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Esports brand: shortcomings and opportunities

By:

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Abstract

Purpose: Esports is a young industry that is experiencing an enormous boom in popularity. However, negative public perceptions are abundant, and there is a distinct lack of literature discussing esports from the branding perspective. This paper examines the shortcomings of esports brands and discusses opportunities to improve the public opinion on the industry.

Methodology: Literature review, qualitative survey, semi-structured interviews with organizations operating within esports, secondary data collection from websites and media

Findings: We find heritage to be greatly lacking within esports brands, specifically due to the youth of esports organizations. Furthermore, we emphasize the effectiveness of corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts directed at healthiness and advise CSR to be adopted as a core activity that can be included in the brand heritage.

Original/value: The paper is the first of its kind to combine brand heritage and esports brands, as well the role of CSR in the esports industry.

Keywords: Esports, video games, brand heritage, corporate social responsibility, legitimacy

Paper type: Research paper

Introduction

Growing from being obscure video game tournaments in the 1990s, nowadays esports are a worldwide phenomenon, commanding the attention of millions of spectators all around the globe – for example, in 2019 the grand final of the *League of Legends (LoL)* world championship attracted 100 million unique viewers (Gough, 2021a), even overtaking the viewership of the Superbowl of that year (at 98.19 million) (Gough, 2021b). Nowadays, many video game developers go as far as to announce that they will be supporting a professional scene of their upcoming games even before the games themselves are released (for example, Xbox game studios have already partnered with nine teams to create a professional scene despite the game still being in development (Campbell, 2021)), signifying how prominent professional gaming has become.

However, the esports path is far from being all roses: legislative problems and antagonistic public opinions are the bread and butter of the industry. For example, Germany only introduced a separate visa type for esports players in 2020 and is still in the overwhelming minority of countries to have recognized esports as sports (Nair, 2021). Even so, the general public in many regions is struggling to marry up the two concepts and view video games in a negative light (Freitas, Espinosa & Correia 2019). It is clear that while esports are slowly becoming more legitimate, the industry has a long way to go before it achieves universal acceptance.

Given the circumstances described, a closer look at esports organizations would not only be intrinsically interesting – the actions and practices of esports organizations at this stage of the scene's development will have a lasting impact on

how esports will be seen in the future, potentially making or breaking the scene. Thus, in this paper we will examine the lackluster areas of esports brands and discuss opportunities to improve the esports landscape through more favourable public perceptions.

Literature overview

Esports

While there are many different definitions for esports, Wagner's (2006) definition "an area of sport activities in which people develop and train mental or physical abilities in the use of information and communication technologies" is one of the more popular ones. Some synonyms to esports could be "electronic sports", "cybersports", or "virtual sports" (Jenny, Manning, Keiper & Olrich, 2016). Jenny et al. (2016) argue that Wagner's definition is not a perfect fit due to providing the option of either training mental or physical capabilities. Furthermore, the paper states that it is widely accepted that physical activity is the deciding factor that separates a game from sport and observes that Wagner's (2006) definition fails to define the platform on which esports are played, which is online. They therefore define esports as "organized video game competitions". According to Wagner (2006), there is no need to satisfy the traditional definition of "a sport" and question whether it is a sport or competitive gaming, as it could as well be looked at as a separate field of study. Despite the lack of consensus regarding the question whether esports are the equivalent of traditional sports, we will consider the two fields similar enough and thus consider them to follow the same principles and be subject to mostly the same patterns despite some natural differences between the two industries.

Esports research has evolved from a small study field into a field that is studied by several disciplines (Reitman, Anderson-Coto, Wu, Lee & Steinkuehler, 2019). Only about 17% of the studies inspect esports from the business angle, whereas most of the research is done in the fields of informatics or media studies (Reitman et al., 2019). Reitman et al. (2019) further note, that the research done within the business side of esports is usually done through surveys, interviews and case studies. However, the representatives of the samples in surveys are often difficult to assess as they are often limited in their scope of age groups, regions or particular games. This makes it difficult to produce useful knowledge within the business context (Reitman et al., 2019).

Brand heritage

The brand heritage framework was introduced by Urde, Greyser & Balmer (2007). Brand heritage was described as a sum of five elements: longevity, track record, importance of history to identity, core values and use of symbols. The authors differentiate between three time periods: the past, the present, and the future. Examining a brand through this framework can provide insight on the brand's past, and thus can be helpful in making the brand relevant in the current time and the future. Longevity refers to the consistent demonstration of other heritage elements, to the point where they are believed to be at the core of the organization itself (Urde, Greyser & Balmer, 2007). The track record element refers to the proof that the company has lived up to its values and promises (Urde, Greyser & Balmer, 2007). Core values are the collection of internal values & mindset, as well as promises made in external communication (Urde, Greyser & Balmer, 2007). Symbols have to be used and have to achieve a meaning – symbols here refer to, for example, the company's logo, motto, slogans, fonts, etc. (Urde,

Greyser & Balmer, 2007). Finally, history must be important to the brand (Urde, Greyser & Balmer, 2007). While the authors do not claim that it is necessary to have heritage for a brand to be successful, it can unlock hidden values and provide a sustained competitive advantage for the firm. However, heritage often goes unrecognized and its value remains untapped by organizations (Urde, Greyser & Balmer, 2007).

Strategic corporate social responsibility

The first instance of the modern approach to Corporate Social Responsibility should largely be attributed to Bowen (1953) and refers to "the obligations of businessmen to pursue those policies, to make those decisions, or to follow those lines of action which are desirable in terms of objectives and values of our society" (Bowen, 1953). While the definition has evolved throughout the years and now has many variations, the general idea remains the same. In the long run, CSR activities can build a corporate image, enhance the relation with stakeholders and increase stakeholders' advocacy behavior (Du, Bhattacharya & Sen, 2010), as well as be the source of opportunity, innovation and competitive advantage (Porter & Kramer, 2006). However, companies must publicize their efforts, as organizations whose audience is unaware of their CSR work can only reap minimal benefits (Du, Bhattacharya & Sen, 2007; Tata & Prasad, 2015).

The link between competitive advantage and CSR

Perhaps one of the most important and well-known contributions to CSR was Carroll's (1991) pyramid of CSR which differentiates the different levels of CSR activity. Furthermore, Porter & Kramer (2006) argue that organizations tend to scatter their CSR efforts on issues that are not strategically important and thus these efforts have limited effect on the organization's performance. Most importantly, the paper differentiates between three types of CSR involvement: "generic social issues" (social issues that are not significantly affected by the company nor have a large impact on its long-term performance), "value chain social impacts" (social issues that are greatly affected by the organization's activities), and "social dimensions of competitive context" (social issues in the external environment that greatly affect the company's performance in the environment that it operates). The authors then differentiate between "responsive CSR" and "strategic CSR", the representation of which can be seen in Figure 1. Porter & Kramer (2006) believe that no organization can solve all the problems in society or bear the cost of it, and should thus select the issues that intersect with the organization's activities. By engaging in strategic CSR, a firm can create shared values by investing in social aspects of a context that simultaneously strengthens the organizations competitiveness. When an organization takes on problems it understands, it can create a greater impact than any other institution or philanthropic organization (Porter & Kramer, 2006).

Corporate Involvement in Society: A Strategic Approach		
Generic Social Impacts	**Value Chain Social Impacts**	**Social Dimensions of Competitive Context**
Good citizenship	Mitigate harm from value chain activities	Strategic philanthropy that leverages capabilities to improve salient areas of competitive context
Responsive CSR	Transform value chain activities to benefit society while reinforcing strategy	**Strategic CSR**

Figure 1. Corporate Involvement in Society: A Strategic Approach (Porter & Kramer, 2006)

CSR communication

A CSR image is how an audience perceives the organization and its regard to CSR issues. CSR communication can help sustain an ongoing relationship with the stakeholders and can be used to enhance the image, as well as reduce the misalignment between the perceived and desired CSR (Tata & Prasad, 2015). Public scrutiny can further be influenced by the media and media exposure can shape the relationship between organizations and the stakeholders (Cho & Patten, 2007; Rindova and Fombrun, 1999 see Tata & Prasad, 2015). According to Tata & Prasad (2015), organizations could communicate with local stakeholders and create collaboration for the benefit of the society. Companies could partake in local events and promote themselves there and build relationships with stakeholders and other companies. A noteworthy distinction is that parents of kids who follow esports could be labeled as one of the primary stakeholders rather than kids themselves, due to parents having the financial (money) and physical (restraints, authority) resources over the children.

Methodology

The problems existing within esports explained in the introduction and found in the general media opened a few questions but no specific hypotheses were made. Therefore, we decided to conduct inductive research, meaning that data is collected for the purpose of building up theories rather than trying them out. The process has been iterative, which means that it involved repetitive interplay between the collection and analysis of data (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Through this, possible hypotheses were obtained.

Empirical data collection

Firstly, a quantitative online survey was conducted. As the main problematic areas for esports can be said to stem from public perceptions, an up-to-date study on what those perceptions actually are was deemed necessary. Additionally, a survey provided the possibility to examine how public perceptions might differ from the esports organization point of view. Quantitative data analysis is also associated with an inductive approach, as theory is seen as the outcome of the analytical process rather than a precursor to it (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). The surveys were sent out to

friends and acquaintances of the authors, as well as some gaming-related forums and platforms. Basically, the survey was spread among those channels that were the most accessible, which is known as convenience sampling (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). In total, 202 responses were obtained. Efforts were made to differentiate the respondents as much as possible in terms of age, sex, location and knowledge of the field. Regardless of potential limitations (that will be further discussed at the Limitations part of the paper), the survey acted as a basis for our judgements and presumptions.

Secondly, three semi-structured interviews were conducted. The interviewees were representatives of a well-known esports team, a sports organization with an esports branch, and a non-profit esports tournament organizer. Three different types of organizations were consciously chosen to obtain a wider variety of viewpoints, as well as a more thorough understanding of the possible scope of issues within the industry. The interview questions were formulated after the survey was conducted and a surface-level list of possible discussion points was obtained. These points included: (1) discussing the most common negative perceptions on esports and the overall level of opposition, (2) evaluating the dynamics between esports and traditional sports, and (3) discussing the possible shortcomings of esports brands. The interviews took place on Zoom and lasted about 35 minutes on average. The reason for conducting comparative research is to compare between companies which would give us a better reference point to analyse whether the theories are reliable or not for the general esports firms (Yin, 1984; Eisenhardt 1989 see Bell, Bryman & Harley 2019). While it can be argued whether three companies operating within esports are a sufficient sample size for the purpose, it was considered good enough as more time could be spent on each organization for a better understanding (Bell, Bryman &

Harley, 2019). Furthermore, the emphasis was put on quality, detail and depth of the interview rather than achieving a high number of interviews (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). The questionnaire and names of the interview respondents will be published with explicit permission from the interviewees, which will allow for a better chance of replicability.

Thirdly, secondary data was collected through the websites of esports brands, advertisement content, news articles, etc.

Observations & results

Introduction to ENCE

ENCE is a Finnish esports team founded in 2013, the goal of which is to professionalize the Finnish esports landscape (ENCE, n.d.). After their miraculous *Counter Strike: Global Offensive* (*CS:GO*) major tournament run in 2019, it is today the most successful esports brand in Finland and well known around the globe, particularly in the *CS:GO* scene where they currently are ranked #11th (HLTV, 2021). Their mission since the beginning has been to build a sustainable long-term winning culture and know-how of how to build success stories. In addition to the aforementioned *CS:GO*, ENCE is present in the pro scenes of *Starcraft 2, Playerunknown's Battlegrounds* and *NHL.*

The representative from ENCE was the CEO, Mika Kuusisto.

Introduction to Malmö FF

Malmö FF is a football association that was established in the year 1910 and is one of the most successful and well-known football clubs in Sweden. Malmö FF's extensive work in the community have made them become an integral part of the

city of Malmö. Their entire operation in all its components is constructed in a way that is meant to develop people physically, mentally, socially and culturally, both as individuals and in group contexts, on and off the field. Some of its goals are to spread and maintain positive values, counteract violence and racism, reduce the use of drugs and increase the integration between different groups in the society (MFF, n.d.). Malmö FF runs a program called "FIFA Academy" with the Malmö Fria Läroverkthat high school and offers the opportunity for high schoolers to combine their school studies with their interest in esports. Physical and mental wellbeing is at the forefront of the program and the club aims to provide the same high level of training as it does for their traditional football players.

The representative from Malmö FF was the project leader for esports, Filip Ahlström.

Introduction to Publiclir

The idea for Publiclir was initially conceived in 2008 when its founder Daniel Skoglund created a public server for *Counter Strike: 1.6*. The server found a niche by providing small courses in addition to the usual gameplay. In 2012, Skoglund decided to develop it into something greater and an association was created. Between 2014 and 2016, the organization had a *CS:GO* team, however it achieved very limited success and was disbanded. Nowadays, Publiclir is a non-profit organization that runs public servers and some tournaments in *CS:GO*, as well as tournaments in *LoL* and *Rocket League.* Their main aims are to provide a network for young people in Sweden to compete against like-minded peers and create a gathering place that is both highly skilled in esports games and inclusive; as such, Publiclir fosters friendly non-toxic behavior in-game and often fulfils the role of an educator to teens as well as their parents.

The representative from Publiclir was its founder, Daniel Skoglund.

Lack of heritage

One of the most important questions on the online survey was "What are the 5 most important factors that influenced your choice of favorite teams/clubs? Please rank them from most important to least important." The 2nd most important factor turned out to be the history of an organization – its past results, rivalries, memorable moments, etc. Furthermore, 56.8% of the respondents felt like this was one of the features that esports brands lack the most and should focus on improving, and it was by far the most commonly mentioned factor. The lack of history and heritage was also brought up in the interviews, where respondents acknowledged that such features are important and agree that it might be a shortcoming of esports:

Kuusisto: "That's a good point. It's still such a young industry. <...> If you look into the Premier League in the UK, you have hundreds of years old rivalries between certain teams. The fans are very passionate – sometimes too much, but that's the history that is kind of missing [in esports]".

The alleged lack of history in esports brands have inspired a closer look at these firms through the lens of Urde et al.'s (2007) Brand heritage framework. However, we observed that the framework could be altered slightly to accommodate esports firms better. While there are countless metaphors and studies that examine the similarities between sports and business, we believe that esports could interpret some of the features in the brand heritage framework differently than a typical corporate organization. As such, we have created our own brand heritage framework specifically for esports firms and examined the industry through this lens.
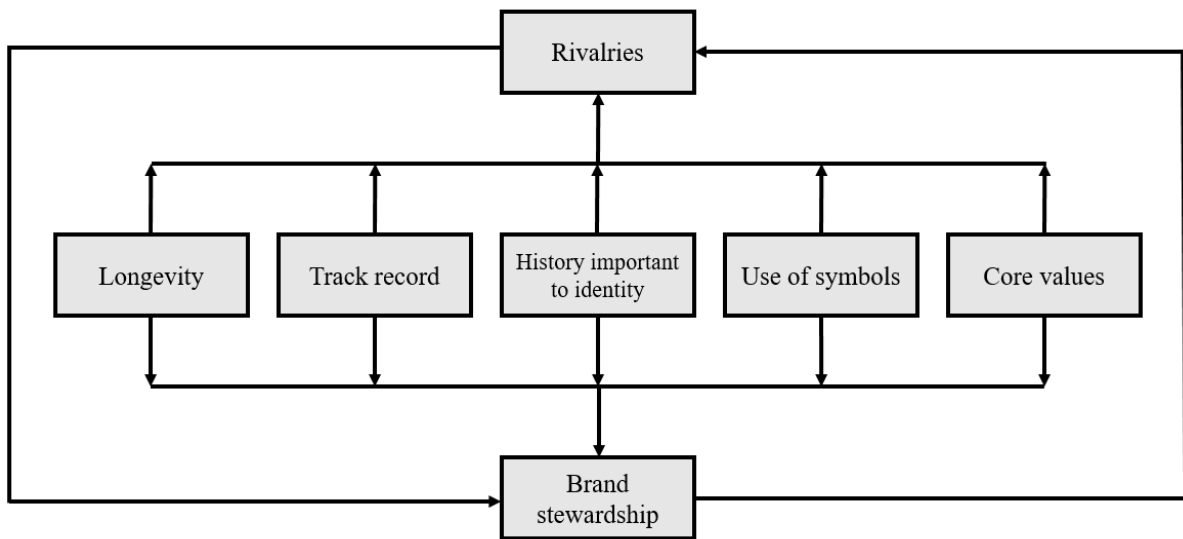
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Figure 1. A supplementary brand heritage framework tailored for esports brands.

Longevity

Urde et al. (2007) interpreted longevity as "a consistent demonstration of other heritage elements". For the sake of simplicity, this definition will be elaborated more upon in the *track record* section; instead, we will define longevity as the period of time that an esports brand has been around.

While at a glance this might seem too one-dimensional and misleading without proper context, this metric is actually quite insightful given how young and volatile the industry is. As an example of the lack of longevity in esports brands, we have compiled secondary data on the foundation dates of 35 esports organizations. Most of these operate in the western scenes of some of the most popular esports, such as *LoL, CS:GO, Defense of The Ancients 2 (DoTA 2)*, etc. The results can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Founding dates of 35 select esports organizations.

Brand name	Founding date
SK Gaming	1997
Evil Geniuses	1999
Ninjas In Pyjamas	2000
Team Liquid	2000
Complexity Gaming	2003
Dignitas	2003
T1	2003
Virtus.pro	2003
Fnatic	2004
OpTic Gaming	2006
Natus Vincere	2009
TSM FTX	2009
Counter Logic Gaming	2010
FaZe Clan	2010
ENCE	2013
Gambit Esports	2013
Team Vitality	2013
Unicorns of Love	2013
Cloud9	2013
Excel Esports	2014
G2 Esports	2014
Immortals	2015
NRG Esports	2015
OG Esports	2015
Astralis	2016
Heroic	2016
Misfits Gaming	2016
PSG Esports	2016
Rogue	2016
100 Thieves	2017
BIG Clan	2017
FlyQuest	2017
MAD Lions	2017
Movistar riders	2017
North	2017

A couple of things in the table are worth noting:

- The average founding date of the organizations currently competing in the League of Legends European Championship (LEC) – the highest-level *LoL* competition in Europe - is 2012, with the median being 2014. It is also paramount to note that only 2 of the 10 teams have been competing in the league since its inception in 2013, while 5 of them only entered it in 2019 or later, after franchising was introduced to the scene. 3 years is an extremely short period of time to establish any kind of resilient legacies. Furthermore, most of the organizations that entered after 2019 had not been involved in the game before and have had to build up a reputation from scratch.
- The average date of founding for the top 10 ranked *CS:GO* teams is 2011, with the median being 2013. However, the stories of these teams vary greatly, with some of the teams only becoming relevant fairly recently. The greatest example of this could be the team Heroic that has been in the scene since 2016 but have only consistently shown up in the top 10 since the middle of 2020. Which brings us to our next point. Because of this, it can be disputed whether this longevity is relevant or not.

Overall, it seems quite decisive that many esports brands besides a select few face the classic struggle of being fairly new, as the overall average founding date of the organizations listed is late 2010, with the median being 2013. Realistically, as more organizations are founded and manage to survive this will change with time, but for now it often acts as a liability as brands have had limited time to showcase their developments and build a strong heritage.
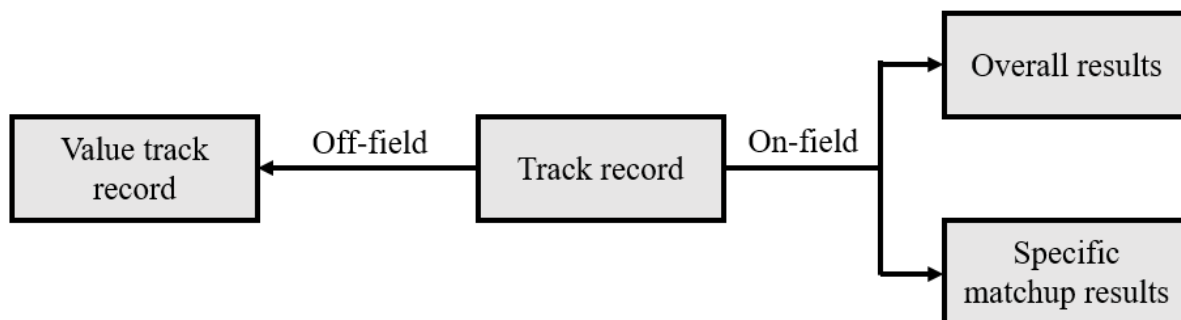
Figure 2. An alternate view of the track record element, tailored for esports brands.

While longevity in our altered framework is quite a black-and-white check of how long an esports brand has been around, track record is the metric that encompasses what the longevity dimension might be lacking. Our interpretation of the track record builds upon Urde, Greyser & Balmer's (2007) definition, which is being able to display proof of delivery on promises and core values over a long time; however, we argue that esports teams could also add a literal dimension to this feature. We believe that this element should be split into three parts when referring to esports, as can be seen in Figure 3.

Value track record is the most similar to the classic definition and refers to how consistently and how well an esports brand has been behaving out-of-the-game. This is difficult to measure precisely, and many teams lack the longevity to utilize this metric.

Overall results refer to the track records of an organization either in a specific esport or as a whole, against any opponent. This is important as the stories can vary greatly between firms that are standing next to each other on the standings. For example, Team Liquid is currently ranked #13th in *CS:GO* – two spots above Copenhagen Flames (HLTV, 2021). However, the difference between the two is that the former has been

in the top 10 almost the entire time since its entry into the scene in 2019, while the latter has been in the scene since 2017 and is currently performing the best it ever has (HLTV, 2021).

Specific matchup results are a crucial component in the creation of *Rivalries,* which will be discussed later on in this section and refers to the track record between two specific brands. Closer number of victories, larger sample sizes and higher stakes amplify the importance of this type of track record. An example of alluring matchup results is between the *LoL* teams of G2 Esports and Fnatic. Between the summer of 2019 and 2020, the two teams met each other in the grand final of the LEC *three times in a row* and both organizations have won the tournament a similar number of times – 8 to 7.

In a perfect scenario, both of the in-game track records should be interesting at the same time, as one without the other can have limited effect. For example, a team might have *specific matchup results* that indicate an intense rivalry with another brand but may not possess the *overall results* to make the rivalry relevant if both teams are at the bottom of the standings. However, this might be unnecessary in some cases, for example when the brand has an unwavering local following regardless of the overall results which can

often be seen with local football or other sports clubs.

History important to identity, use of symbols, core values

We believe that these parts of the framework carry the same meaning as in the original and are generally executed well. Some brands might not be able to showcase the *importance of history to the brand* as well as *core values* as they simply lack the *longevity* and t*rack records* to be able to showcase these elements. Generally, the teams that have history to leverage, do so reasonably well: for example, achievements are highly emphasized on the brands' websites and media content, and some brands (for example, Team Liquid or Team Solomid) have added stars to the jerseys on their players representing how many times their teams have won the North American League Championship Series. The use of logotypes and slogans are also abundant in every activity. *Core values* might be seen as more troublesome, as Kuusisto noted in our interview that many of the esports brands started out and still are hobbies. This could provide some difficulties in the future if the organizations decide to change their mentality. In the interview with Kuusisto it was hinted that ENCE changed its mentality in 2019 when the leadership "decided that they wanted to go big". While ENCE might have transitioned reasonably well, this is a dimension that organizations in the future could fail to deliver on.

Rivalries

The final element of our updated framework is *rivalries*. Rivalries are among the most important phenomena in sports, as they motivate the performance of the team (Pike, Kilduff & Galinsky, 2018), causes fans to pay premiums to attend matches (Havard, 2018), and makes fans feel more included (Havard, 2018). We argue that

effective rivalries contribute greatly towards the creation of a heritage for sports firms, and are a product of the other dimensions of heritage. For an example of this, we can dissect a quote where we asked the MFF representative about rivalries in esports:

"The FIFA [esports] league we work in works the same way. Every time you can make a derby – when Malmo meets Helsingborg – they make a big game out of it because it's history between the football clubs and you can paint that into the esports world and make a rivalry there as well."

First of all, one can spot the longevity and importance of history in the words "every time" and "it's history". The track record of the rivalry since 2008 is 11-8 in favour of Malmo (Sofascore, 2021), and despite Malmo FF doing better overall than Helsingborg, this is compensated by the local strength of the brands. The "big game" part of the sentence suggests the use of symbols and large-scale advertising, further fulfilling the framework.

As a conclusion to this, we decided to define the relationship between rivalries and heritage as a two-way street, as rivalries are fueled by heritage, as well as fuel the heritage themselves as they can fuel the other elements of the framework. In general, we believe that meaningful rivalries are scarce in esports, which is mostly due to the lack of longevity and established track records. While short-term rivalries spring up fairly often, it would be rare to find one that has maintained its relevancy and competitiveness for an extended period of time. However, this is likely to change in the future as esports brands obtain richer backgrounds and histories.

CSR

Misconceptions

By looking at the empirical data, we can see that the general public has many misconceptions about esports which gives the industry a wrong image. Many people view esports as they used to be many years ago when they were just hobbies. During the interviews, the interviewees shared their experience of peoples view within esports. When asked about if people might change their attitude if esports were called something else, like "pro gaming" or "organized video game competitions" in an attempt to appeal more to the public through stifling the argument on whether esports are sports, Ahlström shared that he believes it does not need to change:

"No, I think it's the other people that are against it that needs to change and I think that change is coming. I mean in just my three years working with it, there have been a few changes in people's view of esports and they understand more about it now. I think a lot of people are against it since they don't understand it or haven't tried it or haven't seen it. I mean my father is 67, he watches our FIFA games now and that would have not happened for like five years ago. There's a lot of people here in the office that also watch the games and they didn't do that before, so I think it's just spread the word about esports now with words and how serious a lot of athletes are in the esports community and that will just push it forward and then 10 years it will be regarded as a sport".

Ahlström also touched on another point during the interview which shows that misconceptions stretch back to the early days of gaming culture that is not as prevalent now:

"I think that's the problem, that people don't understand what it is. When they hear esports they think about dark cellars with

kids sitting there, eating chips and that is totally wrong and people don't do that anymore, we did it in my days in the 90s and early 2000...".*

Skoglund shared the similar view as Ahlström during another interview when he was asked about the gap between the traditional sport and the esports:

"If you look at the gamer from 20 years ago they were maybe drinking coke and eating chips or candy and they didn't really care about anything yet stayed up and play games and that was it. And today you see most of the esports professionals, they're concerned about what they eat before games what to eat after games and when to go to bed and stuff like that, and they also work a lot with how they should focus and stuff like that...".

Kuusisto stated that ENCE does not encounter much resistance to the esports culture, but did mention the presence of misconceptions or a lack of understanding: *"We don't get lots of resistance, I think it is sometimes about ignorance, but more about not knowing, not understanding what is this".*

One of the most important factors shaping opinions on esports and esports players is the alleged lack of physical activity. In our conducted survey, around 45% of the people who do not think esports should be treated as traditional sports stated that it is primarily due to the lack of physical activity. However, this view is greatly different within the scene, as Ahlström noted when he was asked whether he considers esports players to be athletes:

"Yes, I would since I know how much, just looking at our players, how much time they put in and how good they are at what they are doing and not only the practice in game, I mean their physical training, the mental strength and mental training to be good at esports. In FIFA, half of the part of being in the top level is the mental strength to be

calm in the 80th minute and still be able to score if you're down one goal or something like that so of course I consider them athletes".

Skoglund, who has been playing hockey almost his whole life shared a similar view but from his perspective, that he can see resemblance between the two sports (hockey and esports) as they are very similar in many aspects, except for the physical aspects where one has to be in more physical good shape in order to perform on the ice rink. Esports may not require the same physical shape but instead have other demands, such as good reflexes, communication skills, hand-eye coordination, etc. While some of the flashier physical aspects might not be there, the degree of absence of physical activity is debatable. In addition to this, Skoglund notes that he thinks esports should be kept close to sports, and points out that there are many types of sports out there.

It is noticeable from the interviews that esports practices over the years have been dynamic and evolved in many ways. People who operate within esports have a different insight than those from the outside. The most common misconceptions mainly refer to the lack of physical effort and the gaming culture that used to be present many years ago. This could draw a hypothesis that esport firms have an opportunity to tackle these misconception issues in favor of gaining legitimacy by presenting how it is in the modern days.

CSR Communications

Because there are so many misconceptions about esports, there are plenty of opportunities for promoting the industry with an added emphasis on educating people about what esports are and dispelling the old-standing myths. Some of the interviewees shared their experiences in creating a more positive image of esports. During the interview with Ahlström and a

question about the importance of role models, Ahlström shared:

"It is our responsibility, if you are a top player in your esports league field recognized for being good that you actually realize what platform you're sitting on and how many people are actually looking up to you that you need to be a good role model for the only kids that follow you on social media and try to evolve the esports scene."

Furthermore, he mentions that Malmö FF try to showcase to the high school students enrolled at their FIFA Academy project how the two esports players the organization has signed go forward with physical training, sleeping, eating, sitting, etc. Ahlström notes that when the students see it, they realize what is required to compete at that high of a level.

Our conducted survey also reinforces the theory that focusing on the health and physicality aspects of esports can improve the public image of esports. Out of 67 survey respondents who chose the option "Maybe" when asked whether they believe that esports should be treated the same way as traditional sports. 23 chose the option "Yes" for the question "If an esports game was set in a virtual reality where people would have to physically run and such, would you then consider it a sport?" The large emphasis that Malmö FF, for example, puts on physical wellbeing could be communicated more widely. Gaming is sometimes seen as a source of obesity and an unhealthy lifestyle. Thus, promoting healthiness could fit Porter & Kramer's (2006) criteria for strategic CSR due to the fact that it addresses a social issue that would directly impact the competitiveness of the firm.

The effectiveness of educational communications is also quite high. When Skoglund was asked about whether he had managed to introduce esports to someone that was not involved in the esports scene,

he shared that he had managed to accomplish it on multiple occasions:

"For me personally, most of my friends they're not from the gaming world and they don't play games or do anything within esports, since I come from and regular sports background I have those type of people around me and most of them have had this old view of esport and just by showing them <...> this sold out arenas with 20,000 people when they play esports, the biggest events and the stars make a lot of money and it's good and it's it requires a lot of dedication and you need to have talent. When I explained that to them it became kind of an eye opener for them".

When asked about the children's parents, Skoglund shared that he talks to many parents during some of the events, for example Dreamhack (a huge event for the gaming community), where Publiclir has a booth. Events are a common occasion where parents come to talk as they are not knowledgeable on their kids' hobbies. Explaining to parents what esports are about and how it can help the kids often changes the parents' view on gaming.

Overall, the empirical data strongly suggests that esports firms have the ability to change the public perception of esports through engaging in active conversations with the public and taking on the role of educators. This could partly explain why the esports scene has experienced a huge growth over the last couple of years, as people are becoming more likely to run into the topic and can dispel old misconceptions in favour of more educated and positive opinions. With the lack of physical activity and healthiness being the most commonly named issues, targeting them could bring the greatest success. Collaborating with other organizations could be a great way to reach a larger audience (Tata and Prasad, 2014) and organizations should aim to communicate with local stakeholders and create collaborations as this can greatly

benefit their own performance. As seen in the case of Publiclir, the Dream Hack booth gave them an opportunity to communicate the positivity about esports and also change the view of stakeholders in which in this context were the parents. In the end, engaging in this strategic CSR would result in strategic advantages for the firm (Porter & Kramer, 2006).

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to research the shortcomings of esports brands and discuss opportunities for them to increase the public opinion on the industry. An inductive method in the form of a qualitative survey and interviews was used to determine potential issues, and the most prominent issues have been identified. Firstly, the lack of heritage and history of esports firms was examined. For this, Urde et al. 's (2007) brand heritage framework was adapted to fit esports firms more accurately. The conclusion was that esports brands primarily lack longevity and track records, which hinders the creation of meaningful rivalries and heritage. Secondly, an apparent issue was the abundance of misconceptions and lack of accurate knowledge about the industry. Educational behavior was confirmed to be effective in changing people's perceptions about esports, and healthiness as well as physical activity were identified as some of the most common misconceptions.

Time

One common denominator in our research turned out to be the role of time. It seems like the problems with brand heritage will naturally become better with time, as in many of the quotes the interviewees note that many problems that esports face stem from the lack of understanding and accurate knowledge about the industry. However, we argue that while time might indeed

assist in creating brand heritage, partaking in strategic CSR particularly aimed at dispelling myths and misconceptions about esports (primarily about healthiness) could greatly accelerate the process of the esports industry gaining legitimacy and could create competitive advantages for the brand.

Limitations

As briefly mentioned in the Methodology part of this paper, the main limitation of this study is the relatively low number and relatively similar demographics of survey respondents. On a scale from 1 to 5 (with 1 being the least and 5 being the most), 78% of the respondents would label their knowledge of esports and its current affairs at 4 or higher. The validity of this was also soft checked by asking to name at least 3 of their favorite esports brands, a task which most of these respondents could do. It could present a fairly skewed reflection of the issues; however, it could also be argued that these perceptions are just as if not more valuable, as high involvement of the respondents in the field of esports signifies the issues being deep, rather than surface-level and stemming from the lack of knowledge on the field. Furthermore, 59.4% of the respondents were male, and between the ages of 19 and 24, which could have possibly skewed the results. Additionally, a fairly small number of interviews were conducted. While this paper has argued that the approach is reasonable due to prioritizing quality over quantity, a larger sample size would likely provide better insights.

Further research

Due to the time and length constraints, only the most prominent issues and findings were presented, however the survey does suggest that there are undoubtedly many more fields for improvement for esports brands that could be studied in more detail,

such as effective player marketing or better nurturing of the fan base. A particularly interesting observation that was not discussed in detail was the importance of the name "esports" to the industry. While 52% of the survey respondents expressed that their opinion on the industry would not change if it were to be renamed, the remaining 48% were almost evenly split between their opinion improving or worsening, with those less knowledgeable on esports opting for the former, whereas those more knowledgeable chose the latter option. Given the demographic homogeneity of the sample, a more in-depth study with a more heterogeneous and larger sample might produce greatly different results.

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Appendix 1 – Interview guide for ENCE

1. You yourself said you work with startups a lot. How did you end up interested in esports?
2. A lot of people nowadays still can't wrap their heads around the whole concept of playing computer games competitively, and have these negative connotations about esports (teenager hobby that doesn't have any longevity).
   o How often, if at all, do you encounter this resistance to the culture?
   o Why, do you think, people still can't get that this isn't just a nerd hobby and can be so much more?
   o Is this an active topic within the organization?
   o How do you think we could possibly fix this? Is it something that will naturally disappear with time, or are there some steps in particular that you have come up with as an org?
3. ENCE is one of the most well-known brands in esports nowadays, particularly within the CS pro scene. Are there any particular brands that you like or look up to?
   o What do you think separates the best esports brands from the worse ones? Is it the focus on branding players? History?
   o Do you think there's something that esports orgs lack in particular, especially when compared to traditional sports organizations? Something that could be greatly improved?

   o What do you think about traditional sports teams moving into esports? Will it help develop the field more, or is it dangerous competition because of the difference in resources? Are they more welcomed or feared?
4. As a high-ranking person on a leading esports team, you are essentially at the forefront of the whole "are esports actually sports" debate. What are your personal thoughts on this?
   o Do you think it's important for esports to keep their name? How do you think the public perception might change if they were named "pro gaming" instead?
   o Would you agree with the idea that esports should be included in the Olympics and such? Maybe they should have their own category, like the Paralympics (no negative connotation intended)?

Appendix 2 – Interview guide for MFF Esports

1. Could you tell us what your position within MFF is particularly and what your day-to-day activities look like?

2. As a person representing a sports team and esports, you are pretty much at the forefront of the whole "are esports actually sports" debate. What is your personal opinion on this?
   - What would you define as a sport?
   - Do you think people's attitudes might change if esports were called something else, like "pro gaming"? How big of an impact could the name possibly have?
   - Would you consider esports players "athletes"? Why/why not?

3. Esports will make their debut in the 2022 Asian games, which is essentially a smaller version of the Olympics happening in Asia. Esports will make their debut in the event (with 8 games) and will count towards the official medal count.
   - Do you think it is reasonable for esports to be included in the Olympics and such high-grade competitions? Just generally, what are your thoughts on this?

4. More and more sports teams nowadays are looking to obtain their own esports teams - the more famous example would be Schalke 04, who until a couple of months ago had their own League of Legends team. Meanwhile, MFF has its own esports team and also its FIFA Academy project together with high school Malmö Fria Läroverk.
   - How was these ideas born?

   - Would MFF possibly get into other esports as well, or will it primarily stick to football-related games?
   - What has the response been like from fans who know about this program? My natural assumption is that it would be positive as the 2 games are closely related, but has there been any criticism or resistance at all?
   - Have there been any significant challenges in promoting this idea?
   - Which segments do you generally try to reach out to and why them?
   - Do the jerseys differ between the soccer players and the esports FIFA players, if yes, in what ways? Perhaps different sponsors on the jerseys?

5. Coming back to the "are esports sports" idea that we talked about before, how knowledgeable are you about the brands and teams in esports?
   - Do you have any particular favorites?
   - What do you think esports teams could do better, branding-wise to make different stakeholders accept them more? (stories, promoting players, etc.)

Appendix 3 – Interview guide for Publiclir

1. Can you tell us a little bit about what Publiclir is, what your position is within it, and what your day-to-day looks like?
2. On the "about us" page on Publiclir's website, you say that your goals are to create better environments for people to play games and reach a high level of play.
   - When we talk about esports and particularly the words "higher level of play", a question instantly pops to my mind, that is "do you think esports are actual sports?"
   - Would you agree with the idea that esports should be included in the Olympics and such? Maybe they should have their own category, like the Paralympics (no negative connotation intended)?

3. In Publiclirs website at the section About us, it says in Swedish: Publiclir strävar efter att utveckla och förena det traditionella föreningslivet med den morderna "gamern" samt skapa en bra samlingsplats som håller både hög nivå och är inkluderande. Could you tell us what it means?
   - Is there a large gap between the traditional lifestyle and gamers? How does it manifest?
   - When you say bullying, do you mean toxicity in games or in real life? Would you agree that people nowadays still have negative connotations attached to gaming? As in, that they see it as a nerd hobby and many people see this as a hobby that they don't share with many other people.
   - Do you think it's important for esports to keep their name? How do you think the public perception might change if they were named "pro gaming" instead?
4. Is this negativity around gaming something we can fix now or should it be left to fix itself with time?
   - Do you think the current esports brands are doing a good job at improving the public's opinion about gaming and esports?
   - What could be done better in order to make people accept gaming more?
   - Do you remember any particular instances where you managed to introduce esports to those who didn't like them before?

Appendix 4 – Online survey

1. How old are you?
   - 12-18
   - 19-24
   - 25-30
   - 30-35
   - 35-40
   - 40-50
   - 50+
2. What gender do you identify as?
   - Male
   - Female
   - Other
   - Prefer not to say
3. What country do you live in?
   - A comprehensive list of countries
4. From 1 to 5 (1 being the least and 5 being the most), how familiar would you say you are with esports as a concept and its current affairs?
   - Numbers 1-5
5. From 1 to 5 (1 being the least and 5 being the most), how familiar would you say you are with some sort of traditional sports?
   - Numbers 1-5
6. Please name up to 5 of your favorite esports brands (e.g. Faze, TSM) with your favorite one being first
7. Please name up to 5 of your favorite traditional sports brands (e.g. FC Barcelona, Real Madrid), with your favorite one being first
8. What are the 5 most important factors that influenced your choice of favorite teams/clubs? Please rank them from most important to least important.
   - Personalities within the brand (players, coaches, etc.)
   - History (past results, rivalries, memorable moments, etc.)
   - Origin (city/country the brand is associated with)
   - Name/Logotype
   - Community culture (reputation and personality of the fan base)
   - Quality of management (the top managers are perceived to be fair, competent, likeable, etc.)
   - Communications (social media posts, the formality level in its communications, the content it posts)
   - Your friends/family support this brand
9. In your opinion, what do you think esports brands lack the most and should work on improving?
   - Having likeable, interesting players
   - Developing rich backgrounds with interesting rivalries, memorable moments, etc.
   - Being associated with specific places (cities/countries)
   - Interesting names, logotypes, slogans, etc.
   - Management quality (having likeable, interesting top managers)
   - Communications (producing better content, adjusting the formality/maturity levels in their communications, etc.)
   - Nurturing their fan bases more and making them more likeable
   - Merchandise
   - Other (text box)
10. Would you agree with the view that esports should be recognized and receive the same treatment as traditional sports (e.g. would be included in the Olympics)?
   - Yes
   - No
   - Maybe

11. If maybe/no, what is the main reason you think esports should not be treated like traditional sports?
    o Lack of physical activity
    o Private ownership of video games (football, for example, is not owned by anyone)
    o Steep prerequisites for participation (need to have a computer, mouse, keyboard, etc.)
    o Controversial possible long-term effects of video gaming, such as bad posture, alleged increased violent tendencies, etc.
    o Other (text box)
12. If an esports game was set in a virtual reality where people would have to physically run and such would you then consider it a sport?
    o Yes
    o No
    o Maybe
13. Do you consider chess to be a sport?
    o Yes
    o No
14. How would your opinion on esports change if it changed its name (e.g. they would be called "pro gaming" instead)? In this case, they would no longer seek to be included in traditional olympics, but could have their own equivalent.
    o Strongly worsen
    o Worsen
    o Would not change
    o Improve
    o Strongly improve