



SCHOOL OF
ECONOMICS AND
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Everything, everywhere, all at once

eSports fandoms: An empirical case of virtual organizations

Gina Guizzetti & Ha Trang Tran

Master's Programme in Managing People, Knowledge and Change

Supervisor: Roland Paulsen

Examiner: Sverre Spoelstra

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Abstract

Title: Everything, everywhere, all at once. eSports Fandoms: An empirical case of virtual organizations.

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Authors: Gina Guizzetti and Ha Trang Tran

Supervisor: Roland Paulsen

Purpose: The purpose of this thesis is to develop a comprehensive understanding of the fandoms in eSports as an empirical case for developing a modern virtual global organization.

Methodology: This research includes a qualitative case study with a symbolic interactionism tradition and an abductive approach. Eleven semi-constructed interviews, along with online observation conducted during “watch parties” in Discord servers and Youtube channels, which allows us to see people within social situations and understand their own construction of reality.

Theoretical Framework: We drew on the building of a new framework regarding virtual organizations to examine the fandoms in eSports based on the one proposed by Strader et al. (1998).

Contributions: By introducing a revised and updated framework of virtual global organizations, this research contributes a new lens through which the interaction between eSports fandoms and organizational studies can be examined. Furthermore, it contributes to challenging existing literature of parasocial relationship theory by suggesting a more transactional form of bond based on implicit agreements.

Key Words: eSports, Fandoms, Communities, Virtual Organization

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1. Introduction

Esports captured our interest for two reasons: it represents an understudied phenomenon, and it is one that has grown substantially over the past decade, making it a compelling subject for research. One of the authors of this thesis is herself an avid fan and player; the other is not. This dynamic made the collaboration both fascinating and challenging in equal measure. We come from different worlds and different interests; on one side, conversations were naturally drawn toward entertainment, gaming, and fan culture; on the other, the focus leaned toward organizational theory, strategy, and the business dimensions of the industry. The intersection of these two perspectives became our guiding idea and north star, and the richness of the esports industry provided the fuel to set this research in motion. In the sections that follow, we present detailed insights into how esports fandoms function as an empirical case for understanding virtual organizations.

1.1. Background

Valeria started playing video games when she was just a little kid. At first, Valeria played simply because her older brother did, and as children, people are often strongly influenced by the interests of those around them - especially in this case, their siblings. Gaming was also a way for the two of them to spend time together. Over time, gaming gradually became Valeria's own personal passion without her even realizing it. It provided a space where Valeria could spend time alone, temporarily escape the pressures of everyday life, and also to connect with her close friends. Gaming also became a medium through which Valeria found communities where she truly felt belonged, met new people, and learned interesting things from different places and cultures around the world - even when it is the ability to swear in multiple languages.

As time passed, Valeria grew up, graduated, and, more fortunately than many other gamers, eventually found a career within the eSports industry. Gaming and eSports thus became a constant and natural presence in Valeria's life, almost resembling an instinctive part of her identity. The eSports community shaped Valeria's habits and perspectives in ways that could naturally be applied to her professional life, influencing how she analyzed situations, made

decisions, and approached their work. Even Valeria did not fully realize how much she had gained from what had originally been just a simple childhood hobby that entered her life so naturally. The moment when Valeria came to this realization during our interview became a defining inspiration for this thesis. Although Valeria is a fictional character, she was constructed from the real experiences shared by the gamers we interviewed.

For many years, gaming has frequently been misunderstood and negatively perceived, particularly by those outside gaming communities. It has often been associated with terms such as violent, unproductive, time-consuming, and harmful to players' thoughts and behavior. Even after the emergence of eSports and its inclusion in major sporting events, it still has not received widespread social recognition as a legitimate sport (Parry, 2019). Not only outsiders, but even individuals who have been involved with gaming and eSports since before they could even read, often fail to fully recognize the benefits these communities have provided them, especially in relation to professional and organizational environments.

Current realities, however, increasingly suggest the opposite. Since 2010, the eSports industry has seen tremendous growth, driven by the increase in players and audiences and technology development. What began as a niche competitive pastime has matured into a multi-billion-dollar entertainment ecosystem: according to the Global Esports Market Report (2025), the global eSports market is estimated at approximately \$3.0 billion, up from \$2.53 billion in 2024, reflecting a compound annual growth rate of nearly 19%.

Alongside its increasing profit, the eSports domain is simultaneously undergoing other forms of growth and transformation. ESports insider presents in their Esports stats (2025) in terms of eSports growth as interest in eSports among 18-29-year-olds grew steadily from 27% in Q1 2021 to 31% in Q2 2024. Counter-Strike had the largest 2025 prize pool at \$28.5 million, followed by Dota 2 and Honor of Kings (each \$20.2 million). Furthermore, League of Legends recorded the highest peak viewership of 2025 at 6.7 million for Worlds. Sponsorship growth eased to 7% in 2025, compared with the 18% increase from 2017 to 2018. This acceleration highlights the industry's transition from niche competition to mainstream entertainment, fueled by broader public awareness, the surge in live streaming engagement, and the steady rise of international tournament prize pools (Formosa et al., 2022).

With the emergence of its economic value, eSports has started to receive great attention from various fields. The fast developing features of this new field has sparked the authors interests, as they wondered how a new community such as eSports can expand that fast in such a short period of time. However, as the authors dived deeper into the development of eSports theory and scientific research, it has been lagging behind the development of practice. Especially with focus on organizational studies, it raises a question to the writers: *How can this fast-paced, changing, developing field by any chance be related to organizational studies?*

To address this question, the authors conducted interviews with various individuals within the eSports player and viewer community in order to identify the distinctive characteristics of this community. These characteristics drew the authors' attention to a new organizational model emerging in the digital era *virtual organizations*. This model shares several similarities with eSports communities, leading the authors to argue that studying eSports communities may provide valuable contributions to the broader body of research on virtual organizations.

Defining either concept with precision is not straightforward. There is no universally accepted definition of eSports (Tang et al., 2023, p.1). However, Pedraza-Ramirez et al. (2020) supplemented and redefined eSports with a more comprehensive definition of eSports as the casual or organized competitive activity of playing specific video games that provide professional and/or personal development to the player. This practice is facilitated by electronic systems, either computers, consoles, tablets, or mobile phones, on which teams and individual players practice and compete online and/or in local-area-network tournaments at the professional or amateur level. The games are established by ranking systems and competitions and are regulated by official leagues. This structure provides players with a sense of being part of a community and facilitates mastering expertise in fine-motor coordination and perceptual-cognitive skills, particularly but not exclusively, at higher levels of performance. Wagner (2006, p.3) defines eSports as an area of sport activities in which people develop and train mental or physical abilities in the use of information and communication technologies.

Similarly, despite the fact that the concept of the virtual organization (VO) has engendered great interest in the literature, there is still little common understanding of the concept, as

evidenced by the multitude of labels applied to VOs (Kasper-Fuehrer, 2003, p.34). One definition of a virtual organization is that it is a temporary network of companies that comes together quickly to exploit fast-changing opportunities (Byrne, 1993). Virtual organizations involve an alliance of separate firms that can quickly bring together a set of core competencies to take advantage of a market opportunity.

What unites these two phenomena is a shared trajectory: both eSports communities and virtual organizations have been shaped by the same forces of technological acceleration, geographic dispersion, and the collapse of traditional boundaries between competition, collaboration, and community. It is within this convergence that the present study situates itself, contributing to an emerging body of research that takes seriously the organizational dimensions of digital sport.

1.2. Research Purpose and Research Question

We argue that approaching and studying eSports communities can provide valuable and innovative insights into the business model of virtual organizations. At the same time, eSports represents a large-scale community composed of numerous smaller subcommunities with diverse backgrounds, resembling the structure of virtual organizations while remaining far more accessible for research and observation. By examining the real-life experiences of eSports players and industry practitioners, this study contributes to understanding the similarities between eSports communities and virtual organization, thereby offering insights into this expanding type of business models.

We particularly examine the distinctive characteristics of communities operated through online platforms features that are rarely observed, or entirely absent, in other types of communities. Based on these observations, the study compares such characteristics with this emerging business model in order to identify potential challenges and limitations. In doing so, the authors aim to provide insights that may help future organizations minimize these obstacles and maximize the benefits of virtual organizations.

Fandoms and communities in eSports are not being studied at large due to its new appearance in the scene. This study aims to give visibility and perspective and discover research areas by understanding how fandoms and communities in eSports operate as a legitimate organization.

We are interested in investigating the implication of implementing this new type of organization, especially focusing on the negative impact on modern workplaces. Building on this context, our research is guided by the following research questions:

How can eSports communities be conceptualized as virtual organizations? and How do community narratives influence fandom engagement within the virtual organization framework?

By examining the intersection between modern virtual organizations and eSports fandoms, this study aims to understand the structure and dynamics of loose and individualistic forms of organization operating within the boundaries of the internet and algorithmically shaped environments. While existing literature has explored eSports, fandoms, and virtual organizations separately, limited research has integrated these perspectives within an organizational studies framework.

This thesis contributes by:

- Positioning eSports fandoms as a form of organization rather than mere consumption, and building a new virtual organization framework that better describes contemporary virtual organization.
- Applying organizational theories to the empirical case of eSports fan behavior and decisions.
- Critically examining eSports communities' narratives in attracting fandoms' engagement.

By doing so, it offers a novel perspective on how virtual and global communities both shape and challenge contemporary organizational models.

1.3. Outline of the Thesis

We structured the thesis into six sections: Introduction, Literature review, Methodology, Empirical findings, Discussion, and Conclusion. Chapter One presents an introduction to the thesis. It begins with background information to contextualize the study. Subsequently, the research objectives are outlined, encompassing the research problem, the purpose of the study, and the research question. Chapter Two, provides a comprehensive overview of existing

knowledge. We will dive into key areas with a focus on their relevance to fandoms and communities, virtual organizations, platforms, algorithmic management, control and our theoretical framework for our study. Chapter Three, we will outline our chosen research approach and explain our qualitative case study, detailing research philosophy and data collection methods. Chapter Four, will present the empirical results of our research, organized according to key themes. We present empirical results organized in the framework of Virtual Global Organization around Identity, Structure, Engagement, and Dissolution. Chapter Five will draw crucial connections between theory and the empirical case based on the framework of Virtual Global Organization, its four aspects and insights from the findings. Chapter Six will synthesize our investigation, highlighting contributions to organizational studies literature, offer practical recommendations for future organizations and we will also propose areas for future research.

2. Literature Review

In order to develop a comprehensive understanding of the current implications and context of our study, we carried out a detailed literature review of theoretical concepts and prior research relevant to the topic. This review involved examining a range of academic sources, including scholarly articles, and previous empirical studies, with the aim of identifying the key ideas and frameworks that have shaped existing discussions in this field. Through this process, we were able to better understand how our research relates to and builds upon earlier work, while also identifying potential gaps or perspectives that require further exploration. The insights derived from this initial review served as an important foundation for the development of our research approach. On the basis of these findings, we established the following theoretical starting points, which guide the analytical direction of our study.

2.1. Fandoms in eSport

We start by explaining the foundational concept of fandoms. The study of fandoms has grown considerably in the past decade, we understand fandoms as *passionate communities built around shared interests that have become a defining feature of pop culture. It is all about creating a tribe where people feel valued, understood, and excited to be a part of something bigger than themselves* (Aloysius, 2024, n.p.). Similarly, Edlom and Karlsson (2021, p.124) notes that fandom centers on the process of turning strong individual emotions into collective experiences shared with others who hold similar emotional investments. Echoing this idea, Jenkins (2024) considers that fandom can be understood as a participatory cultural practice through which individuals communicate and negotiate their emotional attachment to the creative works of others. Fandoms are often framed as a form of fanaticism or worship. The glorification of personas is an important component of the communities that are generated in and around online personas and live streaming personalities (Kowert & Daniel, 2021, p.3). Today, fandoms function as structured networks capable of influencing corporate decisions, driving market trends, and determining the commercial viability of cultural products. Edlom and Karlsson (2021, p.130) suggest that online fan communities empower other fans with new roles creating value. Furthermore, fandoms are legitimate organizations with coordinated communication channels, and governance mechanisms that enable collective action with

important cultural and economic relevance. Fandom is often what brings in viewers initially and then holds the potential for viewers to establish relationships with other community members (Kowert & Daniel, 2021, p.3). Particularly, fandoms have also been found to mediate the relationship between sense of community and different gratifications or benefits acquired from watching streams, namely, relaxing entertainment, expressive information sharing, and escapism (Kowert & Daniel, 2021, p.3). In the case of eSports many people watch eSports athletes not only for entertainment, but also because they can get better at their own performance on the game. This allows for greater engagement and identification to the community. Jenkins (2006, p.26) observed that through collective intelligence communities can operate as *knowledge communities*. In eSports, this is particularly visible in forums, and social media discussion threads where fans collaboratively analyze player performance, decode organizational decisions, and anticipate competitive outcomes. Furthermore, fandom creates a space for discussions and debates creating an opportunity for subtle, gradual, social, and cultural change which does not become overtly political and does not require approval from the state or other established institutions but may be transformative (Jenkins & Jie, 2024, p.16).

Esport fan communities possess a multi-layered structure, at the outermost level exists the broader eSports community, consisting of all individuals who play games or are involved in the eSports industry in some capacity. Within this larger layer are the main communities centered around specific game genres or individual games, such as AAA games, tactical shooting games, indie games, among others. Within these genre, or game-specific communities, there are further smaller communities created by players or influencers themselves, with the purpose of fostering interaction and connection among individuals who share similar interests, preferences, or gaming styles. The existence of these fandoms communities also creates conditions for the development of parasocial relationships between fandoms and professional eSports players.

2.2. Parasocial Relationship theory

One of the firsts theorists of the parasocial relationship phenomenon were Horton and Wohl in 1956, which he conceptualized as a delusional *face-to-face relationship between spectator and performer* (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p.2). In this case, the audience member feels an emotional

attachment and a sense of intimacy without the other party to acknowledge their existence. Similarly, Giles (2002, p.284) refers that in a parasocial relationship *the media user is a stranger throughout*. Furthermore he explains that social attraction was a more important and motivating factor than physical attraction (Giles, 2002, p.284). This creates an attachment fostering a sense of closeness, loyalty, devotion and respect for the figure. Kowert and Daniel (2021, p.1) describe this unique kind of relationship as a nonreciprocated emotional connection that a person develops with a media personality. Furthermore, it can be described as a *socio-emotional connection that people develop with media figures* (Hoffner & Bond, 2022, p.1). Elaboration of this idea, Tukachinsky (2010, p.76) examines the friendship dimension of parasocial relationships, suggesting that *in a parasocial context, friendship can be conceptualized as liking the character, feeling solidarity with and trust in the media figure, and desiring self-disclosure and communication with him or her*. Moreover, parasocial relationships can be defined as *one-sided relationships that individuals develop with media personalities or fictional characters* (Chang et al., 2023, p.2). What distinguishes a fan from someone engaged in a parasocial relationship is the perceived sense of connection with the media figure. Chang et al. (2023, p.2) further describes that a fan may admire or feel affinity toward a celebrity, but this does not necessarily imply the perception of a personal relationship. In contrast, individuals involved in parasocial relationships often perceive the media figure as a close friend and may describe the relationship in more personal or emotionally intimate terms (Blight, 2016). This distinction is critical because it determines the depth of emotional investment fans bring to their engagement with players and, by extension, with the organizations those players represent.

Exploring the concept of parasocial relationships lays the foundation for understanding how these dynamics specifically manifest within eSports fandoms. The characteristics described previously reflect a more traditional understanding of parasocial relationship theory. In the context of eSports, however, these relationships take on new forms shaped by digital interaction, live-streaming, constant online engagement, and the accessibility of players and content creators. There is a twist echoing the idea of Kowert and Daniel (2021, p.3) that while the relationship between viewer and performer are not necessarily reciprocal within these communities, affiliation with the community itself provides a sense of reciprocity. In this conception, fans' connections are primarily formed with the players and teams they

support. Players share updates about their lives, respond to fan comments, and stream their practice sessions, creating an environment in which the perceived relational proximity between fans and players is reduced. Consequently, this has implications for organizational dynamics, as fans who feel personally connected to players are more likely to respond emotionally and collectively to organizational decisions affecting those players. The implications from the fandom behavior in demonstrating loyalty includes merchandise purchases, skin transactions, and tournament viewership. In this sense, eSports fandoms act on more of a feeling of entertainment and once that goes away, they move to another team or player. This has potentiated the sense of community and engagement where it contributes to high emotional engagement by the community, and in long-term, tight knit groups being formed around the famous person (Kowert & Daniel, 2021, p.4) as this is the case in eSports. The online presence plays a role in fostering these relationships as geographical distances shorten and the access seems reciprocal.

2.3. Knowledge communities

Considering the vast literature on the subject of communities, Lindkvist (2005, p. 1193) points out that communities *involve both affect-laden social relationships and a substantial degree of shared ideational or cognitive communality, having emerged over a lengthy period of time.* Furthermore, he suggests that the communities do not reside on one person to create and share knowledge but as to practice knowledge, in the particular case of eSports they are actively performing and experiencing the same thing regularly. Furthermore, it is important to point out knowledge communities can be defined as *close-knit groups that have been together long enough to develop into a cohesive community with relationships of mutuality and shared understandings* (Lindkvist, 2005, p.1189). In relation with the practice of sharing the knowledge in communities such as eSports fandoms, suggesting a novel way to engage while sharing *tacit knowledge* (Lindkvist, 2005, p.1190). Furthermore, with collective intelligence, the community leverages the combined expertise of the members of the community as Jenkins (2006, p.27) suggested.

When discussing knowledge we need to make reference to Nonaka's (1994) framework for understanding the type of knowledge as he explains that *tacit knowledge is deeply rooted in action, commitment, and involvement in a specific context.* Nonaka's (1994, p.16) further

explains that tacit knowledge involves the cognitive and technical elements often including the individuals' images, perspectives and beliefs to perceive the individual's own world but also the know-how and appropriate skills. This is particularly relevant in contexts such as eSports fandoms, where individuals connect across different platforms to share and acquire knowledge, engaging in interactions through which they collectively construct and exchange understandings of their world. It is important to note as Nonaka explains that the creation of knowledge in the organization setting is *understood as a process that amplifies the knowledge created by individuals* (Nonaka, 1994, p.17). Individuality is the prime mover of knowledge creation, there are three aspects, first, intention is concerned with how individuals form their approach to the world and try to make sense of their environment. Second, autonomy can be applied at the individual, group, and organizational levels either separately or all together. Finally, fluctuation, chaos or discontinuity can generate new patterns of interaction between individuals and their environment (Nonaka, 1994, p.18). Furthermore, he notes that one way to implement the management of organizational knowledge creation is by establishing a field or self-organizing team in which individual members collaborate to develop new concepts (Nonaka, 1994). In this sense, fandoms in eSports represent autonomy groups generating knowledge by constructing their social reality and evolving communities of practice where they are more *fluid and interpenetrative than bounded* (Nonaka, 1994, p.24). To create their social reality, trust among the members is paramount as people need to feel safe in order to share their experiences and ultimately exteriorize their tacit knowledge. Nonaka expresses that a *key way to build mutual trust is to share one's original experience* (Nonaka, 1994, p.24).

2.4. Mechanism of Control

In terms of control, Dimitrova (2003, p.182) research on the supervision and flexibility of virtual workers has raised questions about whether extensive investments in control procedures and monitoring strategies and viability. His research has shown that virtual work is often more similar to traditional workplace arrangements than previously assumed. He further explains that when people are granted greater autonomy, virtual workers frequently dedicate more working hours than they would under the fixed working schedules of traditional workplaces (Dimitrova, 2003). Furthermore, Kellogg et al.,(2020, p.369) define control as the dialectical process in which employers continuously innovate to maximize the value extracted

from workers, while workers simultaneously engage in forms of resistance to preserve their autonomy, dignity, and identity. Moreover, the authors present a variety of forms of control, including normative and rational control. Normative control relates to shaping employees' desires and values by winning their hearts, whereas rational control appeals to workers' self-interest (Kellogg et al., 2020, p.369).

Building on this, we draw on the definition of normative control as Cushen, (2019, p.102) describes as the *locus of shared values and moral involvement in which control rests on shaping workers' identities, emotions, attitudes and beliefs*. Normative control regulates people internally, particularly their self-image, emotions, and identifications, by shaping identities that are considered congruent, (Müller, 2017, p.895). The individual internalises the attitudes of a community in the form of the *generalized other* that enters as a determining factor into the individual's thinking. Through this internalization process the self becomes self-conscious, as it can refer to itself as part of this community.

In previous decades, companies promoted identification with corporate culture through what is traditionally understood as normative control. However, the focus has increasingly shifted to the concept of neo-normative control which entails being yourself rather than conforming to an organizational identity (Müller, 2017). Additionally, this involves more of an approach of individualism, free self-expression and emotional expression, social identities, (Sturdy & Delbridge, 2010, p.119). Besides the underlying freedom that this control brings there is an element of fun, as pointed out by Sturdy and Delbridge (2010, p.122), *people are expected to express their own fun side and playful side rather than suppressing it*. In addition to other forms of control, neo-normative has gained traction as an hybrid extension of others. Similarly, Müller (2017, p.895) defines neo-normative control as *based on an extension of culture management which invites aspects of employees' personal lives into the set-up of normative control*.

2.5. Algorithmic management

The rapid growth of social media platforms such as Reddit, X, YouTube, and Discord has brought into sharper focus the question of how such spaces are managed and governed. These platforms are not merely communication tools; they actively constitute eSports fan communities by mediating how members interact, who can participate, what content gains

visibility, and ultimately what kind of culture prevails within these spaces. Central to this dynamic are algorithms, which are optimized for engagement and, in doing so, play a decisive role in shaping community discourse and its evolving character.

To understand this phenomenon, it is useful to first establish what algorithmic management means as a concept. Wood (2021, p.1) defines algorithmic management as the use of computerized procedures to control an organization and further elaborates that it involves an extensive collection and use of platform data to build and refine algorithms that take on coordination and control tasks once handled by managers. As Benlian et al. (2022, p.825) observe, algorithmic management has become a defining *feature of the platform economy*, driving the development of increasingly sophisticated algorithms across industries. Extending this point, Benlian et al. (2022, p.827) suggest that *algorithmic management but specifically algorithmic that helps with decision-making are increasingly omnipresent across multiple areas of our lives*.

What makes this particularly relevant for the study of eSports and virtual organizations is how algorithmic management operates beyond the firm. Drawing on the idea of Stark and Vanden Broeck (2024, p.2), an algorithmic society is a process in which many of the most valuable actors, assets, and activities are not located within the firm but involve a complex entanglement of information flows, practices, and users. In this sense, algorithmic management is no longer limited to the workplace or the traditional factory; it permeates into colloquial, private, or digital spaces where communities form and organize themselves (Stark & Vanden Broeck, 2024, p.3). Furthermore, algorithmic management is *characterized by fundamental changes in the very nature of organization*. The authors suggest that it particularly entails the transformations in the topology of organization, as *algorithmic practices address the management challenges of this transformation even while creating new problems* (Stark & Vanden Broeck, 2024, p. 5)

The platform organization, as Stark and Vanderbroeck (2024, p. 5) describe it, becomes the most typical form through which algorithmic management operates, and crucially, the actors within it are configured as *users* a term that, as the authors point out, positions people not as passive consumers but as contributors and active participants (Stark & Vanderbroeck, 2024, p.8). From this perspective, eSports fan communities are not simply audiences; they are

organizational actors shaped by, and in turn shaping, algorithmic logics that govern their visibility, behavior, and sense of belonging.

The implications of algorithmic management are, however, far from straightforward. Recent research presents both a productive and a problematic side. On one hand, it offers tangible gains in decision accuracy, operational efficiency, and the scalability of complex operations. On the other hand, scholars including Benlian et al. (2022) have drawn attention to its darker side. This begins to raise questions about transparency, control, and the displacement of human judgment. Furthermore, discussing on the dark side of algorithmic management a common thread is that algorithmic opacity creates feelings of uncertainty and social injustice, the areas and extent of problematic consequences for workers are multifarious (Benlian et al., 2022, p.834)

2.6. Platforms as digital infrastructure

As the previous concepts suggest that platforms are the epitome of algorithmic management, we need to address this view and delve deep into the definitions and its relation to the study. According to Srnicek (2017, p.31) platforms are digital infrastructures that enable interactions between two or more groups. They are far more than simply internet or technology companies, as they can operate in any context where digital interaction takes place. The platform relies mostly on social data and social media functionalities (Alaimo & Kallinikos, 2017, p.180).

The platforms are characterised by providing the infrastructure to intermediate between different user groups, by displaying monopoly tendencies driven by network effects, by employing cross-subsidisation to draw in different user groups, and by having a designed core architecture that governs the interaction possibilities (Srnicek, 2017, p.36).

Social media can be understood as a platform (Alaimo & Kallinikos, 2017, p.175). There are several variations and meanings to the concept but it is widely accepted that the approach to view social media as a platform is the delineation of the role platforms assume in shaping the communication and interaction fabric of everyday life (Alaimo & Kallinikos, 2017, p.175). Social media platforms are spaces that have been set up to fashion predispositions, preferences, opinions, or, as in our case, intentions out of an engineered platform experience

(Alaimo & Kallinikos, 2017, p.185). Social media platforms frame social interaction in ways that reflect their own constitution as sociotechnical entities. Social media platforms are a particular type of digital platform (Alaimo & Kallinikos, 2017, p.188). As a result, social media establish online a drastically simplified version of social interaction and communication with focusing on the user generated content and the communicative exchange (Alaimo & Kallinikos, 2017, p.177). This can be seen as a social set up and reproduction of a particular kind of sociality.

2.7. Virtual Global Organizations

Within the fast changing environment we are faced on today's landscape, the need for more flexible, fluid or loose organizations are on demand. Virtual organizations (VO) are not a new concept and previous researchers have bright into light in the late 90's. Evidently the term has evolved over time with newer variants and characteristics to fit the present landscape, specially after the groundbreaking historic events like the pandemic COVID-19. This accelerates a new way of working, giving more space to new research and an innovative approach, specially with high investments of *digital technologies and AI-enablement collaborative tools* (Froese et al., 2025, p.691). Newer terms have emerged, in particular, global virtual work (GVW).

First we need to start with defining a Virtual organization (VO) and it could be described as *network organizations, often seen as a collaborative network of people, typically residing inside one organization*, associated with a strong project-oriented organization (Riemer & Vehring, 2012, p.7). Furthermore, the general notion of VO is generalized on *networking, management, community*, switch systematically, *even human personality* (Mowshowitz, 1997, p.32). Moreover, VO is defined as a geographically distributed organization whose members are bound by a long-term common interest or goal, and who communicate and coordinate their work through information technology (Ahuja & Carley, 1998). Echoing this idea, the authors highlight that geographical distribution is a necessary complement for building a common virtual organization identity (Riemer & Vehring, 2012, p.8). Another definition for VO is that it is a temporary network of companies that comes together quickly to exploit fast-changing opportunities (Strader et al, 1998, p.77).

Furthermore, Handy (1995) recognized the potential of virtual organizations to transform the way work is carried out in the future. He emphasized the central role that trust would play as remote forms of collaboration became more common, arguing that technology alone would not be sufficient to sustain virtual organizations (Handy, 1995). When it comes to identifying the structure of a VO, it outlines three key aspects in the formation of such organizations: First *management, the author observes a flexible hierarchical structure which favors a self management* (Riemer & Vehring, 2012, p.8). Contrary to this idea, VO needs dedicated management activities especially because its switching is standard operating procedure (Mowshowitz, 1997, p.33). *Second, value creation focuses on core competencies, specialized expertise or unique ways* (Riemer & Vehring, 2012, p.8). Third, the authors discuss the goals of virtual organizations which are the reasons why virtual organizations are created in the first place. This can be a range of reasons from achieving virtual size by joining forces to the sharing of knowledge and joint learning as a network (Riemer & Vehring, 2012, p.8).

There are many advantages of this type of organization, according to Froese et al. (2025, p.696) *effective collaboration and best practices for communicating across cultures*. Echoing this idea Strader mentions also *adaptability, flexibility, agility, and speed* (Strader et al, 1998, p.77). This is particularly important, as knowledge transfer within organizations must be communicated in an effective and agile manner. It is especially critical in a global context, where organizations are required to adapt quickly and operate across multiple time zones.

Furthermore, VO can be categorized as different types, for example, *the internal VO can resemble a collaborative network of people residing inside one organization (virtual team structures)* (Riemer & Vehring, 2012, p.10). On the other hand, the authors explain that the network VO is a *flexible, collaborative inter-organizational network of independent (small and medium-sized) firms or individuals. Partners bring in their core competencies to the network, where they are synergistically combined to create a best-of-breed organization. Trust is the key enabler of collaboration, which points to the importance of social relationships in the network* (Riemer & Vehring, 2012, p.10). This could be linked to a social organization where a *group of individuals possess collective skills, this makes it possible to switch from one group to another as conditions demand* (Mowshowitz, 1997, p.33). VO does not presuppose any particular control structure, nor does it require specific spatial or functional arrangements.

Control may be exercised by the top echelon of a management hierarchy or by relatively autonomous managers in a decentralized system, who can have centralized or decentralized control structures (Mowshowitz, 1997, p.36). Moreover, *in virtual organizations the structure that will emerge will be a more amorphous web of connections (i.e., a network), changing constantly* (Ahuja & Carley, 1998, n.p.). VO are embedded in a *loosely-coupled organization structure* (Strader et al., 1998, p.78)

Another dimension worth examining is *switching*. Mowshowitz (1997, p.37) argues that switching conditions can be driven by algorithmic aspects. Switching, in this framework, favors flexibility and temporary relationships built on explicit rather than implicit agreements. However, Mowshowitz (1997, p.37) also warns that the extensive use of switching may create an image problem for virtual firms, undermining the trust and stability that communities and organizations depend on. This tension translates directly into the eSports context. On the organizational side, platforms and virtual firms may strategically shift their algorithmic configurations, adjusting recommendation systems, moderation tools, or monetization models in ways that reshape the environment communities inhabit. On the community side, fans themselves switch: migrating from one platform to another when algorithms deprioritize their content.

Building on the concept of virtual organizations, the evolution of technology has led to the emergence of new concepts in the literature, such as Global Virtual Work (GVW). Froese et al. (2025, p.692) define GVW as *collaborative work among individuals, teams, and organizations that spreads across countries and is enabled by technology-mediated communication*. A defining characteristic of GVW is its cross-cultural nature, spanning different cultural values, languages, and time zones, making coordination and cohesion a fundamentally complex challenge (Froese et al., 2025, p.692).

At its core, GVW centers on global virtual teams, groups of individuals who are geographically dispersed, rely on communication technologies, and work together toward a common goal (Froese et al., 2025, p.692). The author further explains that these teams operate across multiple levels, connecting actors and environments that sit within, between, and beyond traditional organizational boundaries. While this framework was largely developed to describe professional and corporate settings, its logic maps remarkably well onto eSports fan

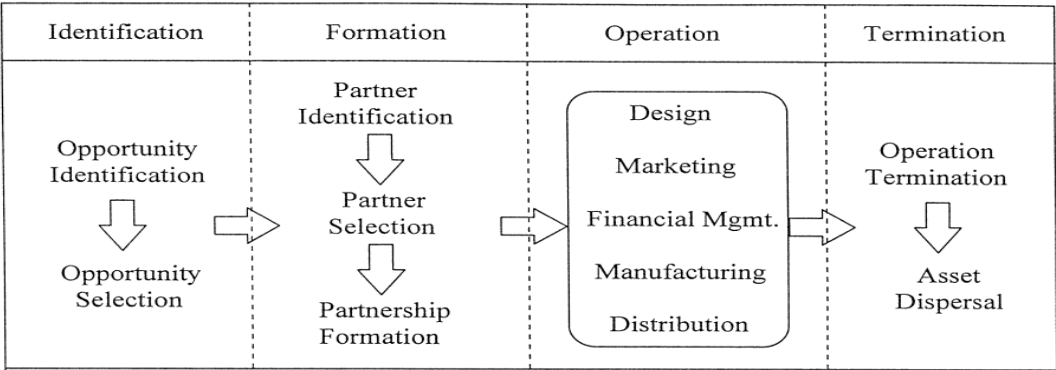
communities. Like global virtual teams, eSports communities are geographically scattered, technology-dependent, and organized around a shared purpose. Members collaborate, debate, create content, and sustain a collective identity often without ever meeting in person and across greatly different cultural contexts. This parallelism is not merely descriptive; it suggests that eSports fandom communities function in ways that closely resemble virtual organizational forms.

2.8. Framework for Virtual Organizations (VO)

Building on the definition of a virtual organization and drawing from the model proposed by Strader et al. (1998), virtual organizations are understood to move through four aspects: identification, formation, operation, and termination, shown in **Figure 1**. This distinction is central to our research framework, as it provides the structural foundation through which we analyze the organization of eSports fandoms.

According to Strader et al. (1998, p.79), *the identification aspect encompasses opportunity identification, evaluation, and selection. The formation aspect involves partner identification, evaluation and selection, and the establishment of partnerships where the partner identification process takes the outputs of the identification aspect as its input, generating a set of potential partners. The operation aspect consists of five major decision-making processes: design, marketing, financial management, manufacturing, and distribution. Finally, the termination aspect covers the cessation of operations and the dispersal of assets* (Strader et al., 1998, p.79-80).

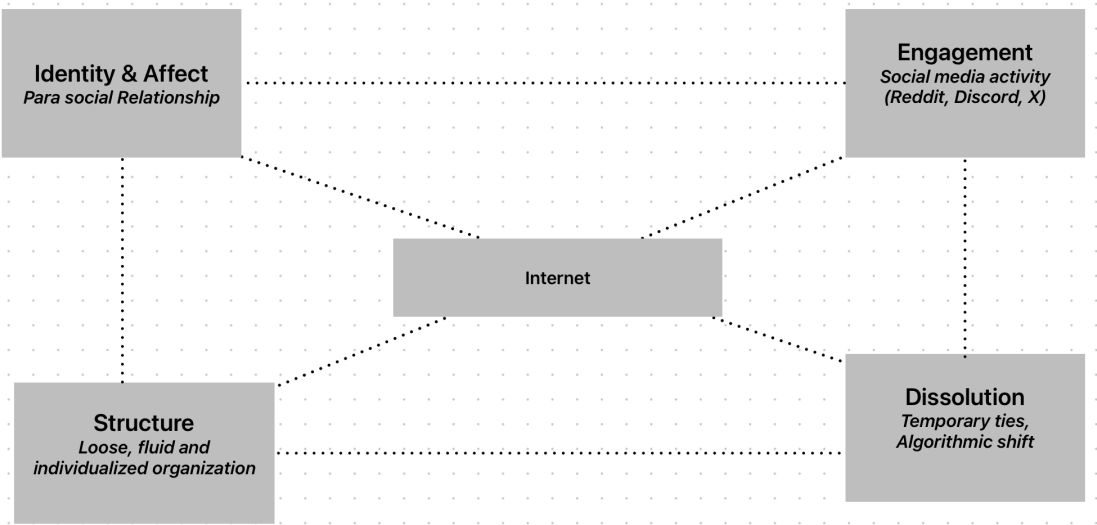
Figure 1 - Virtual Global organization model



Source: Strader et al., 1998

In an effort to contribute a novel perspective at the intersection of organizational theory and fandom studies, we have used this model as a baseline from which to develop an adapted framework suited to the eSports context. Our virtual organization model is presented in **Figure 2**. This serves as a new adaptation of Strader et al. (1998) original model which dates back to the late 1990s and, by bringing it into dialogue with the eSports environment, aims to offer a fresh contribution to a field where this type of framework remains scarce.

Figure 2 - eSport Virtual Global organization model



The theoretical framework is built around four main elements: identity & affect, structure, engagement, and dissolution. Each element contains a subsection that provides a more nuanced explanation of what it entails. Firstly, identity and affect, this aspect refers to how and why individuals within eSports fandoms become emotionally attached to specific players or teams. It explores what captivates fans, how these attachments relate to their identity as gamers, and the motivations and emotions connected to gaming participation. In this aspect, parasocial relationships serve as a central theoretical concept, as fandoms in eSports often rely on a perceived connection with a particular entity or persona, helping to explain the emotional bond between fans and the figures they follow.

The second aspect, structure, concerns the ways in which eSports fandoms organize and regulate themselves. Although these communities typically lack formal hierarchies or

authoritative figures, members still develop shared understandings regarding appropriate behavior, communication, and participation. Fans operate as individualized actors while simultaneously remaining part of a broader collective structure. In this sense, eSports fandoms resemble loose organizational forms characterized by fluidity, immediacy, and adaptability, which together constitute a defining feature of these communities.

The third aspect, engagement, focuses on the platforms and mechanisms through which interaction occurs. It examines where and how fans engage with one another, as well as how different social media platforms are used to fulfill distinct functions and forms of participation within the fandom ecosystem.

Finally, dissolution addresses how and why fandom communities lose momentum, disengage, or dissolve over time. This process is often shaped by algorithmic logic, which influences visibility and interaction online, but also by the inherently loose and shifting ties embedded in fans' identities and participation patterns. Importantly, these four aspects should not be understood as a rigid step-by-step sequence. Rather, they represent interconnected and dynamic processes that continuously overlap and evolve within the digital environment.

Given the nature of the internet, which allows the four aspects of the framework: identity & affect, structure, engagement and dissolution to overlap with *online interactions* continuously, this becomes an iterative rather than a linear process (Srnicsek, 2017, p.33; Alaimo & Kallinikos, 2017). Echoing this idea, Strader et al, (1998, p. 85) explained that the internet is *necessary to support communications as it provides a flexible system to communicate*.

We provide a multilevel perspective that integrates key levels of analysis and organizational elements to offer a synthesized view of Virtual Global Organizations. Our framework is valuable for those seeking comprehensive insights into the development of organizations in the eSports industry, and we also highlight under researched areas within the existing literature.

2.9. Chapter Summary

In this chapter, we situated our research within the existing literature on virtual organizations, eSports fandoms, algorithmic management, and platforms as infrastructures of control. First,

we defined fandoms and, given the focus of this study, directed particular attention toward eSports fandoms. Second, we identified parasocial relationship theory as a core aspect of fandom studies, highlighting distinctions between eSports fandoms and other forms of fandom. Finally, in line with our objective of exploring the relationship between eSports fandoms and virtual organizations, we developed the theoretical framework guiding this study.

Building on the model proposed by Strader (1998), we adapted and refined the framework to better fit the context of eSports fandoms. The framework is structured around four central elements: identity and affect, structure, engagement, and dissolution. Each element is further explored through dedicated subsections that provide a more nuanced explanation of its role and significance. Identity is grounded in parasocial relationships, structure is examined through the lens of virtual organizations, engagement focuses on the digital platforms where interactions occur, and dissolution is shaped by algorithmic logic and temporality.

We argue that this framework provides a multifaceted lens through which these concepts can be examined in practice, while also offering a more holistic understanding of how eSports fandoms interact with and contribute to the formation of virtual global organizations.

3. Methodology

The purpose of this section is to explain the methodological framework guiding our study. It outlines the research tradition and the reasoning approaches employed to formulate responses to the research questions. Furthermore, it provides a detailed account of the data sources that will be subjected to analysis within the scope of this investigation.

Given the qualitative nature of the study, we adopted an interpretive tradition to guide our research. We build on the premise that interpretive traditions *understand the processes of subjective reality construction in all walks of social life*, (Prasad, 2005, p.14). This interpretive lens enables us to explore the complex social dynamics of fandoms in the eSports community and to capture the varied ways in which virtual global organizational forms are understood and experienced.

In particular, our study is based on the symbolic interactionism (SI) research tradition. Central to this tradition is the human capacity to objectify oneself, that is, to *see* oneself within social situations which is key to understanding how sense-making and the construction of reality take place (Prasad, 2005, p. 19). Symbolic interactionism served as a guiding inspiration for this research, which was conducted primarily through interviews with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, positions, and life experiences.

One of SI's core assumptions is that of role-taking which describes *the human tendency to constantly see oneself in social situations and also implies that we consciously decide how to act and behave in them* (Prasad, 2005, p.20). This assumption is particularly relevant to our study, as interviewees likely shifted in their manner of engagement when conversations turned to topics they were passionate about and personally invested in. Symbolic interactionism also holds that *self-images influence the process by which people assign meaning to objects and events, and mediate their eventual choices of meaningful action* (Prasad, 2005, p.20). This reminded us throughout the research process that the accounts we gathered are inherently subjective and that each person adds meaning and value differently. Esports is not only a hobby for our participants but a core part of their identity, which naturally colors how they perceive and describe their experiences within it.

We approached this study primarily through semi-structured interviews with individuals actively involved in eSports fandoms, as well as professionals from the gaming industry working in operations and marketing roles. Their perspectives provided valuable insight into the mechanisms that drive eSports. Through these interviews, we explored how participants identify themselves as members of the eSports community and how they believe their communities are perceived by outsiders. Additionally, on the observation evidenced the notion of role-taking in a eSport watch-party where people acted and behave according to the perception of themselves in social situations.

3.1. Research Approach

The qualitative research method allows us to analyze and understand social interactions between individuals and the meaning behind them. According to Björklund and Paulsson (2014, p.69), qualitative research methods are used when aiming to *create a deeper understanding for a specific problem, specific event or a specific situation*,

We will use abductive reasoning as researchers suggest that abduction is frequently employed in everyday reasoning becoming quite obvious and explicit. However in other practices it may be so routine and automatic that it easily goes unnoticed (Douven, 2011, n.p.). According to Hansen (2008, p.5), *Abduction is a process we all engage in as we use our existing mental models to make sense of experiences*. This plausible framework can facilitate our path towards finding a better understanding of the phenomena. As Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009, p.13) explain that abduction combines elements of both induction and deduction. More specifically, it allows researchers to move iteratively between theoretical frameworks, prior understandings, and empirical material throughout the research process.

3.2. Data Collection Method

3.2.1. Semi - Constructed Interviews

How

To align with our symbolic interactionism approach, we decided to conduct *eleven* semi-structured interviews permits *to be focused while still giving the investigator the autonomy to explore pertinent ideas that may come up in the course of the interview*,

(Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021, p.1360). Furthermore, Semi-structured interviews are *simple, open and the conversation can take many directions before all areas that need to be addressed are covered* (Fylan, 2005, p.66). We followed an interview guide we had created before to approach some relevant topics for the study. The questions were kept broad on purpose not to influence the meaning of the response of the interviewees. The chosen topics for the questions represent topics of interest developed after investigating in our literature review. As we conducted interviews, and some patterns were emerging, we re structured the interview guide allowing us to be more narrow and precise. (See **Appendix A**). From the beginning, the interview guide was designed to capture the eSports fandom phenomenon from multiple perspectives. To achieve this, we developed two separate interview guides with questions tailored to each category of participants: one for fans and another for industry professionals.

During the interviews, we tried to keep the impression of an informal conversation, to encourage the interviewees to feel comfortable to share their emotions and feelings about their personal experiences. We always started the interviews with an informal conversation about how they are doing and talk about the connection we had in common (friends and/or former colleagues). We made it clear that the interviews are recorded but confidential and anonymous to assure that the respondents will feel safe enough to answer our questions with transparency. We then briefly explained to them what our study is about and what is interesting for us and allowed them to ask some questions about our research if they had one.

At the beginning of each interview, we started with relatively simple questions about the participants' personal and professional backgrounds. According to Brinkmann and Kvale (2018, p.30), deliberate naiveté allows *interviewers to be openness to new and unexpected phenomena rather than having ready-made categories and schemes of interpretation*. This helped us gain a better understanding of them as individuals and establish a more comfortable interview environment. We then moved on to questions about whether they considered themselves gamers and how long they had been involved in gaming. These questions were particularly important, as they opened the way for deeper discussion and provided insight into their relationship with gaming, as well as how they perceived and positioned themselves within the gaming community. The order of the next questions depended on the answer to the

first set of questions. One important point to note is that the first two questions were asked consistently in every interview, such as *tell me about yourself and background, Are you a player? If so, when and what games do you play?*.

The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour and 15 minutes, depending both on the interviewees' communication style and on how naturally the conversation developed. Some participants were more open and engaged than others, which required us to navigate their responses carefully in order to obtain deeper insights relevant to our research. We remained mindful that each participant had a different personality and varying levels of comfort with speaking in a formal research setting, particularly when reflecting on more personal or sensitive topics, such as gender or political issues.

When we sensed that an interview had become somewhat rigid or stuck, we would introduce follow-up comments or discussions related to current developments in the gaming scene for example, recent team signings, organizational changes, or shared support for a particular team. These moments helped create a stronger sense of connection between the interviewers and interviewees, fostering a more relaxed and intimate atmosphere that resembled the shared feeling of belonging commonly found within fandom communities. Another side we took into consideration during the interviews was the observation of interviewees' tone of voice, facial expressions, and body language when it was possible, as some of the interviews were without camera.

At the conclusion of each interview, we thanked the participants for their time and contributions, stopped the audio recording, and invited them to ask any questions or share anything they felt had not been addressed during the conversation. In some cases, participants offered additional reflections on gaming; some expressed that they had enjoyed the interview experience, while others chose not to add further comments. We also asked whether they would be open to participating in a follow-up interview, to which all participants agreed. It is worth noting, however, that no follow-up interviews were ultimately conducted.

Where

One interview was conducted in person, and the other nine were conducted online via Zoom and Google Meet platforms. The choice of type of interview (in person/online) was left to the interviewees to keep it as convenient as possible for them and match their busy schedules. The choice of putting a camera on or not depends on the interviewees to make the experience most comfortable for them. However we did encourage interviewees to open cameras before each interview. For some interviews, we, the authors of the thesis, were both present, and for other interviews, only one of us was present; this depended on our availability and how comfortable the interviewees felt to have one or two interviewers. The online interviews were conducted sometimes during their working hours or outside of their working hours. Consequently, some interviewees joined the call from their homes, and others joined from their workplaces. However, all the interviewees participated in the call from a closed room without any other individual present to keep the interview a safe place where interviewees were not afraid of sharing personal information.

Transcript

The interviews were recorded and transcribed with safe transcription tools, *Klang* and *Clipto* for interviews in English and *Vizard.ai* for interviews in Vietnamese. To conform to confidentiality standards, we asked the approval of the interviewees prior to the start of the recording, and asked the interviewees not to mention their names or the names of their colleagues/ company during the interview. We also deleted that information in the transcript in case the interviewees accidentally shared that information in the recording. The recordings were all deleted at the end of our research. Once we obtained the transcript from the transcription tool, we cleaned it by removing the filler words (e.g., “um,” “uh”) and the repetitions by taking care not to change the meaning of the sentences, to make it easier to read and to analyze.

Language

Overall, seven interviews were conducted in English, and four interviews were conducted in Vietnamese. The choice of the language of the interviews was made depending on how comfortable the interviewee was in the two languages. As for interviews conducted in Vietnamese, one of the authors needed to do the translation to English first before analysing them together.

Sampling

In the selection of the interviewees we wanted both people from the fandoms of eSport and also people working in the industry, we tried our selection will be varied and inclusive, including people from different age range and ethnicity. We used our personal network but with a focus on selecting individuals who are knowledgeable about or experienced with the subject, Palinkas et al. (2015,p.534). The age of our interviewees ranged from 21 to 35 years old (See **Table 1**). They have different occupations and backgrounds (See **Table 1**). We provided some additional information such as a fictional name, age range and the key topic on each of the interviews (See **Table 1**).

Table 1: Overview of the interviewees

Name (pseudonym)	Description	Nationality	Age Range	Highlight topic
Rick	Teacher	German	21-26	Admiration, community formation, gender
Perla	Student	England	21-26	Idolization of players, personality traits
Alex	Teacher	Vietnam	21-26	Community formation, loyalty to a player
John	Account Manager	Venezuela	29-35	Integration of gaming on his daily life
Mike	Editor	Vietnam	21-26	Community, political view point
Kandy	Student	Ireland	21-26	Inclusion, devotion to payer and their gaming strategies, gender inequality
Jamie	Architecture intern	Vietnam	21-26	Norms of groups, affinity
Pablo	Photographer	Vietnam	21-26	Formation on groups in social media platforms

Susy	Marketing Manager at eSport Organization	Czech Republic	29-35	Diversity in Esports
Oscar	Marketing Manager at eSport Organization	Sweden	29-35	Engagement in social media, brand image in eSports
Felix	eSports Director at eSport Organization	Norway	29-35	Differences between fandoms of different games , differences and parallelism between in individual sports and eSports

3.2.2 Observations

Alongside the interviews, we conducted observations as the second source of empirical data. This method provided valuable insights that interviews alone could not fully capture, as our aim was not only to gather stories but to genuinely experience and immerse ourselves in the world of eSports.

In line with Androutsopoulos (2026) and his description of online ethnography, it combines the systematic observation of selected sites of online discourse with direct engagement with its social actors. We conducted observations across several social platforms, particularly those most actively used by eSports players and fans, including X and Discord. These observations were conducted with the purpose of identifying the discourse of different actors across these platforms. In addition, we observed a Discord server in which a "watch party" was held, which allowed us to insert ourselves directly into the fandom experience and examine what participants do within these spaces: the language, words, and phrases they use to communicate, and most importantly how they organize themselves.

As Prasad (2005, p.75) suggests, observations enable researchers to develop close connections with the subjects and situations being studied, allowing for a more grounded understanding of

how a phenomenon unfolds in practice. This is further supported by the advantage of capturing behavior in its natural setting Rennstam (2007, p. 50). This quality was particularly evident during the watch party observation, where fans gathered online to watch their favorite team or player compete. A distinctive feature of eSports matches is that they are commonly live-streamed across various platforms such as YouTube, Twitch, etc. To fully immerse themselves in the atmosphere of eSports tournaments, fans do not necessarily need to attend events in person. Instead, they can choose to participate in online watch parties.

These watch parties generally take two main forms. The first consists of informal gatherings organized spontaneously by fan groups or circles of friends who join a shared Discord server to watch matches together. The second type is more structured and is typically hosted by popular streamers or by the official channels of the teams competing in the event. In both settings, one person assumed the role of moderator, streaming the match while others joined the Discord server to watch and interact together. This arrangement helped minimize differences in stream delay between participants, which is particularly important in eSports due to the fast-paced and constantly evolving nature of gameplay. In such competitions, dramatic moments capable of changing the outcome of an entire match can occur within seconds, meaning that even slight delays in streaming may negatively affect the viewing experience of those with slower connections. This form of online watch party organization can therefore be understood as a self-organized, informal, yet clearly structured communal experience.

3.3. Data Analysis

After the completion of the interviews, we proceed to analyse the data following the method explained by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018), we started with sorting the data into categories and sub categories. We carefully read each transcript of the interviews and we started highlighting phrases that felt interesting and relevant to our study, we would tag them with a word or phrases. This procedure was conducted after each interview, we would later discuss the tag meant and in which category we would place the quote. In a separate file, we would complete the information of the interviewee, Real name, Fictional name, category, sub category, quote, literature to relate and column. This file was called *sort topic*. We later reduced the empirical data into four main categories that were more prominent and important

for our research, finally we argued the insights that emerged during the analysis. Finally, when we finished the ninth interview and we had a clear focus of the thesis we created new categories, repeating the same process again. When analyzing the findings we wanted to use analogies to understand the phenomena from a new perspective and what it might imply as noted by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018). This allowed us to have an engaged dimension to our process by interpreting the data from a different perspective.

Sorting

During the sorting process, we focused on what the interviewee was saying as part of their interior experiences as Gubrium and Holstein (2012) described. We aimed to understand how the discourse of the person makes sense of the content, giving the opportunity to assess the reaction of the people involved, the wording they use, (Gubrium & Holstein, 2012). We read our notes and the interviews transcript and categorized them into several themes and we did this with every single quote and phrase. The themes selected were formulated the following way: (1) Community building, (2) Entertainment feeling/Identity attachment, (3) Parasocial, (4) Differences between eSports and other sports, and (5) Others. Each of the identified categories was assigned a specific color to facilitate the organization and analysis of the data. Green represented community building, yellow referred to entertainment feeling and identity attachment, blue corresponded to parasocial relationships, purple highlighted differences between eSports and traditional sports, and grey was used for other relevant themes that did not fit within the main categories. We conducted this process within our “sort topic” file, where we compiled relevant quotes and key excerpts from the interviewees in order to better organize and clearly visualize the data.

Reducing

The second step in the Data Analysis process is reducing the amount of previously sorted data (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). We reflected on the outputs of the Sorting section and selected the most relevant themes and codes for our study. We then built more significant categories, regrouping some original subcategories and removing the categories irrelevant to the analysis part. After the reducing part, we created two categories directly linked to our research question (1) Drivers and (2) Constraints. We used two main colors to distinguish between themes: green represented Drivers, reflecting positive aspects or enabling factors,

while red represented Constraints, highlighting limitations, challenges, or more cautious perspectives. To create these two final categories, we looked at the initial five categories and at the research question. We tried to understand in what way these categories can answer the main research question. We also selected the quotes from the transcripts that made the most sense in these categories and could be the most relevant for our analysis.

Arguing

The final step in the analysis process consists of arguing on the data that emerged during the previous step of the analysis (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). The purpose here is to compare our findings with what was previously written in the academic literature to see what is similar or different. We structured our findings based on the model of Emerson et al. (1995) of creating excerpt-commentary units which is discussed by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018, p.53) as they explained that *each unit begins by formulating an analytical point, and followed by an orientation introducing the field note to be quoted. This orientation serves as a bridge between the analytical point and the empirical material.*

To conform to this method, we structured our findings with the framework of virtual global organizations we constructed. This is composed of four phrases: (1) Identity, (2) Structure, (3) Engagement, and (4) Dissolution. We tried to keep each of our categories alternating between explanations of the concept of our findings, quotes from our interviewees and comments about the quotes.

3.4. Reflexivity

Upon reviewing the interviews, we also identified several limitations worth acknowledging. In our exploration of eSports fandoms, we chose to conduct interviews online, as this offered both accessibility and flexibility qualities that are, in many ways, consistent with the nature of eSports itself. However, this approach also carried drawbacks, most notably the difficulty of establishing a deeper rapport and familiarity with the interviewees. We made every effort to create a warm and welcoming atmosphere, and ensured that all participants were aware that the conversations were fully confidential and anonymous, with the aim of encouraging openness and honesty in their responses.

Furthermore, the language could have been a potential barrier in this research. We conducted interviews in Vietnamese and in English. The interviews were conducted in English with a non-native English speaker, and the Vietnamese records of the interviews needed to be translated into English for further understanding and discussion between the two authors. Even if all the respondents interviewed in English were fully or partially speaking in English for their professional activities, non-native speakers generally have lower linguistic competence compared to native speakers, which affects their ability to convey complex ideas accurately (Lev-Ari, 2015; Lev-Ari & Keysar, 2012). The respondents may have misused certain words when expressing their feelings or relied on simpler vocabulary that did not fully capture their intended meanings, potentially resulting in bias in the interpretation of their responses. This idea is illustrated by Beardwell and Thompson (2017, p.57) which explains that interviews can be seen *as being overly subjective, prone to interviewer bias*.

3.5. Use of AI

On a methodological note, we used Klang.ai, Clipto and Vizard.ai as transcription tools for the video and audio content of the interviews. As is common with automated transcription, the output was frequently inaccurate, requiring us to re-listen to the recordings and manually correct the text to accurately reflect what each interviewee said. ChatGPT has been used to help with the translation transcripts from Vietnamese to English. We also used Claude as a writing aid throughout the thesis. Specifically, we employed it to refine sentence structure, improve clarity and coherence, and ensure that our language met academic standards. Our intention was always to preserve our own ideas and voice. Claude was not used to generate content or arguments on our behalf, but solely to enhance the quality of writing we had already produced. Examples of the prompts we used can be found in (**Appendix B**).

3.6. Chapter Summary

In this chapter, we introduced the methodological approach underpinning the study. We began by presenting the research design, clarifying that the study adopts a qualitative and interpretive perspective grounded in symbolic interactionism, through which eSports fandoms are explored as an empirical case of virtual organizations. We then introduced the case context and detailed the data collection process, which consisted of eleven interviews with participants from both fan communities and industry organizations.

In addition, we conducted online observations to immerse ourselves in the eSports ecosystem and capture its dynamics in a natural setting. This approach provided a deeper understanding of how individuals perceive themselves within social situations, as described by Prasad (2005). Finally, we outlined our approach to data analysis, drawing on Rennstam and Wästerfors' (2018) framework of sorting, reducing, and arguing. Throughout the research process, we remained attentive to the study's limitations, the potential for interpretive bias, and the responsible use of AI tools in the research process.

4. Empirical findings

This chapter presents and examines the data gathered throughout our study. The findings from the qualitative interviews, together with the background information of the research, provide important insights for addressing our research question. The context of the study is important because it highlights the unique and compelling nature of research on the eSports community and its relation to organizational study. Through this empirical data, we seek to explore this new trend, where the participants in our study engage with and identify themselves within the online eSports community in various ways.

The presentation and analysis of the empirical material are divided into four sections based on the framework we mentioned earlier in this paper. The first outlines our findings with respect to the Identity, where players identify themselves through the specific community they choose to engage in, or through that one exact pro player, streamer they follow. In the second section, we present the Structure, where our interviewees pointed out that they got to engage in a unique type of organization, different from any others that they were previously in. Thirdly, we analyze the ways our interviewees can engage in the eSport community. To conclude the chapter, we present the dissolution aspect that our interviewees encountered as a result of temporary ties and algorithmic bubble effects of today's Internet platforms.

4.1. Identity and Affect

Throughout our discussions with interviewees, there seemed to be an overwhelming mentality and agreement that eSport fandoms constantly found themselves attached their image and identity to one eSport team or professional player. More importantly, we observed that the interview participants also identified themselves with the sense of enjoyment and excitement they experienced while watching eSports, which can also be very different and vary from one person to another. For example, Kandy expressed her own thought when choosing to be a fan of an eSport team:

Fans don't just support them for tactics, but for the emotions watching their matches brings to me. You never know what they'll do next, it's intense, adrenaline-pumping, and when they win, the feeling is even stronger.

This implies that the feeling a certain team can create can be more important and cause more impact to their fandom than a certain player in that team.

4.1.1. The relationship between fan and eSport professional players

Kandy shared that she initially watched Keria (T1 League of Legend player)'s gameplay videos with the intention of improving specific in-game skills and learning effective strategies. However, over time, admiration for his unique playstyle and professional performance developed into a stronger emotional attachment. This influence extended beyond gameplay improvement and contributed to a deeper personal connection with the game itself.

For League of Legends, I like T1, specifically the support player Keria. At first, I watched his videos to learn how to play certain agents, but then I became a fan of his playstyle and wanted to improve like him. That created a strong connection between me and the game, beyond just playing with friends.

The same feeling was mentioned by Alex as he mentioned that his interest in Paper Rex was primarily influenced by the player duo Wang Jing Jie and Jason Susanto.

(...) the reason why I started following Paperex from the start was because of the duo, Jing and Forsaken. So if there were to be any changes, for example, like one of them or decided to switch teams or go their separate ways or even retire, then it would affect how I appreciate Paperex as a team. But that's just for me. But personally, there's many reasons for an eSport enjoyer to kind of like follow and be a fan of a certain organization.

The respondent emphasized that admiration for these players was the main reason they began supporting the team and following its competitive journey. Furthermore, the interviewee noted that potential roster changes, such as professional players transferring to another team or retiring, could negatively affect their emotional connection and appreciation toward the team.

4.1.2. eSports fan and the tendency to follow their own feeling of having fun

Beyond the relationship eSport community has with competitive teams and professional players, we observed a highlight point that most of the eSport fandoms tend to pay close attention to their own emotions, particularly whether they feel entertained, thrilled, and they also enjoy following a specific team or participating in a particular gaming community. As

Oscar shared from his observations while working in the marketing team at Team Vitality, eSports fandom can be highly dynamic and entertainment-driven. According to him, many fans are not solely loyal to a team because of long-term attachment or competitive success, but rather because they seek enjoyment and entertainment from watching matches and content creators:

(...) the fandom is very sensitive. Because people are not watching this straightly. Like, because they're not really passionate for the team, they're more like passionate to be entertained. So if the team sucks and it's boring to watch, they're just going to switch teams or switch creators.

Not only people working within the industry can point that out, even eSports fandoms themselves share a mutual feeling. As Kandy said during the interview when she was asked about the reason why she choose T1 League of Legend and Paperex Valorant to her favourite teams to follow:

Both teams I like have very distinct playstyles. No matter who changes, their strategy stays unique, they often look like they're playing without any fixed strategy at all. Fans don't just support them for tactics, but for the emotions their matches bring. You never know what they'll do next, it's intense, adrenaline-pumping, and when they win, the feeling is even stronger. Their achievements also play a role.

Kandy chose to support these two teams simply because their playstyles gave her a sense of excitement, thrill, and unpredictability. She also shared that while uncertainty in real life can often feel frightening, experiencing that same sense of unpredictability through eSports matches is incredibly enjoyable. It is engaging enough to make watching the games exciting, yet still safe enough not to negatively affect real life. Alex expressed a similar perspective when he explained that he enjoyed the duo Jinggg and Forsaken from Paper Rex because of their fast-paced and free-flowing playstyle, which he found exciting and personally relatable to the way he himself approaches gaming. If the duo were to leave and Paper Rex no longer maintained that distinctive style, Alex felt there would no longer be a reason for him to continue supporting the team.

I've been really fascinated and mesmerized by their aggressive gameplay (...) I can see myself fitting into that playstyle as well (...) the reason why I started following PaperX from the start was because of the duo, Jing and Forsaken. So if there were to be any changes, for example, like one of them or decided to switch teams or go their separate ways or even retire, then maybe it would affect how I appreciate PaperX as a team.

Moreover, as Alex stated during his interview that he stopped playing League of Legends because he eventually found the game boring.

I kind of stopped playing League because I found it boring at the time.

Such a simple statement shows that once the sense of enjoyment and excitement associated with a particular game or team gradually diminishes, eSports fandoms often choose to disengage and shift toward another game or team that better aligns with their current interests. This does not necessarily indicate that fandoms in eSports are easily bored or lack commitment; rather, it reflects the relatively transactional nature of attachment between eSports communities and any single game or team, while also underscoring the fast-changing and highly adaptable character of these communities.

4.2 Structure

In terms of the Structure section, our interviews suggest that eSports communities function not through formal rules or hierarchical systems, but rather through shared passion and a collective sense of identity. As a result of these two factors, the level of attachment and participation in activities within the community also varies between individuals and organizations.

4.2.1. Shared passion among players

As Perla explained to us when introducing her fan page and sharing how she came up with the idea of creating it, she initially became a fan of Fnatic simply because she admired the way the team expressed themselves and genuinely enjoyed the stage during tournaments. For her, creating a fan page was not only a way to express personal admiration, but also a means of bringing the image of Fnatic closer to the broader eSports community, particularly among Valorant players and fans.

I started playing Valorant five years ago til now. I already quit playing the game now. But I like them and still run a fanpage account to support. I started liking them when I watch the tournaments because I find it very easy to learn strategies from them and Fnatic. And I think also because I actually like the way that they have expressions on tournament stages so that why I've been rooting for them.

No one within the Fnatic organization requested or suggested that Perla do any of this. All decisions related to building the fan page and establishing a dedicated community for Fnatic fans in Vietnam were independently made and carried out by Perla herself, motivated entirely by her admiration for and personal interest in the team.

Similarly, Felix shared his experience of building a gaming community specifically for Norwegian eSports players who did not have others to play with. The community provided opportunities for like-minded players to connect, play together, and even form small semi-professional teams capable of competing in regional tournaments.

And then I decided that my main motivation was to include people who didn't have anyone to play with, so they could join my organization. That was my motivation (to create 5Stars Esports). From a young age, I always liked including people, especially if they didn't have any friends or if they had disabilities in school or in social settings (...) So that has always been close to me, and I wanted to do the same for eSports players as well because I knew there were a lot of talented people out there who just didn't have anyone to play with.

He did not create this community for financial gain, nor because game publishers asked him to do so. Rather, Felix built it simply because he enjoyed gaming and understood the feeling of wanting to play team-based eSports titles without having anyone to join. Moreover, he had a strong personal passion for including people in communities where they could feel a genuine sense of belonging.

4.2.2. Collective sense of Identity

Although eSports communities are often spontaneous and lack formal rules or rigid structures, they are typically connected through certain shared characteristics and common interests. For example, the Fnatic fans are usually people who enjoy seeing professional players enjoy and

have fun on tournament stage like Perla, or Team Vitality usually attracts people who enjoy the sense of winning and being dominant as Oscar experienced during his time working there. Similarly, Felix's gaming community consists primarily of gamers from Norway and other Nordic countries.

Furthermore, these shared characteristics may also emerge when members of a community hold similar perspectives on broader social issues. People while playing in a team usually prefer to play with others that share the same mindset, as they are evaluating and selecting their partner. As Jamie talked about his own gaming teams toward sexism:

Honestly, I rarely see anyone being uncomfortable with female players. Everyone is generally friendly and gets along well.

He continued by saying sexism does happen on eSport community in general, but he and his teams choose to not involve themselves with those types of behaviour, and that is how they structure their own community:

In my personal communities, no. But in the broader gaming community, it does happen, though I see them very rarely because we choose to not interact and include those type of people in our small cycle.

Felix also discussed the culture of trash talk among gamers, where players from different teams or fan communities verbally mock or provoke one another. In most conventional organizations, such behavior would generally not be considered acceptable or worthy of encouragement. Within eSports communities, however, trash talk is often viewed as a distinctive cultural element that contributes to excitement and competitive intensity during matches.

As Felix shared, he always enjoys witnessing trash talk in the matches he participates in or watches because it gives each game and each player a distinct personality. However, he emphasized that it should remain within healthy boundaries and be grounded in mutual respect.

I am all for rivalry and everything. I feel like, as long as you keep it healthy, the same with trash talk. I think rivalry between teams, having a bit of trash talk between organizations even on social media, that's just good. It brings more personality into the game, and that's how it is in normal sports.

At the same time, the real boundaries of trash talk are largely determined by each community itself. There are no universally fixed limits, as long as members of a particular gaming community collectively accept that level of verbal aggression as part of the experience while playing. Based on what we directly observed across different gaming communities on Discord, the acceptable range varies considerably between groups. If a player is unable to find common ground or feels misaligned with others in the eSports community regarding operational decisions, they may choose to reduce their level of interaction or completely leave that community in order to join another that better aligns with their personal preferences.

Furthermore, we find that Game publishers such as Riot and Valve, are designing their games and developing their narratives that are aimed directly at their targeted audiences. For example, Perla shared that she moved from playing CS:GO to Valorant because she found more female players targeted, with all the colourful agents and inventory skins. She even compared that the smokes in Valorant is more vivid than those in CS:GO:

When Valorant first came out, I found it very colorful and appealing. The agents, which are the different characters you can choose to play in a match, each have their own unique abilities. I think this is a great way to design and structure a game. That is why I became so interested in playing Valorant, girls really like colourful things.

And this is not only as simple as how they design their games. Beyond that, it is about how they build up their narratives to show their support and respect toward certain communities. For example, in Valorant, they have two female agents that are lovers, and an agent who identifies herself as bi-sexual. That is the way the Game developers and publishers show that players in LGBTQ+ community can freely be and express themselves in the Valorant community and they will not overlook behaviors like bullying and showing disrespect.

4.2.3. Different levels of involvement

The interview participants also shared that they felt comfortable within gaming communities because they could actively choose their level of involvement without any particular obligations or commitments, basing their participation simply on whether they enjoyed the experience and felt comfortable. As can be seen, Perla and Felix, mentioned above, represent individuals who choose to engage with eSports communities at a particularly high level. They are not merely ordinary members; rather, they actively build their own smaller communities, contributing to the growth and connection of people who share similar interests and a common sense of identity. Their decisions can also indicate a high level of involvement with the gaming ecosystem. For example, Alex shared his enthusiasm for always being interested in following news both inside and outside the game, including gameplay updates, small or major changes, and news related to professional players:

I've always been very interested in keeping updated with news and about every sort of news relating to outside and inside of the game regardless whether it's updates like groundbreaking or small updates or like in terms of the news relating to players.

In contrast, some players choose to participate in communities solely for their own personal purposes. Nevertheless, this is considered entirely acceptable within the broader goal of building and sustaining a strong eSports community. For example, Mike explained that he mainly joined large groups that updates news related to the games he played, rather than actively supporting or closely following any specific eSports team:

I'm more part of the general gaming community - following news and tournaments.

Kandy also shared a mutual feeling with updating news. However, she also stated that she barely engages in any other activities held by the community, not because they are boring, but mainly due to her own personality:

I do follow fan pages on social media to keep up with news, but I don't really participate in many fandom activities—mostly due to my personality.

Online eSports communities are able to grow and thrive while still providing participants with sufficient freedom to choose the forms of engagement in which they feel comfortable and safe. Whether to participate in a community activity, leave a comment, or watch a match is entirely up to the individual player. As long as people continue to play games and engage with gaming communities, these online communities will continue to develop and expand.

4.2.4. Algorithmic management as a tool

The eSports community and publishers use algorithmic management in order to supervise and shape core community behaviour. For example, as Rick, an interviewee, shared with us, players often utilize in-game reporting systems to address disrespect behavior toward others, and these systems are perceived to be effective in many cases, as offending players may receive bans or penalties:

There's a lot of people that are just blatantly sexist in these games. Mostly, we also just report them to the system, which tends to work most of the time. So, these people are just getting banned from the games (...)

Furthermore, as we observed on different Internet platforms, algorithmic management is not only implemented through in-game reporting systems, but is also widely applied across community groups on Discord and streaming platforms. For example, many Discord groups install automated commands that immediately ban users from chat channels if they use the N-word only a single time in the chat box. Similarly, on livestream channels, moderators often configure bots to automatically answer frequently asked questions from viewers, such as the streamer's crosshair settings, mouse sensitivity, or PC setup specifications. In addition, these bots are also used to moderate conversations by muting or banning viewers who post offensive, inappropriate, or insulting comments directed toward the streamer or other audience members.

4.3. Engagement

4.3.1. A place to be

All interview participants perceived their involvement and attachment to eSports communities as being considerably different from their experiences in other communities, although the

degree of participation varied among individuals. They emphasized how easily they could connect and spend time with long-term friends simply by logging into a game and using a social media or communication platform that allowed them to interact and play together:

Usually, do that with a lot of my friends. So we just meet up after work. Everyone meets up there. On Discord, we get to talking, playing games together, having fun occasionally, losing our minds because of the games. But in a good way.

For some interviewees, playing with friends is even considered as the most important factor for them to decide which games they are going to play that day, as Jamie stated:

Friends are the most important factor. (...) League of Legends has in-game voice chat, but we mainly use Discord to talk.

Moreover, eSports organizations place an important emphasis on creating a sense of belonging and appreciation within their fan communities by making supporters feel welcomed and *at home*. As Felix shared, although his team is only a small semi-professional organization, he consistently tries to include both fans and organizational staff as much as possible whenever the team participates in tournaments. This is done through activities such as inviting them to attend matches together or organizing online watch parties where everyone can follow the games, discuss performances, and share feedback collectively as close friends or family members.

We try to build ourselves as well, like a community on Discord where people can go and watch our matches when we play and watch our streams together, to feel more like a family. And then for us, it's kind of different as we usually just play in Sweden tournaments right now. So we try to gather more people when we go to an event, both fans and members of the organization.

Larger organizations with greater financial resources, such as Team Vitality, even go as far as pre-purchasing adjacent seating sections so that their fans can sit together in the same area when attending live matches. This helps create a sense of familiarity and belonging, allowing fans to feel as if they are *coming home* when surrounded by others who share the same passion and interests.

Vitality, they are the best in Europe for working with their fans. When there's a tournament, they are booking down seats and seats, and they just flying out, helping with accommodation to their fans, and they are doing it the right way.

(...) they travel to the event together. They buy tickets next to each other, and then you see them taking over full sections of the arena.

This can represent a sense of home away from home where the comfortability and familiarity is present wherever they are.

4.3.2. When virtuality becomes reality

Moreover, gaming enables them to connect with people from different parts of the world, either through the matches they are playing or through large gaming communities on social media platforms such as X, Facebook, and Reddit. Regardless of whether these interactions develop into real friendships, participants still experience enjoyment through playing games and discussing game-related topics with others. In many cases, they also gain exposure to new languages and cultures from different parts of the world. As Perla shared:

(...) actually game is good because we can make friend and we can learn some other languages as well.

At the same time, exposure to different cultures also helps eSports players learn to respect diversity, including differences in how fans support and engage with competitive teams, as Perla explained furtherly:

Actually because the Pacific teams mostly come from Korea and in China and there are lots of their fans are girls who are used to K-pop idol culture. They bringing the same mindset, culture to the eSport field. (...) So that's why eSport fandom in Pacific region is considered different from EMEA or NA region and whether liking it or not, we as big eSport community needs to accept it as a thing.

The same connection and engagement is also mentioned by Pablo:

It's been a while, but from what I remember, it was quite fun. Of course, you also meet people you don't vibe with, but also you find people you really connect with - even to the point of wanting to meet them in real life. And I've actually had quite a few experiences like that.

Not only learning from the community, fandoms also share their own knowledge and experiences with others throughout the communities. Susy said during her interview that she found herself very lucky to have a job in eSports organization, and she wanted to help others, especially female players to achieve their goals working in this industry as well:

(...) keep working hard for yourself and create space for other women, like, encourage them, support them, give them advice (...) I've helped so many people get into eSports, both women and men. They asked me to review their CVs, which took me maybe an hour. And of course I will. I can also meet you at an event to give further instruction.

Susy highlighted that members of eSports communities often extend their online interactions into real-life meetings at major tournaments or gaming conventions:

(...) you have friends from all over the world, and when you meet up, you usually you meet up for a tournament or a gaming bootcamp that you do. But I would say people meet up on tournaments most often, or I meet the most eSports people in tournaments, even though they are from different places. So I think tournaments are like the best melting spot, and there you can really see how the cultures melt. Um and people are really like open to each other, and they're just there to enjoy the game. So I definitely think that gaming brings people together.

She suggested that real-life connections between fans, as well as between fans and teams, serve as one of the strongest catalysts for fostering a sense of belonging. She also shared that she had witnessed cases where individuals met each other at tournaments, got to know one another, developed relationships, and eventually got married.

(...) this creates an emotional bond— it's almost a psychology— it creates an emotional bond and then it drives into them being feeling like they belong. You create this sense of belonging, and this is why they're fanboying or fangirling over these teams because they have a sense that I talk to this player, I know this player, I met them in real life already, and I feel so close. And there is another community. I can bounce off my ideas, or I can do memes with them, or I

can even play with them. All these things, like, there are people that met on tournaments and married each other.

Felix expressed a similar view, noting that for him, as someone who has worked in the eSports industry for many years, the way players present themselves on stage during competitions has a much stronger influence on fans' perceptions than what they post on social media. Although most interactions within eSports communities take place on social media platforms, the opportunity to witness and participate in real-life moments still has a meaningful impact.

I think for me, even more important than social media presence is the presence you have when you are on stage, when you are playing, because that is what matters. At least for me, I feel like, and a lot of other people feel more connected when they actually see you.

Similarly, Perla shared her experience of meeting Fnatic when the team competed in London, that moment made her feel meaningfully closer and more emotionally connected to the team. Moreover, during the meeting, Perla asked the Fnatic players to greet Vietnamese fans in Vietnamese and recorded the interaction.

During that time, I just asked them to record the videos saying hi to Vietnamese fans speaking Vietnamese and the fandoms were crazy about it.

The video later went viral within the Vietnamese Valorant community, as fans felt a stronger sense of closeness when international famous players talked to them in their native language, even only through simple, popular Vietnamese phrases.

The above statements and stories from our interviewees show that most eSports community activities take place online across various platforms which allows members of eSports communities to choose freely, based on their own needs and comfortability, whether or not they wish to transform these interactions from virtuality into reality. This relates to the level of involvement discussed earlier, while also indicating that for those who seek deeper engagement with eSports communities, real-life connections, beyond online interactions, have an impact on their experience.

4.4. Dissolution

4.4.1. Broken algorithms

As discussed in previous sections, especially Identity section, eSports players tend to identify themselves through the communities in which they participate and interact across social media platforms. However, our interviews also revealed that it is relatively easy for them to move between different groups or communities, often with very limited emotional or moral attachment, largely due to the nature of contemporary social media and the way these platforms operate. Oscar noted that professional eSports teams can lose an important portion of their fanbase after only a few losses in a season:

(...) Then you have Team Vitality. And as I said, our fandom is very transactional. So as long as we win, we have fans, and as long as when we start to lose, we lose them.

And he explained further into this statement as if the team wins, their community enjoys anything they do with social contents, but once the team is on the lose streak, everything they build on social seems fake, meaningless and boring to the fandom again, which makes them want to disconnect themselves and their social platforms from contents related to the organization.

(...) so whenever we win two thumbs up, everybody is super happy, you get a lot of viewership, if we lose, everybody hates the team, everybody thinks the product in that video it sucks.

Felix also shared his view on how social media algorithms tend to favor larger teams that possess substantial financial resources and already have strong, established fanbases.

(...)the big organizations naturally have more money to put into marketing. So they push a lot of content into whatever you watch, if it's YouTube, TikTok, Twitter, and then you suddenly get more interested because you see them more often and everything they do is just so much better in term of content creation. Like a thumbnail looking interesting, or a title about how successful Vitality is right now, with 20 trophies across the two years.

It resembles a self-reinforcing cycle of success that smaller organizations struggle to break into. When a team with a large fanbase achieves victory, it gains additional financial resources

to invest in stronger rosters and greater visibility through social media algorithms. As a result, the team is more likely to continue securing high placements in tournaments, thereby perpetuating the cycle within the organization's operational structure.

The Internet never sleeps and there is always something going on and changing every second there. There is a well-known saying on the Internet: *You will never know your next scroll*. This phrase reflects the idea that algorithms, although often assumed to deliver content that users already like or wish to see, are in reality highly unpredictable and largely beyond the understanding of most Internet users. Esports communities are among the groups that engage with the Internet most intensively, which is precisely why online algorithms have such an influence on them. One day, a person may strongly support a particular team, but after a series of losses, roster changes, with the appearance of negative content about the team on their social media feed, they may begin to feel disappointed and perceive the team as no longer representing what originally attracted them. As a result, they may gradually leave that fandom behind. At the same time, algorithms may unexpectedly introduce them to another team, perhaps one from their region but they have never paid attention to. Through repeated exposure to content about that team on social media, they may discover something emotionally compelling or relatable that resonates with them, leading them to stay, follow the team more closely, and eventually become part of its fan community. That is the first step, and then who knows, maybe they will choose to stay there for long, maybe not, but that is how fandoms in eSports operate.

4.4.2. Thrill chaser not love commitment

As mentioned earlier in the Identity section regarding esSports fans and their tendency to follow their own sense of enjoyment, this characteristic of eSports communities also serves as a major factor contributing to the dissolution. Through our interviews, we found that the algorithms discussed above function more as catalysts influencing the decision-making process of whether eSports fans choose to stay or leave, rather than fully determining or manipulating those decisions. As mentioned in Oscar's interview in the previous section, his team gains and loses fans based on their performance during the season, particularly based on whether the emotions and experiences they provide can meet the expectations of the community or not:

(...) as long as we win, we have fans, and as long as when we start to lose, we lose them.

As previously mentioned, Kandy chose to support Paper Rex and T1 because of their distinctive playstyles. As a result, match outcomes or negative content promoted by algorithms on her socials are not enough to affect her support for these teams. However, this also means that if the two teams were to lose the unique identity that originally attracted her, Kandy would likely choose to leave in search of that same feeling elsewhere, perhaps with another eSports team or even another eSports game that could better satisfy the emotional excitement she seeks from watching competitive matches. However, as she mentioned during her interview with us, she is now very happy as a fan of these two teams, and finds no reason to leave for another team even when they have similar gaming styles.

Similarly, Alex shared his admiration for the duo Jinggg and Forsaken because their distinctive gameplay style gives him a sense of excitement and fascination while watching them compete.

(...) the apac duo Jing and Forsaken were like becoming like a upcoming sensation. That's kind of when I became a fan. I've been really fascinated and mesmerized by their aggressive gameplay.

When Alex explained that he followed Paper Rex simply because of this duo, it demonstrated his commitment not only to the players themselves, but also to the sense of excitement and enjoyment he experienced while watching their distinctive playstyle. Certainly, Alex can find similar feelings from other players, but he stated that he would not seek them elsewhere unless Jinggg and Forsaken eventually decided to step away from professional competition.

It can therefore be observed that gamers are both thrill chasers and committed individuals at the same time. In a world like online eSports communities, where individual freedom of choice is exceptionally high, sustaining a stable and long-lasting community becomes particularly challenging. As a result, for most people, Dissolution emerges as an inevitable stage in the lifecycle of being a fan. However, when dissolution occurs, the other three stages continue to operate in parallel. For this reason, eSports communities are still able to grow rapidly and remain in a constant state of activity and evolution.

4.5. Same same, but different

As emphasized in previous sections, because most activities and interactions within eSports communities take place online, the Internet and social media platforms play a crucial role in community building and development. Furthermore, these platforms are used by both community organizers and participants in relatively structured and purposeful ways. Similar to what is mentioned in the Structure section, although there are no formal regulations governing how different social media platforms should be used, members of eSports communities generally share an implicit understanding of the distinct functions each platform serves within the community.

X (formerly Twitter) is commonly used by organizations as a platform for talent scouting, often through highlight videos uploaded by players themselves. Consequently, it also becomes a space where players build their personal image and brand, while fans use it to follow the teams and players they admire.

Discord, on the other hand, is primarily used by eSports community members for direct interaction with other gamers, such as messaging, voice calls during gameplay, or streaming tournaments to watch together.

(...) at the end of the day, usually when you have a conversation with someone on Twitter, it leads to you adding them on Discord anyway because it's easier to communicate there

Felix explained that he usually scouts talent through X and YouTube highlights, and even when initial contact is made through X, or through in-game messages, they often exchange Discord accounts for future communication, as it is widely considered as the most common communication platform among gamers.

4.6. Chapter Summary

Throughout this chapter, we have presented the most notable findings and organized them in a way that aims to give the reader a holistic picture of how our interviewees understand and experience eSports fandoms. In the analysis, we applied our framework as a structuring device, using its four elements: identity, structure, engagement, and dissolution to organize and examine the key themes that emerged. The implementation of this adapted framework

allowed us to categorize and better understand the world of eSports fandoms and their intersection with virtual organization theory. Ultimately, our analysis reveals the connection between these two concepts, which we will explore further in the following chapter.

5. Discussion

In this chapter, we integrate the theoretical framework with the empirical findings to address the research questions. This discussion connects the literature presented in Chapter 2 with the study's key empirical insights, demonstrating how the findings contribute to existing knowledge and address gaps in the literature.

Building on the literature review of virtual organizations and eSports fandoms, we developed an integrated framework that draws on previous research to explain this form of virtual global organization (see **Figure 2**). In this section, we address the following research questions: *How can eSports communities be conceptualized as virtual organizations?* and *How do community narratives influence fandom engagement within the virtual organization framework?*

As previously introduced in this study, we revised and expanded the virtual global organization framework to include four central elements: identity, structure, engagement, and dissolution. The empirical findings reveal themes associated with these dimensions, including identity and control, precarious and loosely structured organization, algorithmic shifts, and flexibility with freedom of participation.

5.1. Who am I? or What are we?

Interviewees consistently framed gaming as central to their self-concept, suggesting participation in eSports fandoms is sustained through identity attachment. Identity can be described as *the extent to which individuals define themselves through the relation to a distinct group to a point where their characteristics become part of their self-concept shaping behavior and attitude* (Froese et al., 2025, p.696). This reflects the notion of how each interviewee defined how they choose their interpretation of fun based on who they were and their personalities. Similarly, eSports fandoms often find other teams or players with similar characteristics that they possess or they like mirroring what they are and what they like. In line with the suggestion of Meyer and Allen (1991, p.62) people want to remain in an organization where they identify and internalize the influence of shared values and maintain a satisfying relationship between parties. This was evident in our empirical findings, people frequently expressed positive perspectives on gaming, emphasizing its values, the enjoyment

it brings, the friendships it creates, and the opportunities it offers for developing strategies and further getting better at the game.

Furthermore, the interviewees mentioned the dynamic of different team's branding, they control the different aspect of the narratives towards the fans therefore helping them adhering to their culture and values. As suggested by Alvesson and Willmott (2002, p.622), people integrate novel managerial dialogue into narratives of self-identity. Unlike the traditional notion of audiences as passive consumers, eSports fandoms actively reproduce community norms, values, and engagement practices through ongoing interaction. They are *active participants in the shaping of themselves and of others through various forms of acceptance* (Müller, 2017, p.897) This active characteristic enabled eSports fandoms to reinforce and demonstrate the enjoyment of gaming, highlighting the authenticity and sense of fun within the community while encouraging others to join.

Building upon the theme of identity, the findings presented at 4.2.2. Collective sense of identity suggests the emergence of control mechanisms, as shared values and collective expectations shape both individual behavior and members' sense of belonging within the community. This can resemble mechanisms associated with neo-normative control that Cushen (2019, p.102) describes as shared values and moral involvement in which control is exercised through the shaping of workers' identities, emotions, attitudes, and beliefs. Moreover, it regulates people internally, particularly their self-image, emotions, and identifications, by shaping identities that are considered congruent (Müller, 2017, p.895). Closely connected to this idea, the empirical findings demonstrate the presence of neo-normative control mechanisms within the narratives promoted by eSports organizations and teams. Through the construction of inclusive team identities and representations, organizations encourage audiences to emotionally identify with their values, cultures and are encouraged to be themselves. For instance, Team Vitality strongly emphasizes its French identity fostering the sense of identification and belonging. Additionally, Team Apeks has a trans person professional player emphasizing diversity in terms of nationality, race, gender, and sexuality. This allows supporters to perceive these organizations as extensions of their own identities and beliefs reinforcing the neo-normative control. Neo-normative control, as presented by Müller (2017, p. 897), is embedded in value-centered discourses such as

authenticity, individuality, and enjoyment that encourage individuals to be themselves, while simultaneously becoming part of a subtle system of control that is difficult to resist.

Similarly, control mechanisms are also integrated within game design itself. The creation of characters with diverse identities and sexual orientations reflects broader attempts by publishers to construct more inclusive gaming environments. While such strategies may alienate certain groups of people who reject these representations, they may simultaneously strengthen engagement among audiences who identify with or support these values, thereby attracting broader and more diverse communities. In this sense, inclusion and self-expression become ingrained into forms of neo-normative control.

Building on this idea, game publishers establish mechanisms of identity regulation as a form of organizational control designed to sustain user engagement with their games by fostering the development of communities and social media interaction operating to the publishers' advantage. According to Alvesson and Willmott (2002, p.627) identity regulation refers to the processes and discourses that condition how identities are formed and transformed. This process, in turn, prompts identity work, through which individuals interpret, negotiate, and reshape their self-identity, ultimately contributing to forms of normative regulation. Each popular game publisher such as Riot and Valve upholds different narratives through the games they produce. For instance, Valve's *Counter-Strike* emphasizes tactical shooting mechanics, with minimal focus on character backstories or narrative development. This design approach tends to appeal to audiences who prioritize competitive gameplay over narrative immersion. In contrast, Riot Games adopts a more narrative-driven and character-focused design across its titles, developing detailed backstories and identities for its agents, which contributes to a more dynamic and inclusive gaming experience. This differentiation in design philosophy suggests the formation of distinct fandoms communities, each shaped by shared values, preferences, modes of engagement, and identity regulation.

However, despite the apparent freedom within eSports fandoms to choose which narratives, teams, or communities to support, these ecosystems remain highly layered and structurally complex. As a result, fandom participation may create the perception of autonomous choice, while these choices are simultaneously shaped and conditioned by organizational narratives, platform structures, and algorithmic visibility.

Furthermore, as we presented in previous chapters, the parasocial relationship plays a vital role in the dynamic of attachment as this presents an idea of emotional connection, closeness and loyalty (Kowert & Daniel, 2021, p.1). In line with the literature, our findings demonstrate that there are important aspects in the relationship with the players that the fan presenters worship since they have perplexed fixation on how they play, their strategy or even how they celebrate when they win. Furthermore, the connection relates to the view of the strategy of the players, this an important note since the majority of the interviewees explained that they learn and replicate their newly acquired knowledge when gaming, therefore the attribute of education creates a nuance as it represents a passive and active relationship. This challenges the existing literature as previous studies suggest a linear and passive path between the fan and the object. As Kowert and Daniel (2021, p.1) suggest more of a nonreciprocated relationship.

Building on this argument of differentiability, our evidence suggests that what distinguishes eSports fandoms from other fandoms is the transactional nature of their attachments. Consistent with the idea of an *explicit and implicit agreement* (Rawung et al., 2015, p.127), this transactionality can be fomented by the rapid growth of online media presence and live streaming (Kowert & Daniel, 2021, p.5). In other fandoms, fans tend to grow and evolve alongside their idol, forming bonds that deepen over time, which echoes the notion of the *socio-emotional connection that people develop with media figures* (Hoffner & Bond, 2022, p.1). This suggest that the rapid pace of the eSports environment, combined with the algorithmic bubbles that govern contents visibility and consumption might create weak conditions that can probably cause to cultivate attachments which are genuine and emotionally meaningful in the moment, yet fluid enough to shift once the sense of entertainment or engagement is no longer fulfilled by the player or the team.

The creation of fandoms communities around the identification towards the game, the team and/or the professional player makes the structure of fandoms in eSports to present an additional issue, in terms of algorithmic management and its involvement in these communities. Consistent with Stark and Vanden Broeck (2024, p.2) notion that algorithmic management is a process in which many of the actors, assets, and activities are situated outside the firm, involving a complex entanglement of information flows, practices, and users.

This perspective raises further possible consequences regarding how these communities are controlled and shaped, and also how they exercise judgment and critical thinking within them. Harms and Han (2018, p.75) explained that often organizations value safety, community, fairness, diversity, or a host of other ideals and these ideals must be entered as specific goals for the algorithm and given appropriate weight in decision-making. For instance, the publishers of the games have different measures in place to moderate ethical concerns such as, banning the use of discriminatory language on the game. In all cases when users attempt to use these types of words, their accounts are suspended and they are banned from the game. Furthermore, Harms and Han (2018, p.74) described the role of management in exercise *control and organizing*. Within eSports fandoms, there is an initial layer that encompasses the broader community as a whole, followed by secondary layers in which multiple sub-communities. Each of these sub-communities develops its own norms, expectations, and forms of regulation, requiring individuals who move between communities to adapt to the behavioral standards of each new environment. Building on this idea, there are ways to manage and control organizations as Kellogg et al. (2020, p.369) mentions that direction entails the specification of what needs to be performed, in what order and time period, and with what degree of accuracy. However, within the ecosystem of eSports fandoms top-down control becomes difficult to keep-up. Instead, algorithmic management appears to function by shaping the conditions under which communities self-organize and regulate themselves, rather than attempting to directly manage the ecosystem in its entirety.

5.2. Precarious and free organization

From the perspective of the engagement, although eSports fandoms are real and structurally innovative forms of organization, they also carry a certain form of precarity. These communities operate through differentiated roles and forms of participation, even in the absence of formal authorities assigning responsibilities. They function within blurred and fluid boundaries where little is fixed, yet members generally understand how to behave, what to contribute, and how to engage. In this context, Han (2018, p. 332) states that precarity is *closely associated with marginality, abandonment, and has come to signal the ways in which life and labor have transformed in an age of globalization*.

In this sense, eSports fandoms can be understood as *organizations-in-the-making* and, echoing Han (2018, p. 336), they may also *signal forms of insecurity, unstable identity formation, and the absence of a unified collective voice*. While they represent an emerging organizational form marked by flexibility, creativity, and adaptability, they are simultaneously built upon fragile and vague foundations.

Within this context, collectivity becomes increasingly individualized, as coordination emerges through voluntary participation and shared understanding rather than hierarchical structures, formal membership, or institutional control. This dynamic bears resemblance to the concept of precarious work, which Shin et al. (2023, p. 3) define as work characterized by uncertainty, instability, and insecurity, where individuals bear risks themselves while receiving limited social benefits or statutory protections. Similarly, eSports fandoms can be understood as operating under conditions that lack formal legal protection or representation. However, organizations often implement initiatives and community-building activities that simulate forms of support and protection, thereby sustaining and reinforcing users' sense of belonging and community.

As Shin et al. (2023, p.3) note, precarious work takes many forms from *nonstandard employment relations to self-employment and informal work*. The broader transitions between traditional economic models and the rapidly changing modern economy and globalization, Allan et al. (2021) have created conditions that, arguably, have enabled the emergence of eSports fandoms as a form of precarious *organization-in-the-making*, a concept that draws meaningful parallels to Han (2018) notion of *class-in-the-making*. Through the interviewees we had an impression that their involvement in the game and the community would resemble some *part-time work that may not provide a living wage* (Allan et al. 2021, p, 2). Many of them would dedicate more than 4 hours daily to playing online games and be active in the community. Liu (2022, p.769) argues that leads to excessive consumption and unpaid labor time for their favorite objects. The empirical findings challenge the notion that major game publishers, such as Riot Games and Valve, create environments centered on the concepts of *fun and home* solely to foster stronger identification among players and encourage forms of unpaid affective labor. While players develop strong attachments, they simultaneously remain *workers* who financially contribute through in-game purchases.

Building on the idea of collective individuality, members are rarely formally assigned responsibilities; nevertheless, they organize themselves and participate actively within the community. This dynamic is exemplified by Perla, who independently created a fan page for the team Fnatic due to her strong attachment to the team and its players. Through her role, she became a central figure within the community, facilitating interactions between fans and players while organizing activities, videos, among other things. Her leadership role emerged in a largely spontaneous and arguably accidental manner. This aligns with the argument of Riemer and Vehring (2012, p. 8), who suggest that *flexible hierarchical structures encourage self-management*.

Fandoms in eSports exhibit several organizational characteristics, including role differentiation (moderators, creators, and critics), norm enforcement through community standards of acceptable behavior, and collective goal pursuit, such as defending a team's reputation or organizing viewership activities. The collective understanding and coordination emerge implicitly rather than through explicit instruction. This was evidenced through our online observations conducted during the watch party, particularly in relation to norms of communication such as permissible forms of *trash talk* but without disrespectful insults, as well as broader expectations regarding appropriate behavior within the environment.

At the same time, the precarity and absence of formal structures shape both engagement and dissolution within these communities. Based on our findings participation is voluntary and loosely organized, individuals can freely enter or exit the relationship. Nevertheless, eSports fandoms continue to develop strong behavioral norms that define what constitutes a *real fan*, alongside shared discourses, insider terminology, chants, memes, and team lore. This understanding appears when *close-knit groups develop into a cohesive community with relationships of mutuality and shared understandings* (Lindkvist, 2005, p. 1189). These shared cultural practices reinforce collective identity and strengthen community cohesion despite the lack of formal organizational parameters.

5.3. Blurry lines and fluid ties

In terms of the dissolution of virtual organizations, fandoms in eSports resemble shifting sands: fluid, and movable. In our empirical findings we observed that fandoms in eSports change constantly from one game, team and/or professional player to another without any

formal consequences, just for the sake of their amusement. Consequently, it is relevant to bring light to an idea of what a loose organization's characteristics can have, adaptability, flexibility, agility, and speed (Strader et al., 1998, p.77). This can arguably be an adaptation of a fluid society that has been more individualized with time and with a notion of universal flexibility (Bauman, 2013). This is more present nowadays with the rise of the fast-paced world, with this reflection also accompanying the ephemerality of the organization reinforcing the idea of an *amorphous web of connections changing constantly* (Ahuja & Carley, 1998).

As discussed in the previously presented virtual global organization framework, one of the four central aspects is dissolution. In most contexts, dissolution implies a definitive ending, the termination of a relationship or the break-up. However, within eSports fandoms, dissolution is far from the typical *it's not you, it's me* narrative. Instead, it reflects a situation in which fans perceive that the implicit pact between themselves and the team and/or professional player, understood in terms of entertainment, is no longer being fulfilled. It contradicts with Mowshowitz's idea that switching *involves flexibility, favoring temporary relationships based on explicit rather than implicit agreements* (Mowshowitz, 1997, p. 37)

Furthermore, what makes this aspect particularly interesting is that it does not represent the final stage of the framework in a linear sense. Instead, identity, structure, and engagement remain active, dynamic, and continuously reiterative. The temporary and fluid ties that fans form with players and/or teams make dissolution feel less like a rupture and more like a natural transition.

While this natural transition dynamic is inherent to eSports fandoms, external forces can also disrupt these relationships, particularly through algorithmic shifts. Platform algorithms are designed to maximize engagement, thereby reinforcing the sense of entertainment and enjoyment that interviewees consistently identified as central to their experiences. However, when algorithmic logics redirect visibility and attention elsewhere, audience engagement within fandoms may shift accordingly. This algorithmic dependency raises a further concern: that eSports fandoms may experience important drops in attachment to the game, the team and/or players not as a result of any meaningful change in loyalty, but simply due to the logic of the platforms themselves. Fans are in constant contact with content interviews, tournament footage, commentary, highlights and when that content disappears from their feeds, it might

suggest so too does the sense of connection, like the popular saying *eyes that they do not see, they do not feel*. This echoes Gillespie's (2017, p.63) notion of being *algorithmically recognizable*. This could be a daunting contradiction where a fandom can be deeply committed, genuinely passionate, and still dissolve because an algorithm stopped feeding it. Additionally, the eSports industry operates within an uneven playing field that advantages certain teams over others. Financial resources play an important role, as some organizations are able to invest a lot in marketing and algorithmic strategies that amplify their visibility and engagement across social media platforms. In contrast, teams that have fewer economic resources are often left dependent on organic growth and chance. This creates an important challenge within the industry, as financial success tends to reinforce itself: winning attracts more fans, increased fandom generates greater economic activity for the team, and these additional resources can then be reinvested into branding, content creation, and fan engagement initiatives designed to attract and retain even larger audiences.

5.4. Knowledge as unexpected gifts

The final component of the previously presented framework is the internet. Although it does not constitute one of the four central elements, it functions as the digital infrastructure that connects and enables the entire ecosystem. This relates to one of the key findings of the study: the role of social media platforms as knowledge communities within eSports fandoms.

Platforms such as Reddit, Discord, YouTube, and X serve as the primary spaces where fandoms and the wider eSports community interact. Each platform serves for a purpose as previously presented in our findings, places to share their knowledge and learn, while they are active participants. They shape the topics discussed within the community, how they communicate, and sustain collective engagement over time. Blight (2016) describes that individuals use technology to interact around a shared interest which allows the exchange of ideas, opinions, and other resources related to their favorite media figures and programs. Similarly, Leimeister (2010, p.246) explains that the *active users engage themselves critically and directly in activities providing them with collective power*. In this sense, fandoms in eSports feel a strong sense of recognition and pride when talking about gaming in general, their identity is partially based on the connections they have made, the languages they have learned and the shared cultural values these communities have to offer. Furthermore, as

Leimeister (2010, p.246) describes, people can be motivated to partake in these communities because it *makes them feel they are contributing to a deeper meaning*. In this context, fandoms in eSports are not only receiving new knowledge from other people in the communities but also sharing theirs throughout the community. Echoing the idea of Jenkins (2006, p.27) that the production and reciprocate knowledge exchange holds stronger the knowledge communities. By exercising this knowledge exchange, fandoms in eSports contribute and further develop the communities while fostering the collective intelligence. When fandoms in eSports partake to share their knowledge, the social interactions and expertise they contribute can have advantages, as Rose (2004) notes.

Furthermore, social media platforms are indispensable sources of knowledge and belonging, and as safe spaces where the *real* fans, those who know the ins and outs, feel at home. While entering these spaces feels like going down a *rabbit hole*, an image that evokes an Alice in Wonderland quality of curiosity, depth, and discovery. Most of these worlds are not known to outsiders, as a result people with the same interests, shared values find each other. Despite the fact that most people have only ever met online, never seen each other in person, and know one another primarily through avatars and digital interactions, the sense of closeness is striking. This is particularly evident in eSports, where the virtual nature of the industry effectively shortens global distances, bringing together people who would otherwise never cross paths. Additionally, this creates a more inclusive and equal environment, making participation both more accessible and more meaningful. This aligns with Srnicek (2017, p.31) conceptualization of platforms as *infrastructures that mediate between different groups*, as well as with Alaimo and Kallinikos (2017, p.175) finding that social media platforms play a central role in shaping and structuring everyday communication and interaction.

5.5. Chapter Summary

Through our discussion, we formulated a conversation and dialogue between existing literature and our study's key findings. In this chapter we analyze eSports fandoms across different themes such as identity, control, precarious and structureless organizations, algorithmic shifts and knowledge sharing in relation to the four aspects of the virtual global organization framework previously presented: identity, structure, engagement, and dissolution. We argue that while fans form genuine emotional bonds with players and teams,

these attachments are inherently fluid, shaped by transactionality with influence of algorithmic logic. Despite lacking formal rules or hierarchy, these communities are self-organizing, developing their own norms, roles, and shared language, although raising questions on their precarity form. Additionally, digital platforms serve as the foundational infrastructure holding these communities together, creating a strong sense of belonging among members and allowing sharing and acquiring knowledge. However, this platform dependency is also their greatest vulnerability when algorithms stop surfacing content, communities can dissolve because the attention was possibly redirected. Together, the four aspects of the framework previously presented: Identity & Affect, Structure, Engagement and Dissolution form an iterative cycle powered by the internet infrastructure which presents eSports fandoms as a structurally innovative but also a precarious organization.

6. Conclusion

This research aimed to present a notion that fandoms in eSports are virtual organizations and critically reflect its original characteristics. Furthermore, we wanted to answer the question of what can be learned from the case of the eSports community. The built frameworks serve as great conceptualization to draw similarities between VO and communities in eSports allowing to contribute from a theoretical standpoint. Arguably, eSports fandoms represent a fundamentally new perspective that defies traditional models of organization.

6.1. Main Empirical Findings

To address our research question, we conducted interviews with people in the eSports community from all around the world and did online observation on how they interact on social platforms. We explored that eSports players' experiences, the four aspects within our framework interconnected and happened simultaneously using the Internet as the platform and that eSports fandoms can identify and choose to engage themselves in the eSports communities in different ways.

First, in the Identity and Affect section, we observed that eSports players define enjoyment in different ways when playing games or watching eSports matches. This characteristic of the players serves as one of the primary criteria used when choosing which gaming communities to join, alongside other factors such as favorite players or favorite teams.

Second, the characteristics discussed above directly influence the way gaming communities are structured. Through the interviews we conducted, it became evident that game developers and eSports organizations deliberately construct specific images and narratives around their games and competitive teams. These narratives attract eSports players to participate, as individuals evaluate themselves whether such stories align with their own personalities and preferences. In this sense, the passion and collective sense of identity shared among fan communities of a particular game or team become the foundation upon which these online eSports communities are structured. At the same time, the structure of these communities is continuously reshaped throughout their existence based on the way algorithmic management is set up to monitor and regulate interactions and behaviors among community members.

Third, our findings indicate that eSports players perceive online eSports communities as safe spaces not only because they can express their authentic selves, but also because they have the autonomy to determine their own level of engagement and participation within these communities. While some gamers prefer to engage only at the level of joining groups to stay updated on games' changes or tournaments, others describe these communities as a *home* where they truly feel a sense of belonging. These online interactions become even more real as players learn about different cultures and languages through friendships with people from around the world, with some of these relationships eventually developing into genuine real life friendships.

Lastly, our findings indicate that dissolution is an inevitable section within the developing process of eSports communities, influenced both by the current algorithms of social media platforms and by the characteristics discussed in the previous three sections. However, when dissolution occurs, the other processes continue to operate simultaneously. As a result, eSports communities are still able to grow rapidly while remaining in a constant state of activity and evolution.

Although, the findings suggest parallels between eSports fandoms and virtual global organizations in terms of identity, structure, engagement and dissolution, due to the fluid nature of the ties and the ease with which individuals move between different aspects of the community, the framework appears less rigid than the model of virtual organizations proposed by Strader et al. (1998). Moreover, the findings demonstrate that these dimensions frequently overlap and interconnect, with identity and the internet emerging as particularly central elements. Structure is also closely intertwined with identity, engagement, and dissolution. Therefore be observed that fluidity and freedom of choosing can propose a challenge for sustaining a long-lasting stable relationship. Furthermore, the constant movement and intersection of the other three aspects continuing to operate in parallel makes it difficult to form a formal organization.

Overall, based on our findings, we argue that all sections in the virtual organization framework are interconnected. They are constantly changing and happening all at once. We also find eSports as a fast-paced industry, where continuous adaptation is essential for a game or a team's survival within the industry. As gamers themselves often use the phrase *out-meta*

to describe something that used to be strong in the previous update but fails to evolve and now with the latest update, it is not and no one wants to play it anymore in game.

6.2. Theoretical Contributions

Our empirical findings contribute to the existing body of research by proposing a new framework for understanding virtual global organizations (VGO). Developing this framework allowed us to organize, explain, and interpret the complex phenomena of eSports fandoms in a more comprehensive and structured way, while also contributing to the advancement of organizational theory and the broader literature in this field. This was achieved by building upon and adapting the original model proposed by Strader et al. (1998) a necessary step, given that the original framework, rooted in the late 1990s, does not fully account for the new realities that eSports communities present. Our adapted framework helps fill those gaps by introducing concepts and relationships that previous studies have overlooked, offering a more fitting lens through which to examine this evolving phenomenon.

The ambition of our study takes shape to investigate eSports communities as a rich empirical case, and to build upon the original virtual organization framework in order to develop a more contemporary model one that more accurately reflects how virtual organizations function today. This updated framework represents the central contribution of our work. Esports communities were chosen as the empirical setting precisely because of what makes them exceptional: their dynamism, their fast-changing and constantly evolving nature, and their complexity as a subject that extends far beyond gaming. They are not simply groups of people who play or watch games, they are intricate, self-organizing social structures that offer an unusually revealing window into virtual organization in the modern era.

Our empirical findings suggest that every dimension of eSports fandoms can be connected to organizational theory and, more specifically, to the concept of virtual organizations even if these areas are not traditionally considered related. This points to the potential of eSports fandoms as an emerging organizational phenomenon, one shaped by digital interaction, fluid structures, transactional bonds and individualized collective knowledge communities. Both theory and current research stand to benefit from expanding their scope to include these newer and less conventional approaches to organizational theory.

As presented in the introduction, eSports represent a relatively new and evolving phenomenon, and research on the topic remains limited. We first wish to acknowledge a contribution that is often overlooked in discussions surrounding eSports. Existing research on gaming and eSports tends to concentrate primarily on negative aspects, sociological implications, or marketing-related perspectives. Comparatively little attention has been given to how eSports fandoms might offer a novel and productive lens within the field of organizational studies. Furthermore, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of precarity within eSports fandoms, drawing on the general concepts of Han (2018) and Shin et al. (2023), which have not previously been applied specifically to eSports fandoms. Accordingly, this research proposes a novel connection between these concepts and eSports fandoms, offering an alternative perspective on their functionality.

Moreover, the study contributes to parasocial relationship theory by challenging existing literature and suggesting a more transactional form of bond based on implicit agreements, rather than the traditional conceptualization proposed by Horton and Wohl (1956). Furthermore, it extends the literature by highlighting the differentiated roles of digital platforms within eSports fandoms, building on Jenkins (2006) notion of knowledge communities. Lastly, our findings suggest that, given the nature of eSports fandoms, existing understandings of control mechanisms require revision to enable a more open discussion of their dynamics and the ways in which new forms of control may emerge.

6.3. Practical Implications

Although our study focuses specifically on eSports communities as a form of virtual organization, the findings may offer valuable insights for businesses within the eSports industry, as well as for organizations seeking to operate virtual organization models more effectively.

The first major implication concerns businesses operating within the eSports industry. Our findings show that eSports fandoms prioritize their feeling of enjoyment. Once that sense of enjoyment and excitement no longer exists while playing a game or following a team, fandoms usually move their attention toward another game or team that also aligns with their personal interests. It reflects the transactional attachment between gaming and eSports communities and any single game or team, while also highlighting the fast-changing and

highly adaptable nature of eSports communities. Consequently, game publishers themselves must continuously evolve and update their products in order to remain relevant and responsive to these shifting community dynamics. This suggests game publishers and eSports organizations need to constantly listen to their opinions, update features, fix bugs, strengthen narratives, among other things, in order to sustain interest of players in the games or the teams. In addition, maintaining excitement alone is not sufficient, companies should also pay close attention to fostering a sense of belonging among eSports players. As indicated by our findings, this feeling serves as one of the fundamental elements shaping the structure of eSports communities. We therefore recommend that organizations invest more in community events that can reach underrepresented but potential groups of players, for example, within the APAC region, instead of only focusing on Korea and Japan, gaming publishers can consider hosting major international tournaments in other places with strong growth potential, such as countries with strong player base and highly qualified facility in Southeast Asia named Vietnam, Malaysia, or Thailand.

Second, we would like to focus our suggested practical implications toward businesses operating through virtual organization (VO) models. Our findings indicate that fandoms in eSports as a virtual organization may possess a highly complex structure composed of multiple smaller communities, each with distinct characteristics and operational norms. Attempting to control all of these smaller groups through a single unified set of principles is both unrealistic and inefficient, even when algorithmic management systems are employed. Therefore, we suggest that organizations should instead create conditions that allow smaller communities to self-manage, as long as they continue to uphold respect for the broader organization and mutual respect among communities. Furthermore, we suggest that building a persuasive narrative is essential for organizations to attract talents, let them get to know the organization on a deeper level, which can also benefit the talent retaining process.

6.4. Limitations

By conducting this study, we acknowledged a few limitations that can impact the quality of our findings.

First, because participants were recruited primarily through our personal networks, the sample consisted largely of individuals from South East Asian, European, and Latin American

backgrounds. As a result, the findings may not fully capture the diversity of perspectives present across other regions or cultural contexts. Cultural norms, values, and social dynamics vary across geographical settings, and these differences can shape individuals' behaviors, attitudes, and motivations in distinct ways. Although the interviewees had different backgrounds, and shared detailed reflections, we are fully aware that their narratives can not represent the complex eSports community as a whole.

Furthermore, our own perception and prior beliefs can impact the interpretation we gave to the findings (Eidels, 2023). One of the authors has prior experience as an eSports player and engaging in various eSports communities and events, which granted us direct access to interviewees and a deeper familiarity with the gamers' experiences. Even though this helped build trust and made interviewees more open in sharing sensitive experiences, it also meant that we came into the research with certain expectations. However, being two authors can also benefit the thesis, as we certainly had different approaches, which can provide a few pathways and results for a single research project (Baron, 2021). This diversity in perspectives helps broaden knowledge, identify and mitigate biases that a single researcher might overlook.

Last, with its own prominent characteristics of fast-paced changing, the eSports community is certainly also evolving constantly as we speak. We are aware that our thesis can only describe this continuous flow of eSports community dynamics in a relatively limited manner, within a specific timeframe, through the experiences of our interviewees and our own online observations. .

6.5. Further research

Building on the findings and limitations of this study, we introduce several suggestions for future research.

Research on eSports is rather limited as it is a new phenomena and the existing body of literature centers mostly on marketing and sociology aspects. We suggest further research could also take a closer look at regulation and neo-normative control or perhaps a new form of control system for this type of organization as its novelty involves newer and more dynamic adaptation of control mechanisms.

Simultaneously, another direction would be to explore the parasocial relationship theories adapted to new forms of attachment, as our study exposed a different perspective of people attaching to a feeling rather than a celebrity or unreal figure emphasizing the transactionality of their attachment.

Lastly, more research could be done to extend this topic to a bigger scale. Our research has eleven people from South East Asia, Europe, and Latin America to get involved and share about their own experiences in various online eSports communities. However, the Internet is an enormous and inclusive platform, so more could be done with people with other cultural backgrounds included to get a more comprehensive result in terms of this topic.

In this chapter, we presented the conclusions of the study by drawing parallels between eSports fandoms and the functioning of virtual organizations. In addition, we outlined the study's theoretical contribution through the development of an updated version of the virtual global organization framework, offering a more contemporary perspective on Strader (1998) original model of virtual organization. At the same time, we identified limitations within this parallelism and discussed the practical implications arising from these findings. Finally, we concluded by highlighting opportunities for future research, particularly regarding emerging forms of normative and neo-normative control in an era increasingly shaped by algorithmic dominance.

Game over.

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Appendixes

Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Guide (English)

Fandoms

1. What is your profession? Tell me about yourself and your job.
2. Are you a player?
3. When did you start playing?
4. What kind of games do you play?
5. Why are you attracted to that type of game ?
6. Are you active in the esports community and how do you define yourself in the community?
7. How do you think fandoms in esports are organized? interim structure?
8. Are you engaged in the community's activities?
9. Are there other games/activities/hobbies you do? If yes, which ones?
10. Do you feel part of a fandom/community/club?
11. Do you join any Discord community that you don't actually know lots of people on that server in real life?
12. How do you feel meeting people in games? What type of players that you think can become online/ in-game friends with each other?
13. Do you observe strong in-group behavior or rivalry with other communities?
14. Where do you see the game's community in 5-10 years from now?
15. What other topics do you pay attention to through social media besides the game?
16. Do you think this topic would also peak interest from a portion of the gaming community?
17. Does the gaming community share interest in a certain field/aspect outside of the game?
18. Do you think gender equality could be one of those topics that interest a large portion of the gaming community? Provide us an explanation with an example that you can think of

19. The majority of competitive professional gamers are male, do you think that gender has a contributing factor to this fact or simply players are selected based on their skill level
20. Due to the recent popularization of the LGBTQ+ community, there has been many examples of individuals (though biologically identified as males) identify themselves as females/transgenders in order to compete in the female's categories and are gaining certain advantages from a biological standpoint based on the data from competitiveness, do you think this accidentally creates disadvantages for the females competing in the same categories, consequentially manifesting hatred/discrimination within the gaming community as a whole towards these individuals?
21. As a female/male esports enjoyer, do you think that prejudices exist within the gaming community towards female players and female figures in general?
22. Anything that you would like to share that we haven't discussed yet

Organizations

1. Can you please tell us a little about yourself, your background your profession
2. Are you a player?
3. When did you start playing?
4. What kind of games do you play?
5. Why are you attracted to that type of game ?
6. Are you active in the esports community and how do you define yourself in the community?
7. How do you think fandoms in esports are organized in terms of structure?
8. How do you view fandoms from your perspective?
9. Are organizations interested in investing resources in creating more products/services?
10. What types of activities are designed for fandoms?
11. How do you recognize fandoms affect organizations in the past decade?
12. Do you think fandoms are important stakeholders for the organization? If so, why?
13. Do you think there are negative aspects of fandoms in the organization? If so, why?
14. Anything that you would like to share that we haven't discussed yet
15. How organizations perceive fandom?

16. How do they strategically manage it?
17. What value (economic, reputational, strategic) fandom creates?
18. Can you give examples of fans influencing sales, sponsorships, or partnerships?
19. How do you think people can be friends/ form community with others that they only meet through playing games together?
20. Do you usually see this pattern from the games designed by your company/ the games you play?
21. Anything that you would like to share that we haven't discussed yet

Appendix B: Semi-Structured Interview Guide (Vietnamese)

1. Bạn có thể giới thiệu một chút về bản thân được không?
2. Công ty làm về mảng gì và em đang làm việc gì cho họ?
3. Bạn đã chơi game bao nhiêu lâu rồi? Đây là những game mà bạn đã bắt đầu chơi? Đây là những game mà bây giờ bạn vẫn chơi và điều gì khiến bạn gắn bó với những game đấy lâu như vậy?
4. Bạn thường chơi những thể loại game gì trong thời gian rảnh?
5. Tại sao bạn lại bị thu hút bởi các dòng game đấy?
6. Và việc chơi game gắn bó với những công việc hàng ngày của bạn như thế nào?
7. Ngoài những tựa game lớn thì bạn còn chơi những game nhỏ nào khác không?
8. Bạn có thể chia sẻ với chúng tôi tên 1 số đội tuyển, tuyển thủ yêu thích của bạn được không?
9. Lí do chính nào khiến bạn lựa chọn có những hôm sẽ dành nhiều thời gian chơi game hơn những hôm khác?
10. Thường thì bạn sẽ dùng phương thức nào để liên lạc và giao tiếp với bạn bè khi chơi game cùng nhau?
11. Bạn có tìm cho mình những cộng đồng chơi game thân quen thường xuyên dành thời gian để chơi game với nhau qua Discord không?
12. Bạn có sẵn sàng chơi với người từ cộng đồng khác nếu hôm đó nhóm quen của bạn thiếu người không? Nếu có, đã có trường hợp nào mà sau đó các đối tượng trở thành bạn bè/người quen của nhau từ trải nghiệm chơi game chưa?
13. Ngoài chơi game với bạn bè, bạn vẫn sẽ có những lúc chơi game với những người lạ chỉ mới bắt gặp qua các nhóm Discord để ghép trận chung không?
14. Bạn đã bao giờ gặp một ai đó trong game với ấn tượng rằng phong cách người đó hợp với mình và sau đó kết bạn làm quen với người đó chưa?
15. Bạn cảm thấy như thế nào khi là 1 phần của những cộng đồng game như vậy?
16. Bạn đã bao giờ quan sát được xung đột xảy ra giữa những người từ các cộng đồng khác nhau chưa?
17. Xung đột xảy ra chỉ đơn thuần xuất phát từ việc chơi game không hợp hay còn có thể từ những nguyên nhân nào nữa?

18. Bạn đã bao giờ quan sát được những cái hành vi thiên hướng phân biệt giới tính đối với các bạn nữ đó ở trong các nhóm chơi game của bạn không?
19. Việc biết một người đang chơi chung một tựa game giống mình có tạo cảm giác gần gũi với họ hơn, làm việc đánh giá con người họ trở nên bớt khắt khe hơn không?
20. Hãy chia sẻ đôi chút và nêu cảm nhận của bạn về những cộng đồng game mà bạn chọn gắn bó thân quen
21. Bạn cảm thấy là việc thêm một thành viên mới vào cộng đồng của mình nên cần có sự thoải mái của tất cả mọi người trong nhóm hay chỉ một là đủ?
22. Bạn có tham gia tích cực trong cộng đồng fandom của các đội tuyển không? Như cập tin tức, tham gia những hoạt động của fandom trên mạng xã hội?
23. Bạn có bao giờ ủng hộ tuyển thủ về mặt tài chính không?
24. Việc chi tiêu đó xuất phát từ việc bạn hâm mộ một cá nhân nhất định ở trong đội thi đấu đó, hay là nó xuất phát từ việc bạn đơn thuần muốn ủng hộ đội về mặt tài chính?
25. Giả sử tuyển thủ bạn yêu thích quyết định không thi đấu cho đội tuyển hiện tại nữa mà thi đấu cho một đội tuyển khác, thì bạn sẽ chọn tiếp tục cổ vũ đội tuyển đấy, hay sẽ đi theo và ủng hộ tuyển thủ mà mình yêu thích?
26. Bạn có nghĩ rằng bình đẳng giới có thể là một trong những chủ đề thu hút sự quan tâm của phần lớn cộng đồng game thủ không? Hãy giải thích và đưa ra một ví dụ mà bạn có thể nghĩ đến.
27. Hiện tại ở trong các giải eSports cho nữ, có một số người chơi định danh bản thân là người chuyển giới để được đấu ở các giải dành cho nữ và dành được lợi thế hơn, bạn nghĩ sao về chuyện đó?
28. Trong trường hợp tuyển thủ bạn yêu thích có những phát ngôn liên quan đến vấn đề chính trị hoặc vấn đề về văn hóa xã hội có phần lệch chuẩn thì bạn có quyết định tiếp tục ủng hộ họ không?
29. Bạn có thể tưởng tượng ra cộng đồng eSports trong 5 đến 10 năm tới trong tương lai không?
30. Có điều gì bạn muốn chia sẻ liên quan đến chủ đề này mà câu hỏi của chúng tôi chưa khai thác được từ bạn không?

Appendix C: AI Prompts

Chat GPT prompts

How can I rephrase this paragraph to make it more academically appropriate and concise?

How can I improve the flow and academic tone of this section?

How can I translate this phrase in a more academic way?

Can you help me rephrase this in better and more formal English:...

Claude prompts

I need help correcting grammatical errors and syntax in the text.