		
Validation	X	X	
Visualization		X	
Writing – Original Draft	X		X
Writing – Review & Editing	X	X	X

8. CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

9. DECLARATION ON THE USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Artificial intelligence tools were used solely to support the writing process and stylistic revision of the manuscript. The data analysis, interpretation of the findings, and conclusions are the sole responsibility of the authors.

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