



eSports Behind the Screen

How consumers co-create meaning in practice

Cand.merc.(kom)

Master's Thesis

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Resumé

eSports (electronic sports) er gennem det sidste årti vokset til at blive en global industri med et stort økosystem af forskellige dedikerede aktører. Formålet med denne afhandling er at udforske nogle af de praksisser og interaktioner, som bliver udvekslet og udlevet internt for at skabe mening mellem eSports-aktører. Baseret på en eksplorativ netnografisk analyse af 3.000 kommentarer skrevet af brugere på eSports streaming-plattformen Twitch, samt tre interviews med engagerede eSports-forbrugere, søger afhandlingen at klargøre nogle af de underliggende mekanismer, der driver og motiverer forbrugerne. Således tillægger afhandlingen sig en socialkonstruktivistisk og fortolkende vinkel på de dynamiske processer og praksisser, der finder sted mellem forskellige aktører i eSports-økosystemet. Resultaterne viser, at for at få en dybdegående forståelse af, hvad der påvirker og motiverer forbrugere af eSports, bør man forholde sig til de praksisser, som de indgår i. Disse praksisser er påvirket af tre forbundne dynamikker: 1) streameren, 2) sproget og 3) sociale interaktioner, og hver af disse har indflydelse på den måde, eSports-forbrugere skaber mening i samskabelse. Derudover viser resultaterne, at forbrugerne kan anses som mere end tilhængere af videospil, da deres forbrug og interaktioner i eSports-økosystemer går ud over interessen i videospil, hvilket kan ses gennem den sociale betydning i at være en del af økosystemet. Baseret på resultaterne fra analysen fremvises en konceptuel model, der kan anvendes af brands til strategiske kommercielle formål i eSports. Slutteligt argumenteres der for, at brands bør forholde sig til de forbundne dynamikker, hvis de vil bruge økosystemet til strategiske kommercielle formål. Derfor kan brands: 1) udnytte streamerens indflydelse på forbrugerne og deres interaktioner, 2) forstå og udnytte det unikke sprog i økosystemet og 3) integrere deres brand i brugernes sociale kontekst, som går ud over interessen i eSports.

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1. Introduction

Recently, the industry of eSports (electronic sports) has grown significantly with an industry revenue of approximately DKK 6.0b in 2018, a number that is expected to triple by 2022, a total audience of 395m viewers, and cash prizes totalling of DKK 900m in 2018 (Vækstfonden, 2018; Newzoo, 2019). A major part of the revenue, around 38% in 2018, is derived from sponsorship agreements with prominent companies that are starting to show interest in eSports (Vækstfonden, 2018). Companies' interest in eSports has been reflected in marketing on some occasions, as exemplified with McDonald's launching a minor, yet effective, Danish advertising campaign connecting the computer game Counter-Strike: Global Offensive with its brand and products (Odde, 2018).

Today, one-third of the world population are "gamers", indicating that they play some form of electronic games to a certain extent in their everyday lives (Vækstfonden, 2019). The numbers of people playing video games are significantly larger in the Western part of the world and Asia compared to the rest of the world, and these numbers are expected to increase (Vækstfonden, 2019). The rapidly increasing number of people playing video games has led to a state of professionalization of the eSports industry with the gaming consumption of many practitioners evolving from playing by themselves to also actively following eSports streamers and tournaments. This is reflected in the viewer ratings of some of the most popular eSports events, such as the final in the League of Legends World Championship in 2018 being watched by more than 50m viewers (Vækstfonden, 2019).

The basic concept of eSports has existed for several decades with the first competitive computer games being developed back in the 1950s. In 1952, players could set up a match of "Tic Tac Toe" against a computer, and in 1958, the first multiplayer game "Tennis for Two" was introduced to the market, allowing two people to sit next to each other and compete by the use of a joystick (Larch, 2019). These games, though relatively simple in design and function, were groundbreaking initiatives of the time and they would proceed to become the foundation of video games as we know them today. Some years later, in 1972, the first official tournament in computer games was organized at Stanford University with 24 players participating in "The

Intergalactic Spacewar Olympics”. The participants competed in a new game called “Spacewar!” where two players controlled each of their spaceships with the objective of crashing the other players’ ships as fast as possible. The tournament featured a prize of an annual subscription to the Rolling Stone magazine and is considered to be the first eSports-like event to ever take place (Larch, 2019).

Throughout the 1970s, the video game industry underwent further establishment, particularly in the US, as home consoles and arcade games increased in popularity. For the first time, advances in technology made it possible for gamers to connect the so-called “Magnavox Odyssey” console to a television, allowing them to meet up and play video games together. Additionally, arcade game machines were installed in several public areas, which made way for a shared experience of competitive playing for the masses (Larch, 2019). With the cutting-edge invention of the “Space Invaders” arcade game, the first major gaming tournament was organized in 1980 at the “Space Invaders Championship” with more than 10,000 players participating (Larch, 2019).

Overall, the development of the eSports industry has contributed to a shift from a niche to a large industry with international actors and an increasingly diverse audience (Vækstfonden, 2019). Despite its commercial potential, current academic research contributions on the topic of eSports in a commercial context are scarce. In order to visualize some of the building blocks making up eSports ecosystems, an illustration is provided below. The constituents are: Sponsors, event-organizers, fans, teams and team owners, broadcast and flow-tv providers, and game developers (Vækstfonden, 2019).



Illustration 1: The eSports ecosystem (Vækstfonden, 2019, p. 7).

In this explorative study of practices carried out in eSports ecosystems, the researchers aim to examine underlying mechanisms that influence and motivate eSports consumers to engage in meaning creation. Finally, the researchers provide a conceptual model that can be applied by brands when developing strategies for commercial ends in the context of eSports ecosystems. For this reason, the study will be conducted on the basis of the following research question:

1.1 Research question

How are eSport practices carried out in co-creational ecosystems to make meaning and how can brands use these meanings for strategic commercial ends?

1.2 Delimitations

The aim of this project is to contribute to the unexplored academic field of eSports practices. As several stakeholders exist within eSports ecosystems, certain boundaries have been established to ensure a clear scope throughout the process. In order to explore how eSports practices are carried out in co-creational ecosystems to make meaning, the project explores specific actors within the eSports ecosystems and excludes others. More precisely, the scope is limited to consumers of streaming platforms in eSports ecosystems and the streamers on the platforms. The project does not diminish the importance of other actors within the eSports ecosystems, such as eSports organizations and game developers, as these may also influence the practices and co-creational processes that take place. However, these other actors were excluded as an attempt to maintain a narrow scope. Hence, this project delimits itself to explore two types of eSports actors in order to answer the research question.

1.3 Clarification of eSports terminology

Several of the expressions and terminology used in this project are unique for eSports and may be unfamiliar to readers that have limited prior knowledge about eSports. A large amount of this terminology will be applied throughout the project, and therefore a wordbook and an example of the layout of a streaming platform is initially provided for the readers in order to aid comprehension. Other expressions will be introduced and explained consecutively.

Term	Description
Twitch	An online live streaming platform with focus on gaming and eSports.
Stream	A virtual space where a live video game broadcast takes place. Usually with a live chat related to the stream.
Game in-stream	The actual game or match taking place on the streamer's screen. When live streaming, the streamer shares his screen with the Twitch users, enabling them to follow every action that he performs in the game.
Streamer	A person who broadcasts video games live for an audience, usually with a camera and a microphone.
Individual streamer	A streamer who is broadcasting on his own, often in his own home

	with a camera recording himself. In other words, not as part of a tournament or an eSports team where several players or “eSports athletes” are involved.
Live chat	Real-time chat on a channel where users can interact with each other and the streamer while watching a stream. Displayed on the right side of the stream. The chat is also visible to the streamer.
Channel	A channel on Twitch that has a streamer and one or more users following. The channel page is the location for the streamer’s content (such as video game broadcasting). On these channels, commercials can be shared.
Emote	Instant reactions posted by users in the chat, often depicting a facial expression. Used to communicate certain emotions.
Subscriber	A type of relationship between streamer channel and user. Subscribers pay a monthly fee to gain access to extra features that non-subscribers do not have.

Table 1: Common eSports terminology workbook

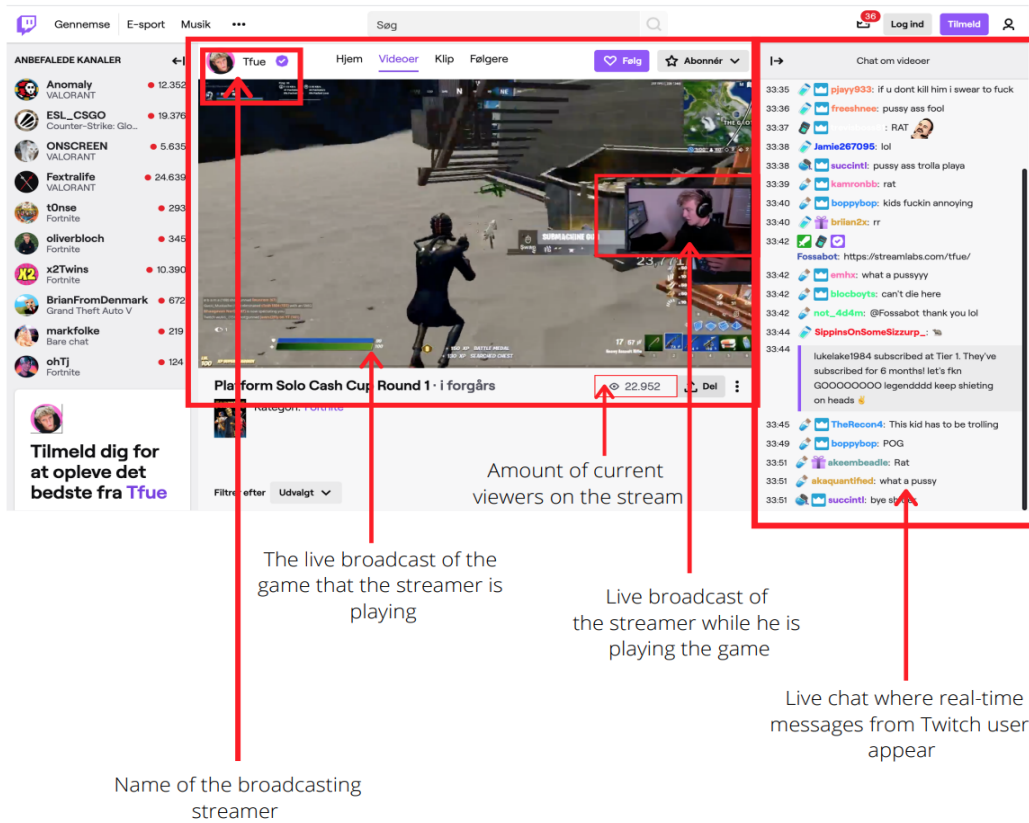
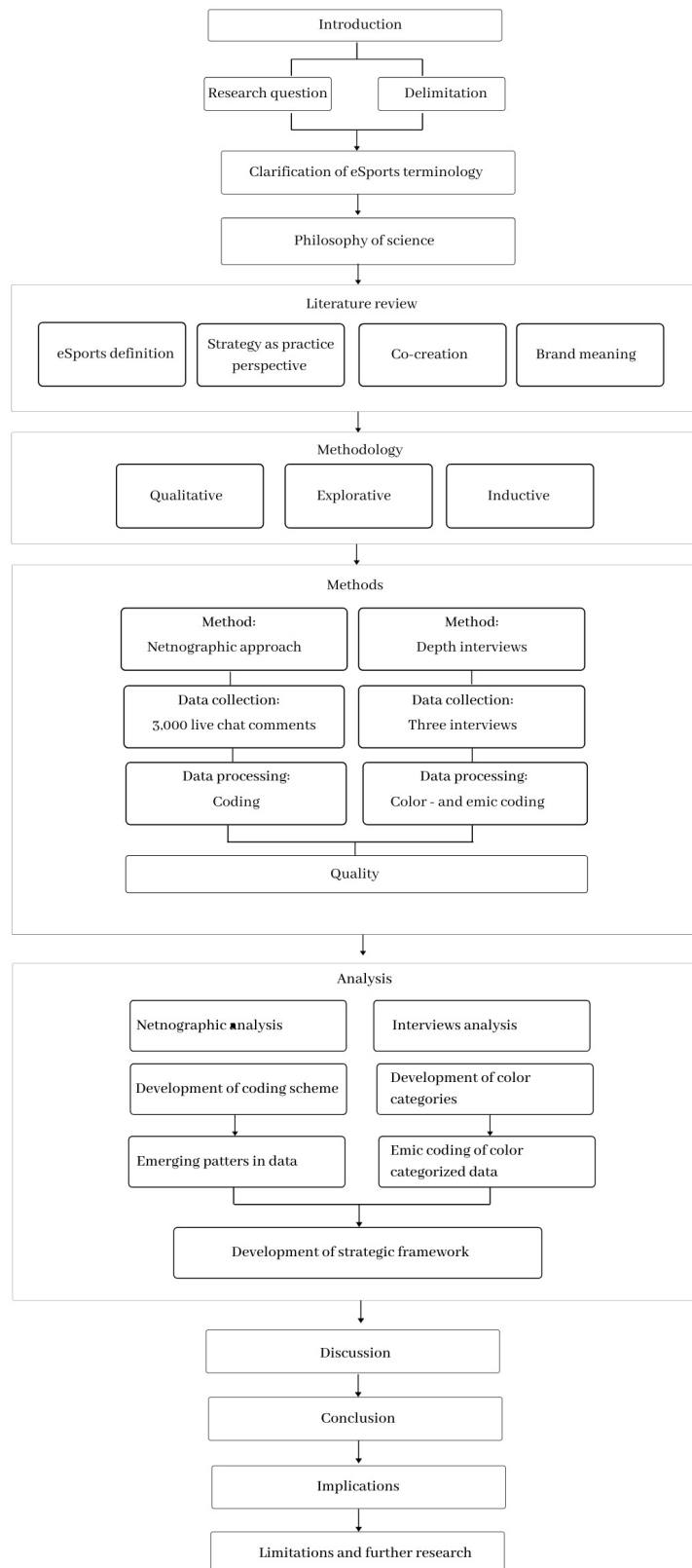


Illustration 2: Layout of a stream on the Twitch streaming platform

1.4 Structure of the project



2. Philosophy of science

A social constructivism perspective

The application of a scientific theoretical perspective is required when conducting an explorative study aiming to shed light on ways in which social reality and meaning are constructed within an eSports ecosystem.

Applying the social constructivist paradigm enables the exploration of different sociocultural forces that contribute to the construction of knowledge and meaning, which is one of the focus areas of social constructivism (Burr, 2015). In other words, this paradigm contributes to the project by aiding comprehension of how meaning is created and exchanged in the ecosystems of eSports. It explores the conversations and interactions that take place between members of an online eSports ecosystem and experiences of individuals highly engaged in eSports. With the support of this paradigm, the project aims to identify existing patterns regarding the co-creation and understanding of meaning in the ecosystems.

The core idea of social constructivism is that perceived reality, beliefs, and social relations are produced and constructed through social actions, such as actions carried out in interaction with other people (Detel, 2015). Social constructivists generally argue that the perceived reality and beliefs are socially constructed and alterable by humans, even though they might initially seem to depend on natural laws and objectivity (Detel, 2015). Furthermore, the general standpoint of the social constructivist framework differs from other paradigms, as it approaches the subjective world, concepts, and language as social constructs. The social constructs of the world and reality are unique from one individual to another and they vary depending on the personal experiences and interactions of the person in question. From the perspective of social constructivism, all individuals live in something that can be defined as “realities of everyday life” and these realities are shaped and influenced by the social context that the individuals are part of (Larsen, 2012, p. 125). Several factors contribute to the creation of the social context, such as place of living, social networks, and the culture that people engage in. When numerous individuals share the same basic knowledge and understandings of an environment, social constructivism defines it as

an institutionalized worldview, and members of a particular institution tend to externalize meaning among each other through social interaction (Larsen, 2012).

In the context of institutions, each environment also has its own understanding of language (Larsen, 2012). The social constructivist perspective argues that the language and words being exchanged by members of a given institution are products of the social context and society that they partake in. In this way, people form their understanding of language and terminology through daily influence from their environments and this is reflected in the way that they communicate (Larsen, 2012). This particular view will be explored further when looking into some of the eSports practices carried out in co-creational ecosystems.

Inspired by the model on institutionalizations and social construction processes by Larsen (2012, p. 128), the researchers have developed an illustration explaining the social construction process thoroughly. The illustration depicts how institutions in eSports may be created through social interactions. It can explain how eSports consumers influence each other and contribute to a shared worldview in an eSports ecosystem.

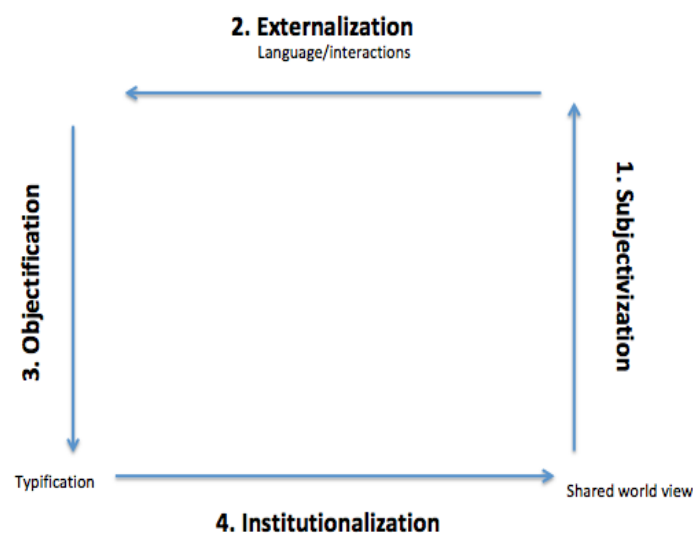


Illustration 3: The social construction process of eSports consumers

Each step of the illustration is explained below.

1. “Subjectivization”: The subjective process of interpreting the world and reality can be defined as subjectivization and this is the starting point of the social construction process. The subjectivization of reality is influenced by cognitive structures, such as the individual’s own world views and intentions (Larsen, 2012).
2. “Externalization”: When the individual's subjective interpretation of reality is externalized and shared with others through interactions and language, e.g. gaming lingo and terminology in eSports ecosystems, a process of externalization occurs. When this process takes place, other individuals - who may have different subjective world views beforehand - can react to it, and this is where others can be influenced towards an alteration in their subjective worldview (Larsen, 2012).
3. “Objectification”: After the world views have been externalized to others through the externalization process, a process of objectification starts. If other individuals adopt a similar world view and share common values, the subjective aspect is removed, which means that a “typification” is beginning to take place (Larsen, 2012). Typification is an in-between state that occurs when basic behaviors, language, terminology, or patterns of action are increasingly shared in a social setting, such as an eSports ecosystem. The elements become typical or characteristic of the ecosystem and become integrated into the ecosystem and its members (Larsen, 2012).
4. “Institutionalization”: Institutionalization is the final step in the social construction process. When typification has taken place, an institution is often created, in which numerous individuals legitimize and exercise similar values, beliefs, and world views, and where roles are clearly defined (Larsen, 2012).

In this project, the subjective world view of social constructivism allows an explorative approach when studying eSports ecosystems and contributes to the interpretation of social patterns, motivations, and meaning creation in the ecosystems.

3. Literature review

3.1 Defining “eSports”

With eSports as a growing phenomenon and eSports ecosystems as the context of exploration in this project, eSports will be defined by the researchers. First and foremost, “eSports” is short for “electronic sports”. Definitions of eSports differ in existing literature, as some define it as “organized video game competitions” (Funk, Pizzo & Baker, 2018) while others define it as “organized competitive video gaming” (Jenny, Keiper, Taylor & Williams, 2018). In this project, the concept of eSports is considered to go beyond organized competitions and also include streamers, who are professional and competitive in their own right without necessarily being related to specific competitions or eSports teams. The researchers acknowledge that eSports competitions, such as “Counter Strike: Global Offensive Majors” and “League of Legends LCS/LEC” tournaments, are an integrated part of the eSports ecosystems. Also, several individuals related to teams that compete in organized competitions often also broadcast their own streams individually.

However, the researchers believe that other streamers, who are not related to teams competing in competitions, are equally important parts of eSports ecosystems as a whole. These individual streamers are competitive in other ways: First and foremost, the most popular individual streamers are often highly ranked in the games’ individual ranking system and are competing to ascend the rankings. Moreover, the streamers are competing in terms of attracting and maintaining viewers and sponsorships. For these reasons, the researchers adopt the following definition of eSports: “eSports is the consumption of video games played in a professionalized and competitive context that may be broadcasted by the individual streamer or the organizer of a tournament.”

3.2 Strategy as practice

The topic of this review is practices in eSports ecosystems and the theoretical context in relation to “Strategy as Practice” (“SAP”) literature is focused on how practices are carried out in these ecosystems. The purpose of this review is to conceptualize SAP by drawing on existing SAP literature and identify what existing knowledge is relevant to the eSports topic and context. In terms of practice literature, it is built on a long trajectory of sociological thinking, but this literature review is focused on SAP literature. Practice theory will be defined and discussed, but its sociological underpinnings will not be reviewed in-depth. In terms of existing knowledge on the subject area, only three studies on social practices and consumption in eSports have been identified. Due to this research gap on the subject area, all studies relating to SAP are eligible for this review, but as this theoretical field consists of a large number of studies, the researchers have consistently assessed which studies are most relevant in relation to the topic and context of this research project.

Defining “practices”

As SAP is premised on practice theory (Vallaster & Wallpach, 2018, p. 987), the concept of “practices” should be defined prior to reviewing SAP literature to provide an understanding of the concept. As Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009) put it, defining the concept of practice can be a challenging task, as different definitions of the concept are used in the field of SAP research (p. 81). This project adopts the following definition proposed by Reckwitz (2002), but remains open to any later contributions or elaborations of this definition: “A *practice* is a routinized type of behavior which consists of several elements, interconnected to one other: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, *things* and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge” (p. 249). This definition builds on the main characteristics of practice theory, which draws on a family of theories that has been established by practice theorists such as Giddens, Bourdieu, and late Foucault. It is distinguished from classical types of social theory, which characterizes practice theory as a “a novel picture of the social and human agency” (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 244). In relation to agency, humans can be considered “carriers” of a practice, as humans have the agency to carry out practices (Reckwitz, 2002). The definition of practices by Reckwitz is highlighted in

later research, as it addresses the interrelated nature of the concept and brings “body, emotion and motivations into practices, which may not be consciously understood by the actor” (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009, p. 82).

As an example, playing football is a practice that consists of routinized bodily performances by the players (carriers). The bodily performances are closely connected to e.g. particular know-how and motivation to win the game. This way, playing football is a practice constituted by the routinized bodily and mental activities carried out by the players (Reckwitz, 2002, pp. 251-52). In an eSports setting, a practice could be a live stream broadcasted by a streamer on a platform featuring a live chat, in which users of the platform can interact. The users would then be the carriers of certain bodily (the action of typing comments) and mental activities (e.g. their know-how of the game and capability to understand the events taking place in the stream). Their motivation could be based on their conscious interest in the specific game that the streamer is playing, but it could also be based on things that are not consciously understood by the users.

Later studies discuss the complexity of defining practices due to the entangled and interrelated nature of the concept (Schatzki, 2006; Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009). As an example, an academic department is constituted by various interrelated practices such as grading, teaching, decision-making, research, etc. taking place within interconnected offices, classrooms, laboratories, etc. (Schatzki, 2006, p. 1864). Translating this to the context of an eSports ecosystems, a streaming platform could be considered a constitution of various interrelated practices such as streaming, managing a channel, interacting in live chats, consuming streaming content, advertising, etc. taking place within the interconnected sections of the streaming platform such as streamers’ specific channels and the different live chats.

From practices to strategy as practice

With the definition of practices in mind, the “strategy as practice” perspective would consider strategy as a routinized behaviour, which consists of certain interrelated bodily and mental activities in relation to strategy work. Put differently, SAP is concerned with strategy as something practitioners do rather than something an organization has (Jarzabkowski, Balogun &

Seidl, 2007). In earlier literature, the SAP perspective is concerned with the “strategizing” element of strategy i.e. how managers actually do strategy within an organization rather than how strategy is planned. The perspective is aimed at the managerial level, but instead of analyzing the organizational performance, it is concerned with how managers and consultants “act and interact in the whole strategy-making sequence” (Whittington, 1996, p. 732). In this early view on the SAP perspective, the strategizing capabilities of managers and consultants are based on their years of experience within the organization (Whittington, 1996), which could be examples of know-how and background knowledge.

The difficulty of defining strategic practices

A later study challenges the implications of micro-activities in the strategizing process as it poses the following question: “Are these visible practices really strategy-shaping? Or are they in fact the mere manifestations of an underlying unconscious pattern of dispositions that provides consistency to managerial actions” (Chia, 2004, p. 29). Considering the definition by Reckwitz (2002), this view on strategizing practices seems to emphasize the implications of unconscious factors such as motivations, understandings, and know-how, and argues that the performance of conscious bodily and mental activities are not strategy-shaping in themselves. Additionally, referring to any action as “strategic” implies that it “coheres within a greater scheme of things” (Chia, 2004, p. 29), which is arguably not visible in concrete activities. In this regard, “strategy” can be defined as “a situated, socially accomplished activity”, and “strategizing” as the “actions, interactions and negotiations of multiple actors and the situated practices that they draw upon in accomplishing that activity” (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007, pp. 7-8). These definitions suggest which actions should be considered “strategic”.

In terms of the underlying unconscious pattern that provides consistency to managerial actions, interactions, and negotiations, this could be explained by practice theory (Chia, 2004). However, it appears in SAP literature that the concept of practices is interpreted and applied differently (Chia, 2004). As an example, Whittington (2003) makes the following point: “The practice perspective is interested in situated, concrete activity. This is the work in boardrooms and awaydays, on phones and in front of the computer screens” (p. 119). This seems to emphasize

the importance of visible practices, but does not seem to recognize the underlying unconscious patterns that guide the managerial actions. In this regard, micro-activities must be understood in their wider strategic context, as previously discussed, but also in their wider social context, as “actors are not acting in isolation but are drawing upon the regular, socially defined modes of acting that arise from the plural social institutions to which they belong” (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007, p. 6). This perspective seems to resonate with the concept of practices, as “socially defined modes of acting” could be considered an unconscious mental activity, and it also seems to recognize the underlying unconscious pattern that guides managerial action. The social context and unconscious pattern that guide actions could be considered particularly relevant in the context of an eSports ecosystem, as practitioners within do not necessarily act in a strategic context.

From a managerial perspective to an eSports ecosystems context

In an eSports ecosystem such as a streaming platform, practitioners are arguably not acting, interacting, and negotiating for the purpose of accomplishing a strategic activity. As previously discussed, however, such an ecosystem can be considered a collection of practices in which practitioners act and interact through bodily and mental activities. From a SAP perspective, strategy is a dynamic process that emerges through everyday practices (Feldman & Wanda, 2011), such as the everyday practices of a streaming platform. In SAP literature, it is also evident that knowledge and understanding of observable practices can have managerial and strategic implications for commercial (Schau, Muniz & Arnould, 2009) and non-profit brands (Vallaster & Wallpach, 2018). Observable practices could also be identified in eSports ecosystems by examining e.g. a chat forum related to a stream. The concept of observable practices in recent studies are similar to the definition by Reckwitz (2002), as they comprise of behaviours such as practical activities, performances, and representations, and are defined as “implicit ways of understanding, saying, and doing things” (Schau et al., 2009, p. 31). The different behaviours, which could be compared to bodily and mental activities, are linked through:

“1) procedures—explicit rules, principles, precepts, and instructions, called “discursive knowledge”; (2) understandings—knowledge of what to say and do, skills and projects, or know-

how (i.e., tacit cultural templates for understanding and action); and (3) engagements—ends and purposes that are emotionally charged insofar as people are committed to them” (Schau et al., 2009, p. 31).

This perspective on the concept of practices has also been adopted by recent studies (Vallaster & Wallpach, 2018) and seems to resonate with the interrelated nature of practices, as previously discussed. In an eSports ecosystems context, certain streaming practices could be observed and their commercial implications discussed. As mentioned, prior studies have adopted a similar SAP approach in a commercial brand and non-profit brand context, but these are not exclusive, as a growing body of literature uses a SAP approach to identify observable practices and discuss the commercial implications. Compared to SAP literature that primarily engages with the SAP perspective in a strategic organizational context, the growing body of SAP literature suggests that the SAP perspective is also applicable in a strategic commercial context. This is evident on other studies, such as Echeverri and Skålén’s 2011 study on how value is co-created and co-destroyed in a public transport setting, and in Cheng, Olsen, Southerton and Warde’s 2007 study on how the practices of eating in the UK are dynamic based on observable practices from diaries. The concept of practices seems to be consistent in this body of literature, as both studies (and the study by Valaster and Wallpach, 2018) draw on elements from practice theory as proposed by Reckwitz (2002), and Schau et al. (2009).

In the context of an eSports ecosystem, existing literature within the commercially focused SAP literature suggests that commercial strategies can emerge from observable practices, such as eSports ecosystem practices, which consists of interrelated bodily and mental activities that involve procedures, understandings and engagements. As an example, a chat forum related to an eSports stream could consist of certain observable practices, such as participating in the chat conversations and playing the game, and practitioners, such as the chat participants, stream audience, and the streamer. These practices collectively constitute the specific stream in an eSports ecosystem, such as a streaming platform.

The potential research gap in SAP-oriented eSports literature

As mentioned earlier, all SAP literature has been eligible for this review, as a current gap seems to exist in SAP-oriented eSports literature, however, few recent studies have researched on eSports ecosystems from a practice perspective. One such study researched the viewing practices on Twitch. Based on in-depth interviews with engaged Twitch users, the study found that social interaction was a primary appeal, which was expected by the researchers. However, it was also found that the flexible engagement, which the streaming platform made possible, was a critical appeal, as it was often used as a background media. The findings are finally discussed in relation to other media technologies (Spilker, Ask & Hansen, 2020).

As the study focused exclusively on Twitch and its users' viewing practices, Spilker et al. (2020) reviewed previous literature on the streaming platform, in which they highlight a 2016 study, which found that different types of Twitch broadcasts exist. The study does not adopt a practice theory lens, but does use the concept "practices" on multiple occasions and concludes that practitioners can take the findings into account to "operate in a more effective and conscious way" (Gandolfi, 2016, p. 78). The findings of the study therefore appears to have practical implications within the eSports ecosystem of Twitch, which makes it eligible for this review. It was based on a quantitative approach, in which a group of Twitch users were surveyed, and Twitch streams with different audience sizes were observed. It found that three types of Twitch broadcasts exist: "the challenge", which focuses on competitive gaming and the streamer's abilities within the game, "the exhibition", which focuses more on the streamer's personal abilities than the game itself, and its interactions with the audience during breaks in gameplay, and "the exchange", in which the social tie between the streamer and the audience lead the highly interactive stream and motivates sharing of emotions and memories toward the game being played (Gandolfi, 2016). The quantitative methodology of the study above is evaluated by Spilker et al. (2020), as they argue how:

"Gandolfi's approach in combining analysis of content and interactions between broadcaster and audience seems fruitful in addressing different types of streams, and consequently the different forms of appeal they hold, they are still missing a key component: the experience of the users

themselves. [...] the quantitative approach is unable to parse out more complex meaning making processes, and how they entangle with practice.” (p. 608).

As mentioned, Gandolfi (2016) does use the term “practices”, but Spilker et al. (2020) also seem to recognize how the findings are not “entangled with practice”, as the quantitative approach does not provide an in-depth view on user experiences. Spilker et al. (2020) identify a research gap in this regard, as they argue that their qualitative study is “a much-needed contribution to the study of Twitch as a phenomenon” (p. 608). Gandolfi (2016) also invites future game and media studies and social scholars to “test and develop the suggestions reported above in order to refine and expand the perspective on Twitch.tv” (p. 78).

Despite the apparent lack of qualitative studies on eSports practices, another recent study adopts the practice theory lens for the purpose of understanding consumption practices within eSports. Firstly, it identifies eSports consumption practices; secondly, it illustrates the interrelated nature of such practices; and thirdly, it discusses how the interrelated practices increase understanding of eSports consumption. It was found that certain insights emerged from the interrelated practices of governing, watching, and playing eSports based on academic texts, popular media texts and non-participant observations at eSports events. The interrelated consumption practices and the insights that emerge from them are dynamically illustrated below. The gears indicate the developing and interrelated nature of the practices (Seo & Jung, 2016).

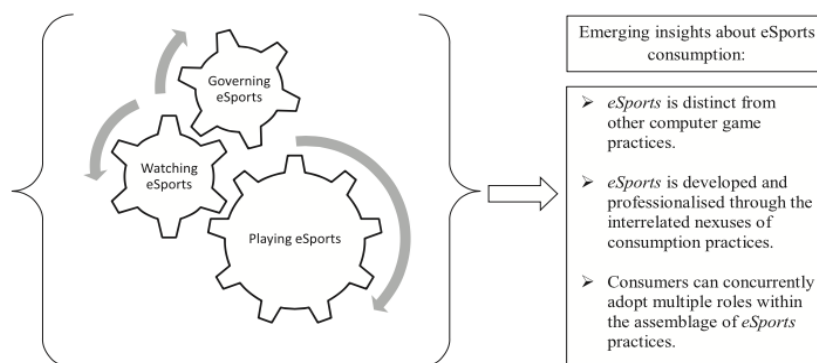


Figure 1. The assemblage of eSports practices.

(Seo & Jung, 2016, p. 649).

Finally, the emerging insights are discussed in relation to the broader development and professionalization of gaming. Similarly to Spilker et al., Seo and Jung (2016) recognize how future studies on eSports practices “should be explored to seek further conceptual understandings and empirical findings” (p. 651), which seems to emphasize the novelty of eSports practices research.

Future opportunities for research on eSports practices

Considering the two existing studies on eSports practices and the single study on Twitch broadcasts, which has some practical implications, it appears that eSports practices have not yet been studied from a commercial SAP perspective. The study by Seo and Jung (2016) seems to draw on SAP literature, as insights emerge from the assemblage of eSports practices that could have strategic implications, but they are discussed in a professional gaming development context, not in a strategic commercial one. The research by Spilker et al. (2020) does provide a qualitative study on eSports practices and user experience, but this is limited to passive viewer practices and experiences on Twitch, and is primarily discussed in relation to other media technologies. Finally, the quantitative study by Gandolfi (2016) identifies different types of streams, and users and streamer relationships, but the practical implications do not seem to be grounded in practice theory, and the user experience is naturally neglected due to the quantitative methodology.

All the studies seem to agree on the lack of qualitative studies on eSports practices. In the study by Spilker et al. (2020), the authors argue that their literature review of Twitch “did not uncover any studies qualitatively investigating audience or viewing habits to unpack what meanings and practices they involve” (p. 608) and eventually concludes that “there is a need for qualitative research on Twitch audiences and streaming audiences more broadly” (p. 617) and that “future research should not be so obsessed with ends or beginnings, but rather concentrate on investigating and conceptualizing the specters and specificities of participation” (p. 617). In the study by Gandolfi (2016), the author invites researchers to refine his findings through qualitative means. Finally, in the study by Seo and Jung (2016), the authors conclude that their research on eSports “illustrates the relevance and usefulness of social practices in exploring new avenues for understanding computer games” (p. 651).

Conducting a qualitative study on an eSports ecosystem such as Twitch could be a potential research opportunity, as it addresses some future research implications from previous studies. Drawing on practice theory, certain observable practices could be identified within a live stream chat where Twitch users are actively engaged and participate in interactions with each other and the streamer. Drawing on SAP theory and the assemblage of eSports practices framework by Seo and Jung (2016), different insights would emerge from the observable eSports practices on Twitch, which could then be discussed in a strategic commercial context. Such a study could explore the commercial aspect of eSports practices, as it currently seems to remain unexplored.

3.3 Co-creation

This review aims to identify how the concept of co-creation can be applied in the context of eSports practices. There seems to be a natural research gap in the academic field of co-creation in an eSports context, as only few studies addressing co-creation within eSports have been identified by the researchers. As a result, all existing literature on the concept of co-creation is eligible for this review, but due to the large amount of studies on co-creation, the researchers have continuously assessed which studies are most critical for this review. Additionally, the concept of “value creation” is often used in relation to co-creation literature, but this will not be reviewed in-depth. However, it will be defined for the purpose of clarifying the concept and its implications in the context of co-creation.

Defining “value creation”

The concept of value creation and its connection to co-creation is widely discussed in literature (Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2017). This project adopts the following view: “A new point of view is required, one that allows individual customers to actively co-construct their own consumption experiences through personalized interaction, thereby co-creating unique value for themselves” (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2003, p. 12). This view emphasizes how the perception of value creation may differ depending on perspective and context, implying that a co-creational process may result in different perceptions of value for e.g. the consumer and the firm in question.

The concept of co-creation

The key to unlocking new sources of competitive advantage is high quality interactions that enable an individual customer to co-create unique experiences with a company (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Informed, connected, empowered, and active consumers are increasingly learning that they too can extract a sense of value at the traditional point of exchange. Moreover, consumer-to-consumer communication and dialogue provide consumers with an alternative source of information and perspectives, making them less dependent on the communication of a firm (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). In this way, consumers can choose the companies that they wish to have a relationship with based on their individual views of how value should be created for them (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004).

Throughout the years, the concept of co-creation has often been mentioned in connection to company growth and value creation, e.g. as stated by Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004), who argue that the meaning of value itself and the process of creating it have shifted from a product- and firm-centric view to a more personalized consumer-oriented experience. In a more traditional system of value creation, a company decides the products and services as well as how these should be offered. According to Prahalad & Ramaswamy (2004), such a system makes the company dominant in terms of what is considered valuable to the consumer, undermining the active role of the consumer in the value creation process. A major reason for the shift from a firm-centric to a consumer-oriented view can be found in the proliferation of computers around the world, which contributes to the creation of ubiquitous connectivity between consumers (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004).

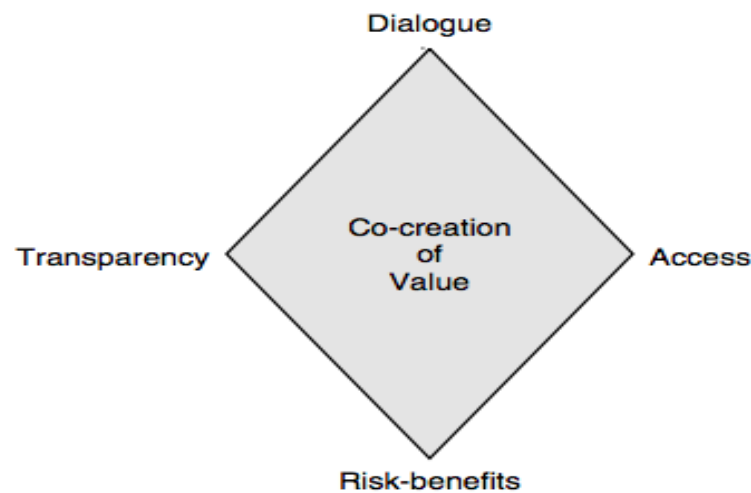
In connection to the shift from a firm-centric to a consumer-oriented view, consumers are not to be regarded merely as passive receivers, but instead as informed, networked, empowered, and active stakeholders who are increasingly co-creating value with a company (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Such a shift in the creation and exchange of value opens up new ways to approach a market, which means that the market begins to resemble a forum for conversation and interactions between consumers, consumer communities, and companies (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Thus, it is about “developing methods to attain a visceral understanding of

co-creation experiences so that companies can co-shape consumer expectations and experiences along with their customers'' (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004, p. 11). By exploring eSports ecosystems, e.g. streaming platforms, as forums for conversations and interactions between eSports consumers, the co-creation aspect is applicable to this study as it allows an exploration and understanding of the practices being carried out in these co-creational ecosystems.

To illustrate the concept of co-creation, Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) provide an example of a hospital patient in need of treatment. In this example, it is argued that a doctor who takes the individual and personal circumstances of each specific patient into account, in other words entering into a co-creating process, will contribute to a greater value outcome for the patient receiving the treatment. By entering the co-creational process, the doctor is showing genuine interest in the needs of the patient and helps create an environment and experience in which the individual patient is a core part of the treatment process. On the other hand, the patient would most likely also want to engage in the dialogue and process in order to understand the risks and benefits of different types of treatment, which makes it a jointly developed process between two sides (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). A similar example could be applied in the relatively unexplored context of eSports, as brands will arguably be able to co-create value with eSports consumers much more effectively if they initially acquire a deep understanding of their motivations and the practices that they carry out within the eSports ecosystems.

To illustrate the concept of co-creation even further, Prahalad & Ramaswamy (2004) present a model with four building blocks. The model demonstrates a DART system of interrelated elements, consisting of dialogue, access, risk-benefits, and transparency, and each element should be embraced equally by companies that seek to engage in co-creational processes with consumers. In short, dialogue is important since markets can be viewed as a set of conversations (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004), such as conversations and interactions between eSports consumers taking place on online gaming and eSports streaming platforms. From the perspective of a firm, it may be beneficial to put an effort into understanding the underlying mechanisms that influence the conversations and interactions, as they might reveal motivations and needs of eSports consumers. However, a meaningful dialogue is only possible when both sides are equal,

which requires access and transparency into the initiatives and, in the broadest sense, the thoughts of a firm (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Finally, if access and transparency is exercised and shared, the consumer can make an easier assessment of the risks and benefits related to a course of action or decision (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). The model and its four building blocks will be brought up again and elaborated on later in this literature review.



Building Blocks of Interactions for Co-creation of value (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004).

Co-creation through relations

Several other researchers share the view that value creation emerges from stakeholder engagement with a company (Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Hatch & Schultz, 2010). For instance, Vargo and Lusch (2004) present the perspective of a “service-dominant” (“S-D”) logic that distances itself from value creation through tangible resources, traditional transactions, and the exchange of physical goods. Instead, it is argued that intangible assets like relationships and the co-creation of value are more fundamental for economic exchange (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). The S-D view emphasizes the cultivation of relationships that involve customers in developing customized, competitively compelling value propositions to meet specific needs (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Hence, the co-creation of value is being placed in relation to stakeholders instead of a company or brand alone. Such an approach recognizes the potential of collaborating with and learning from customers, which complements Prahalad and Ramaswamy’s (2004) argument

about the market becoming a venue for proactive customer involvement in the process of value co-creation. Additionally, it implies that value “is defined by and co created with the consumer”, making marketing a process of doing things in interaction with the customer (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, pp. 6-7). In the context of eSports ecosystems, establishing a form of relationship with the eSports consumers might also be the first step in the process of co-creating value with and for them. In order to truly reach and resonate with consumers of eSports, it is essential to understand who they are, what drives them, and how to engage them in the best way.

Similarly to Vargo and Lusch (2004), Hatch and Schultz (2010) emphasize the role that consumers play in the creation of value for companies, highlighting the DART model presented by Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) described earlier. Moreover, Hatch and Schultz (2010) point to the fact that the concept of co-creation is an idea developed by researchers who were originally interested in user-driven product innovation. The co-creation efforts that were studied by researchers demonstrated a significant increase in value, which resulted in an increased level of attention to the phenomenon, especially in marketing, and more recently, branding disciplines (Hatch & Schultz, 2010). In regard to the DART model, Hatch and Schultz (2004) incorporate a brand co-creation perspective, adding ideas from branding literature to show how co-creation is relevant in branding situations. In terms of the dialogue building block of the DART model, it is argued that branding creates dialogue between consumer-consumer and consumer-company. As dialogue between consumer and company occurs, access and transparency to the company is achieved. According to Hatch and Schultz (2004), this transparency exposes the company to added risk since many others are able to get insight into the broader thoughts of the company. This risk, however, is necessary, as it enables the consumer to make an easier assessment of the risks and benefits related to a course of action or decision, as argued by Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004). Moreover, Hatch and Schultz (2010) argue that the focus of the literature and research on co-creation has previously only been placed on two stakeholder groups: the consumers and the marketers, adding that the work of describing how brands are co-created has barely begun (Hatch & Schultz, 2010).

The S-D logic mentioned above is supported by Merz, He, and Vargo (2009), who highlight this perspective and its focus on brand value as something that is being co-created between a firm and its stakeholders. Their research describes a brand as a collaborative, value co-creating activity of a company and all of its stakeholders (Merz et al., 2009), thereby moving away from the focus on value creation via tangible goods and physical products. Mertz et al. (2009) compliment the S-D logic, adding that consumers are endogenous to value creation, acknowledging that value is always “uniquely and phenomenologically” determined by the beneficiary (Mertz et al., 2009, p. 330). In this way, value should be approached and understood in relation to the context of networks that are part of dynamic ecosystems, including communities and other stakeholders (Mertz et al., 2009). According to Mertz et al. (2009), these ecosystems consist of individuals that constitute a collective, and these individuals co-create continuously through the contexts of their own lives. In a similar way, embracing the notion that eSports consumers are endogenous for value creation, more specifically that they are unique actors inside the eSports ecosystems, may hold several advantages for brands seeking to resonate with them. From the perspective of this project, the focus on networks and groups within dynamic eSports ecosystems seems to be particularly applicable. Through an exploration of these, the researchers expect to gain a deep insight into the motivations of the individuals that constitute the eSports ecosystems, especially in regard to their practices as well as their co-creation and understanding of meaning.

To support the notion of stakeholders being more than just passive receivers of value, Ramaswamy and Ozcan (2015) argue that there has been an evolution of the role of consumers, transforming them from being mere recipients of offerings to co-creators in the process of value creation. However, Ramaswamy and Ozcan (2015) also address the lack of a consensus on what value co-creation actually is, especially in relation to what constitutes an act of value co-creation besides the fact that it involves the active roles of individual consumers. As value creation is a two-sided phenomenon, involving stakeholding individuals such as consumers on one side and companies on the other, the perspectives of both sides should be taken into consideration when asking how brand value is co-created together (Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2015). In other words, the actual participation and involvement of the company and the consumers in co-creational actions

must be addressed to understand the processes better (Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2015). In this regard, Ramaswamy and Ozcan (2015) state that “actualized brand value is subjective and varies as a function of individuated co-creational experiences of brand value outcomes, which emerge from brand capability ecosystems” (p. 103), pointing to the fact that the digitalized world has granted both individuals and companies newfound capabilities in terms of co-creating.

Finally, Ramaswamy and Ozcan (2015) highlight the impact of the digitally-empowered consumers, arguing that these are challenging the traditional brand management orthodoxies that mainly focused on branding as a one way process. This view complements the argument about the shift from a product- and firm-centric view to a consumer-oriented experience, as presented by Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004). Instead, a more complex, multi-sided, and multi-stakeholder joint creational process is described. In this process, there is a deeper focus on managing the co-creational infrastructures across multiple channels of interaction in order to enable personalized co-creational experiences for stakeholders (Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2015). If consumers are digitally-empowered and if brands and actualized brand value are to be viewed as “subjective and varying as a function of individuated co-creational experiences [...] which emerge from brand capability ecosystems” (Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2015, p. 103), then eSports consumers could accordingly be included in that equation due to their nature of being digitally empowered. The digital empowerment that eSports consumers have is based on the fact that the majority of eSports consumption activities take place online, which arguably gives them a large amount of knowledge about digital experiences. This creates an opportunity for brands to co-create and personalize valuable experiences through such online channels.

The majority of the co-creation research appears to share a focus on the aspect of co-creation as something that is being carried out collectively rather than alone. Theory on co-creation highlights, in accordance with e.g. theory on brand meaning, that consumers are no longer considered as being passive receivers of a brand’s initiatives and communication, but rather, consumers are increasingly characterized by being actively involved in value co-creation processes. This shift has seemingly allowed for several opportunities to resonate with consumers and engage them in alternative ways, strengthened especially by the development in

digitalization resulting in digitally empowered consumers with greater influence on the way value is being produced by brands. In the context of eSports, another aspect worth emphasising is the focus on the networks and communities that are part of dynamic ecosystems. As this project aims to explore eSports ecosystems and the consumers that carry out practices within them, this aspect is applicable when exploring how individuals co-create meaning through online interactions.

Co-creation in an eSports context

As mentioned earlier, there seems to be a natural research gap in the academic field of co-creation in an eSports context, as only few studies addressing co-creation within eSports have been identified. One such study found that “the experience of eSports is co-created by multiple marketing actors, where the collaborative efforts of gaming companies, players, online communities, governing bodies, and many other stakeholders play important roles in enriching and sustaining the experiential value of eSports consumption” (Seo, 2013, p. 1543). In this way, Seo (2013) argues that co-creational processes are fundamental in eSports ecosystems and that the processes occur between different stakeholders within the ecosystem.

Additionally, Seo (2013) argues that further studies on eSports can “investigate empirically the specific strategic processes that underline value co-creation from the perspective of different marketing actors (e.g. computer-game companies, broadcasting stations, eSports communities, etc.)” (Seo, 2013, p. 1557).

3.4 Brand meaning

This part of the literature review aims to identify how the concept of brand meaning can be applied in the context of eSports practices and what factors influence the creation and development of brand meaning in this context. There seems to be a natural research gap in the academic field of brand meaning in an eSports context, as no prior studies addressing brand meaning within eSports have been identified at the time of writing. As a result, all existing literature on the concept of brand meaning is eligible for this review, but due to the large amount

of studies, the researchers have continuously assessed which studies are most critical for this review. Additionally, brand meaning has been investigated through different theoretical perspectives and approaches (Tarnovskaya & Biedenbach, 2018), however this project adopts the symbolic interactionist perspective. For this reason, other perspectives will not be reviewed in-depth.

Defining ‘meaning’

As this project explores how meaning is co-created in eSports ecosystems, a definition of the concept of “meaning” is presented. The concept of meaning is an abstract and social phenomenon discussed in literature (Wiley, 2016; Larsen, 2012; Pio-Abreu, Ferreira & Januário, 2015). Various descriptions and definitions of meaning have been presented, such as “the meaning of meaning depends on more fundamental ideas, such as the nature of reality” (Wiley, 2016, p. 1). Wiley (2016) moreover describes meaning as “attitudes and values” (p. 5). In social constructivism literature, meaning and the creation of meaning is defined as being constructed through individuals’ interactions and negotiation of reality (Larsen, 2012). In this way, the perception of reality differs from one individual to another and meaning is exchanged based on individual world views. Meaning is thereby a product of a social construction process, where the individual assigns meaning to situations and events based on social interactions (Larsen, 2012). Pio-Abreu et al. (2015) describe meaning as a basic concept for life: They argue that meaning relates to the meaning of life, meaning of words, and meaning of acts, and moreover they state that the etymological root of the word is “direction to an object” (p. 270).

Based on these different views, the researchers understand meaning as an inherently social concept which is subjectively interpreted based on attitudes and values constituting a direction towards an object.

The development of branding

Throughout the last century, the concept of branding has evolved from being a simple and stable entity, claiming producer ownership and working as a compound expression controlled by one actor, typically the producer, to become a multidimensional, dynamic, and complex entity

influenced by a variety of actors (Bastos & Levy, 2012). Branding has evolved from simply claiming ownership of a product to imply added value, as producer names eventually became connected with certain expectations, such as taste, quality, and persistence. Gardner and Levy (1955) explain early development as consumers moving from simply buying on the basis of a frequent and conscious notion to choosing brands on the basis of underlying consumer motivations. The authors introduce the thought of products being more than just a superficial unit with an already decided and fixed purpose to products having an additional subjective meaning for the consumer (Gardner & Levy, 1955). As Levy (1959) later explains: “People buy things not only for what they can do, but also for what they mean” (p. 118).

Motivations and attitudes towards brands are complex and cannot solely be understood by isolated firm-induced messages (Gardner & Levy, 1955). In addition to a product’s superficial and concrete function, the product may have both personal and social meaning for the consumer (Levy, 1959). Drawing upon this research, it is apparent that adding value and meaning to brands has been introduced in early academia and debated throughout the years. However, its connection to eSports ecosystems appears to be unexplored. With referral to Mead, Ligas and Cotte (1999) describe how meaning is constantly distributed into the world, e.g. through the marketing environment explained later, and moreover they argue that the consumer’s interpretation of meaning depends on two factors: Firstly, how the meaning is framed, and secondly, in what context it is delivered. In this project, brand meaning is to be regarded in the context of the co-creational ecosystems in which consumers carry out eSports practices to make meaning.

Defining “brand meaning”

This project understands brand meaning as a consumer’s meaning towards a brand based on individual values and interpretation, which is continuously created, developed and negotiated through dynamic and social processes (Ligas & Cotte, 1999; Tarnovskaya & Biedenbach, 2018; Berthon, Pitt, Campbell, 2009). Ligas and Cotte (1999) describe brand meaning in the following manner: “A brand does not simply signal a product’s utilitarian attributes; it can also have a particular meaning, which makes the product personally meaningful and intrinsically relevant for

the consumer” (p. 609). According to the argument above, brand meaning is very much subjective. Escalas and Bettman (2005) also articulate the individual aspect of brand meaning, as their basic premise is based on consumers to appropriate the meaning of brands in connection to their self-identity and self-image. Brand meaning is not controlled by the brand and brand managers only, as much of the brand meaning is created through a dialogue between consumers and not just between consumer and brand (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). Moreover, brand meaning may differ between consumers depending on their individual perception and interpretation of the world, which is largely based on personal traits of the consumers, such as background, values, and context (Berthon et al., 2009).

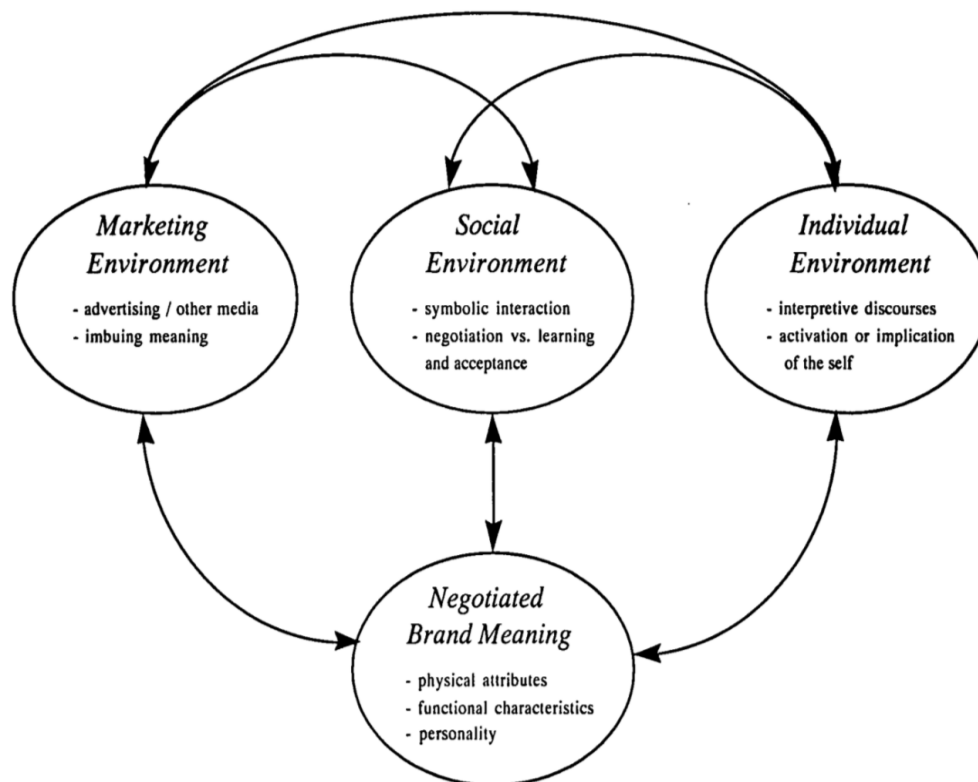
This line of thought is supplemented by Ligas and Cotte (1999), who argue that: “... in the case of branded products, their meanings within the marketplace arise not only from their physical and functional aspects, but also from the more symbolic characteristics (i.e., characterization). The product not only performs a specific act, but it also helps in identifying the consumer in a particular role” (p. 613). In this way, it is argued that brand meaning can influence consumption of specific brands, helping consumers express a desired self-image. Ligas and Cotte (1999) further describe that marketers aim to instill a certain meaning into products, which consumers interpret and subsequently create individual meanings upon. These interpreted meanings are not solely made up on the basis of the instilled meaning, but also on the basis of the individual’s life and context, including culture, social network, and background (Ligas & Cotte, 1999). In this way, several factors influence a consumer’s brand meaning.

Brand meaning is supplemented by sociological theory. Ligas and Cotte (1999) take a symbolic interactionist perspective on brand meaning creation, which is a sociological perspective. This project adopts the symbolic interactionist perspective as it provides a holistic view on brand meaning (Tarnovskaya & Biedenbach, 2018). The foundation of symbolic interactionism implies that people behave on the basis of their meanings, and these meanings are created through social interactions and are continuously transformed through processes of interpretation (Tarnovska & Biedenbach, 2018). Symbolic interaction implies that an object’s meaning, e.g. a branded product, arises from a negotiation process in a social group (Ligas & Cotte, 1999). In other

words, what a specific product means to the individual largely depends on the social group's perception of the specific product. Ultimately, symbolic interactionism implies that brand meaning is the result of a socially negotiated process (Ligas & Cotte, 1999).

Ligas and Cotte (1999) provide a framework for brand meaning creation, which is presented below. The framework illustrates that brand meaning is created, negotiated, and transformed through a dynamic interchange between three environments: Marketing, individual, and social (Ligas & Cotte, 1999, p. 611).

FIGURE 1
A Framework for the Brand Negotiation Process



(Ligas & Cotte, 1999, p. 611)

In the marketing environment, marketing managers create positioning tactics that make the brand recognizable and memorable while instilling a brand's intended brand meaning which is communicated through e.g. advertising campaigns (Ligas & Cotte, 1999; Tarnovska &

Biedenbach, 2018). In the individual environment, the consumer interprets the communicated brand meanings and links the brand to the consumer's own life situation. In the individual environment, the consumer is influenced by both the brand meanings expressed from the marketing environment as well as the meanings expressed in the social environment (Ligas & Cotte, 1999; Tarnovska & Biedenbach, 2018). In the social environment, the brand meaning is negotiated and altered in a social process. The individually interpreted brand meanings are brought into a social context, where the brand meaning is negotiated through social interactionism (Ligas & Cotte, 1999; Tarnovska & Biedenbach, 2018). As the framework illustrates, there is a dynamic and continuous interchange between the three environments, which results in a negotiation of brand meaning that simultaneously influences the three environments, indicating the interconnection between all four elements.

The three environments presented by Ligas and Cotte (1999) are expected to exist within eSports ecosystems, and moreover, it is expected that negotiation of brand meaning takes place in the ecosystems. Exploring an online eSports streaming platform such as Twitch, a consumer is likely to be exposed to branded messages from a streamer's content as well as a social environment in the form of the live chat all the while bringing one's own meaning into the ecosystem. While Ligas and Cotte (1999) argue that the marketing environment is controlled by the brand, Tarnovskaya and Biedenbach (2018) argue that consumers have instead become the primary source of meaning within marketing as a whole. Consumers produce their own consumption experiences, meanings, and narratives of consumption, which are not necessarily in connection with the brand nor related brand communities (Tarnovskaya & Biedenbach, 2018). Following these arguments, the role of the brand is undermined for the self-defined opportunistic goals from the consumers and the role of the brand in the marketing environment is diminished.

Berthon et al. (2009) share a similar view to Ligas and Cotte (1999) in terms of the brand meaning process, as they describe brand meaning as an ever going and ever shifting production and reproduction among multiple stakeholders and consider brand meaning a result of a co-creational process. Drawing on the theory of Escalas and Blackston, Berthon et al. (2009) argue that: "... consumers today are active in the co-creation of brand meaning. They do not simply

record the world, but create it, mixing in cultural and individual expectations as they construct their personal narratives. One might even view consumers as equity partners in the brand” (p. 357). This description of the brand meaning process supplements the interchange between the individual environment, where cultural and individual expectations play a role, and the social environment, where brand meaning is co-created. Again, the consumer role and the social environment are considered increasingly important in contrast to the brand role which is in some ways undermined.

Furthermore, Berthon et al. (2009) argue that multiple dissonant brand meanings often exist despite the brand sending consistent and simple marketing messages to its receivers. However, another study suggests that brand meanings can be relatively assonant despite multiple brand meanings existing in the minds of stakeholders (Wilson, Bengtsson & Curran, 2014). The findings of Wilson et al. (2014) further explain that minor differences in brand meanings among different stakeholders may be an advantage, as brands can leverage offerings to multiple target markets through them (Wilson et al., 2014). The reason for dissonant brand meanings is explained as a lack of understanding of the stakeholder groups’ knowledge bases. Therefore, to obtain assonant brand meanings across different stakeholder groups, a mutual knowledge base must exist (Berthon et al., 2009).

The knowledge base of the stakeholders is generally overlooked (Berthon et al., 2009). Assonance of meaning between sender and recipient will only be achieved when both parties share a mutual knowledge base. Consumers are engaging in dialogues beyond the specific organization, including other consumers, and thereby the consumers co-create mutual beneficial brand meaning. This underlines how brand meaning is created in an ever-going interchange between many different stakeholder groups that affect each other and subsequently the brand meaning. The stakeholder groups have different knowledge bases and brand meanings, which organizations need to understand to co-create assonant brand meaning (Berthon et al., 2009). However, within a specific stakeholder group, multiple meanings still exist: ”Different consumers construct multiple meanings depending on their personal background, social variables, context of consumption and frames of reference” (Berthon et al., 2009, p. 357).

The social environment and social groups

The previously described social environment plays a major role in brand meaning creation and development, as it is in social settings that consumers are most likely to express their individual meanings towards others (Ligas & Cotte, 1999). Brand meaning is first and foremost expressed in social situations, e.g. through verbal and online communication, and an individual non-expressed brand meaning has little interest. As Ligas and Cotte (1999) describe: “What the individual thinks about the brand’s meaning holds little value if it cannot be effectively communicated in the social environment” (p. 613). Moreover, social groups are present in most social environments. Social groups are a major influence for the individual in determining how one will behave and what meaning takes place in the specific social setting (Ligas & Cotte, 1999). Escalas and Bettman (2005) also underline the role of social groups related to the development of brand meaning. When evaluating one’s own beliefs in the world, consumers often use other consumers as sources of information, especially those with similar beliefs (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). In the context of eSports, it is expected that users of Twitch will use each other as sources of information and thereby influence each other, as they arguably share a common interest in the eSports ecosystems.

The group that a consumer resonates with has a major influence on accepting and adopting brand meaning. If the meanings from a brand are consistent with an ingroup, in other words the group in which the consumer belongs, the consumer is likely to accept these meanings. However, if the meanings from a brand are inconsistent with the ingroup, the consumer is likely to reject the meaning (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). As Escalas and Bettman (2005) explain: “When outgroup members use a brand, consumers may form associations about the brand that they would not like to have transferred to themselves” (p. 379). In this way, the consumption of an outgroup can negatively influence brand meaning for individuals belonging to a different group.

Brand meaning in an eSports context

As mentioned above, users might use each other as sources of information in the eSports ecosystems, e.g. through interactions in the chats related to a streaming platform. Moreover, the streamers broadcasting on the platforms may also be used as sources of information, as they

might also interact with the users in the chat in different ways. However, the streamers may have increased influence on the users and their brand meanings as they can be considered the centre of attention on the stream, thereby functioning as facilitators of the stream and the chat. Ligas and Cotte (1999) describe how brand meaning can be conveyed through brand personalities, which they exemplify with celebrity endorsement. Obvious brand personalities in eSports ecosystems are streamers. Ligas and Cotte (1999) describe it as using an individual to effectively communicate a branded product: “Not only is the personality negotiated in the social environment so that the product can be effectively communicated with others, but negotiation also takes place in the individual environment, between the consumer and the branded personality (i.e., how the consumer envision a unique relationship with the product)” (p. 613). The streamer may even be considered a branded personality, despite having no sponsorship agreements, e.g. by answering questions from the live chat on branded products.

It can be argued whether streamers can be compared to celebrities, but recent research suggests that streamers can be considered “influencers” despite not necessarily being celebrities (Woodcock & Johnson, 2019). Influencers can arguably be regarded as human brands in their own right, working to build a perceived interconnectedness with their followers, which may result in intimate relationships through which consumer loyalty can be maintained (Driel & Dumitrica, 2020). In a study on the practice of blogging, Christensen and Erz (2019) explore how bloggers may transform into influential actors and conceptualize themselves as brands, influencing their readers in different ways (Christensen & Erz, 2019). This may arguably also be the case with eSports streamers and their viewers.

When exploring brand meaning in the context of eSports ecosystems, a digital perspective must be drawn upon as eSports is digital by nature. The process of brand meaning within a digital environment adds a layer of complexity and unpredictability, which previous research does not address (Tarnovskaya & Biedenbach, 2018). Brand meaning creation and development takes place across a range of digital platforms, where several stakeholders engage actively and instantly in brand meaning negotiation. With easy access to digital platforms and wide-ranging exposure of expressions on these, stakeholders can interfere with other stakeholder groups

(Tarnovskaya & Biedenbach, 2018). Explorative studies on brand meaning specifically on an eSports streaming platform have previously not been carried out despite the apparent potential of brand meaning processes taking place on e.g. a streaming platform.

4. Methodology

This chapter provides reasoning for choosing relevant research approaches to explore the topic and answer the research question in the best way. Initially, “table 2” illustrates an overview of the methodological and methodical choices of the project. In short, the ontology of the project relates to the assumptions that the researchers have about reality and how the world is perceived. In the context of the research in this project, the subjective ontology implies that realities and worldviews may differ from individual to individual. The researchers thereby acknowledge that their interpretation of the data collected in the project is subjective and may differ from other researchers’ interpretation, as other researchers may have their own view of how reality and meaning is constructed. Thereby, the ontological assumptions shape the way in which the researchers see and study the research objects (Saunders, Lewis, Thornhill & Bristow, 2016), while the epistemology depicts the way the researchers obtain knowledge about reality and the topic being explored, such as through the specific methods chosen for the project.

Ontology	Subjective, socially constructed
Epistemology	Interpretative, observational
Research approach	Explorative, inductive
Methods	Qualitative: Netnography, depth interviews

Table 2: Methodological choices of the project

4.1 Research approach

The explorative study

This research is qualitative and exploratory in nature. The basic aim of such an approach is to extend the researchers' field of acquaintance with complex cases of the real world and become more familiar with them (Stebbins, 2011). In this project, the complex cases are the co-creational practices being carried out in eSports ecosystems and the creation of meaning in these. In this regard, the use of an exploratory approach is particularly applicable when studying a group, process, activity, or situation that have received little or no systematic empirical scrutiny (Stebbins, 2011), such as practices within eSports ecosystems, which means that this project is inductively working towards the generation of new ideas and finally weaving them together (Stebbins, 2011).

A flexible and open-minded attitude is applied in the project, as an exploratory approach emphasizes ideas emerging from looking into data (Stebbins, 2011). Thereby, the exploratory approach compliments the social constructivist perspective, as this paradigm also adopts a similar open-minded view (Larsen, 2012). This research explores the underlying mechanisms and motivations that influence the practices of eSports consumers by working with these two approaches together and combining the knowledge of many different sources.

Social experiences and lived realities are multi-dimensional and the understanding of these phenomena may be weakened if they are viewed along a single continuum only (Barbour, 2008). For this reason, method triangulation is used to increase the validity of this research and uphold the depth necessary to uncover the research question. Using different qualitative methods in the study of one specific topic is an attempt to provide parallel insights into the experiences of different stakeholders (Barbour, 2008), such as the experiences of individuals that carry out eSports practices and create meaning through online interactions. Moreover, applying complementary qualitative methods can help with the identification of potential different aspects and experiences of these stakeholders (Barbour, 2008). In this way, method triangulation provides the study with multi-faceted dimensions due to the combination of different qualitative

approaches (Barbour, 2008), which allows a deeper insight into the co-creational practices that take place within eSports ecosystems.

The analytic strategy for this study is inductive, which is a method that involves an open approach to the data and noticing patterns as the researchers obtain more knowledge on the topic (Yin, 2014). By taking on an inductive approach, the logic is to go from specific observations, of e.g. eSports consumers, to new knowledge. In other words, theory follows data and not the other way around, as what would be the case if a deductive strategy was applied (Saunders & Thornhill, 2017). By applying an inductive approach, the researchers are particularly concerned with the contexts in which eSports practices take place, as a study of these elements allows for an understanding of how the practices are carried out. In terms of data, the qualitative data collected are used to explore one or more phenomena with the intention of identifying themes and patterns and ultimately creating a conceptual framework or new theory (Saunders & Thornhill, 2017).

5. Methods

The interplay between the different methods and the data collection processes will be outlined with emphasis on how they compliment the methodological choices of the project.

5.1 Primary data

This project relies on primary to answer the research question. Primary data are sets of data originated by the researchers for the specific purpose of addressing the topic of study. In other words, the primary data of this research are the sets of data retrieved from respectively the netnographic approach and the depth interviews. These two methods of primary data collection were considered necessary in order to thoroughly explore the practices and meaning creation in eSports ecosystems due to the observation that these phenomena remain a relatively unexplored field in academia. Naturally, this implies a lack of already established data for the researchers to rely on.

5.2 The netnographic approach

The netnographic approach is defined as a form of ethnography taking place on the internet, adopting research techniques from the ethnographic approach to study cultures and communities emerging through computer-mediated communications (Kozinets, 2002, p. 62). Kozinets defines it as ‘‘a marketing research technique that uses information that is publicly available in online forums to identify and understand the needs and decision influences of relevant online consumer groups’’ (Kozinets, 2002, p. 62). Hence, netnography provides the opportunity to study the ‘‘tastes, desires, and other needs of consumers who interact in online communities’’ (Kozinets, 2002, p. 62), such as users interacting with each other on Twitch.

An understanding of practices and meaning creation within eSports ecosystems is achieved by applying a netnographic approach to study eSports consumers (Kozinets, 2002). As the arrival of networked computing has provided new opportunities for market-oriented consumer interaction, a chance to study online consumers has naturally followed (Kozinets, 2002). Thereby, applying the netnographic approach allows an exploration of the online interactions taking place in co-creational ecosystems of eSports, such as Twitch.

The observations are unobtrusive in nature, as the interactions are not happening within a context fabricated by the researchers, and since the researchers do not participate actively in the chats and interactions taking place on the platform (Kozinets, 2002). In this instance, the researchers could have participated by engaging in conversations with users of Twitch, e.g. by asking questions and responding to comments. However, in line with the inductive and explorative approach of this project, the researchers aimed to stay open and unobtrusive to the subject being observed, and for this reason participation was omitted. In this regard, it should be noted that the researchers acknowledge that the project adopts a netnographic approach rather than conducting a netnographic study.

With a starting point in user interaction on Twitch, the netnographic approach will provide insights into some of the underlying mechanisms that influence and guide naturally occurring behavior between users, which would otherwise not be found through traditional ethnography

tools such as focus groups (Kozinets, 2002). Hence, it is expected that taking a netnographic approach to the observation of eSports consumers will result in insights that can be discussed and related to the commercial and strategic perspective of the research question.

5.3 Data collection of the netnography

Selection of online platform

When deciding the specific online platform to investigate, Kozinets (2002) argues that five criteria should be taken into consideration when selecting an online platform for the netnographic approach:

1. A more focused and research question-relevant segment, topic, or group.
2. Higher traffic of postings.
3. Larger numbers of discrete message posters.
4. More detailed or descriptively rich data.
5. More between-member interactions of the type required by the research question.

(Kozinets, 2002, p. 63).

Twitch arguably meets these criteria for the following reasons:

1. Twitch is a streaming platform for gaming and eSports making it a part of the eSports ecosystem. On this platform, eSports consumers can interact with each other via a chat feature, which can provide insights in terms of how practices are carried out. Therefore, Twitch has a research question-relevant segment, topic, and group.
2. Being the world's leading streaming platform by hours watched from online users in total (Weiss, 2019), it is expected that Twitch is the gaming and eSports platform with the highest traffic of postings in terms of comments submitted by users during streaming sessions. The high traffic of postings gives access to large amounts of data, and it is expected that the majority of these postings will contribute to insights into the practices carried out between consumers.

3. User names on Twitch are chosen by the users themselves, allowing for anonymity and discrete message posting. In this context, anonymity means writing online using a name that has no associations to one's civil identity. The state of being anonymous could function as a protective barrier, influencing the way that users communicate with each other, and in that way encourage them to express themselves however they want.
4. It is expected that the comments submitted by Twitch users will take the following different forms: full sentences, abbreviations, words, and isolated letters. Regardless of the types of comments, it can be argued that they are all descriptively rich in the context of this study. As an example, a comment consisting of an isolated letter or an abbreviation can be just as descriptive as a full sentence, as it holds a certain meaning deriving from the language and terminology applied in the meaning creation processes in eSports. Therefore, it is expected that Twitch holds descriptively rich data regardless of the comment forms.
5. The research question of this project does not require a certain type of between-member interaction. In line with the inductive and explorative research approaches, one type of between-member interaction is not prioritized over another. The netnographic approach aims to unobtrusively explore Twitch users' interactions as means to understand the eSports practices and meaning creation carried out on and created within Twitch.

The netnographic approach of this project consists of observations of three different streamers, each playing a different game while broadcasting the sessions live on the streaming platform Twitch. 1,000 comments posted by Twitch users in the live chat logs related to each streaming session were retrieved, which amounts to 3,000 comments in total. This approach allowed the researchers to gain insight into some of the conversations, interactions, and patterns of meaning creation that are being exchanged on the online streaming platform Twitch.

From eSports tournaments to solo-streamers on Twitch

Prior to collecting data from live chats on Twitch, it was expected that there would be some differences in the content of the user comments. Specifically, the comments could differ in terms of how they are expressed in the chat. In this regard, the comments during a stream of a live

eSports tournament were expected to be more descriptive of the eSports ecosystems compared to comments related to a single streamer playing on his or her own. An organized live eSports tournament would have several teams and players participating at the same time, which could potentially attract a larger amount of viewers resulting in a higher traffic of postings.

The most watched titles on Twitch arguably reflect the most popular eSports games. In 2019, the top five list of the most viewed games on Twitch in terms of hours watched included League of Legends, Counter Strike: Global Offensive, and Fortnite (Weiss, 2019). Initially, it was decided that the data would be collected from live chats during eSports tournaments on Twitch, as it was expected that these comments would provide potentially insightful data. With this starting point, 1,000 comments were collected from three different live eSports tournaments within the games Counter-Strike: Global Offensive, League of Legends, and Fortnite (table 3). The comments are collected from the live chats by continuously extracting them as they appear in real-time and adding them to a separate sheet (appendix 1, 2, & 3). As an example, the data collection of a CS: GO eSports tournament is visualized below:

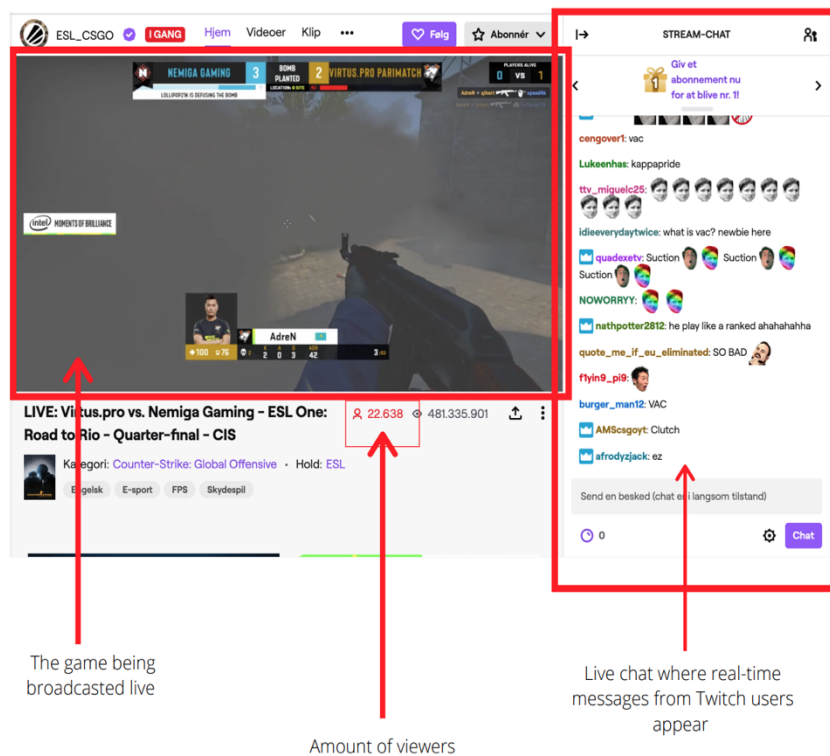


Illustration 4: Data collection from a CS: GO eSports tournament on Twitch.

Streaming platform: Twitch		
Name of event	Game played	Comments retrieved
IEM Katowice 2020: 100 Thieves vs mousesports	Counter Strike: Global Offensive	1,000
Fortnite Champion Series Season X Grand Finals	Fortnite	1,000
LEC Spring Split (2020): Week 5, Day 2	League of Legends	1,000

Table 3: Data collection from eSports tournaments

The games were selected on the basis of popularity and thereby an expectation of higher traffic of postings, combined with the researchers' familiarity with the games and thereby a pre-understanding of the games' lingo and mechanics. After a process of exploring the 1,000 comments of each eSports tournament, it became apparent that the content was not sufficiently descriptive in terms of how meaning is created in the ecosystem of Twitch. As expected, a large number of viewers were present in the stream during the data collection. The vast amount of viewers resulted in a high frequency of postings in the chat. The postings had no or limited relation to the actual eSports event taking place or to the eSports ecosystems in general. The majority of these comments were limited to single emotes - small expressive images used in eSports streaming - and thereby not demonstrating any form of interaction between the users of Twitch. In other words, most of the comments lacked analytical substance in the context of this study.

Based on this iteration of 3,000 comments from eSports tournaments, the researchers assessed that this data could not provide an in-depth understanding of the practices carried out in an eSports ecosystem. Instead, the researchers carried out a new similar data collection from three individual streamers' channels (appendix 4, 5, & 6). An individual streamer is usually

broadcasting the streaming session on his or her own personal channel and has the chat at his or her disposal, in contrast to eSports players during eSports tournaments that are broadcasted by an organization. As a result, the solo streamer was expected to be likely to interact more with the users in the chat. Thereby, they were also expected to attract smaller audiences compared to eSports tournaments. In this regard, it was expected that the frequency of postings would be lower, which heightens the opportunity for users to interact with each other, as comments remain on-screen for a longer duration of time. Similarly to the data collection from the three eSports tournaments, 3,000 comments in total were collected from three individual streamers' channels. The data collection of the individual streamer's broadcast is visualized below:

Streaming platform: Twitch		
Name of streamer	Game played	Comments retrieved
Stewie2k	Counter Strike: Global Offensive	1,000
Tfue	Fortnite	1,000
Gosu	League of Legends	1,000

Table 4: Data collection from individual streamers' channels

5.4 Netnographic coding process

After collecting data from Twitch, a qualitative coding process was developed for the purpose of identifying themes that are practiced in the social reality (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009, p. 328) of eSports consumers. "Figure 1" serves as a visualization of the first step of this process, which outlines the method used to code the data. The researchers work inductively by completing two individual iterations followed by two group discussions. The inductive analysis takes place as the researchers discover patterns and themes emerging from the data (Patton, 2002, p. 542) while completing the first iteration. By doing multiple iterations, however, the researchers

progressively develop codes deductively, as new codes are identified with the findings in mind (Patton, 2002, p. 542). The process is illustrated below:

Netnographic coding process

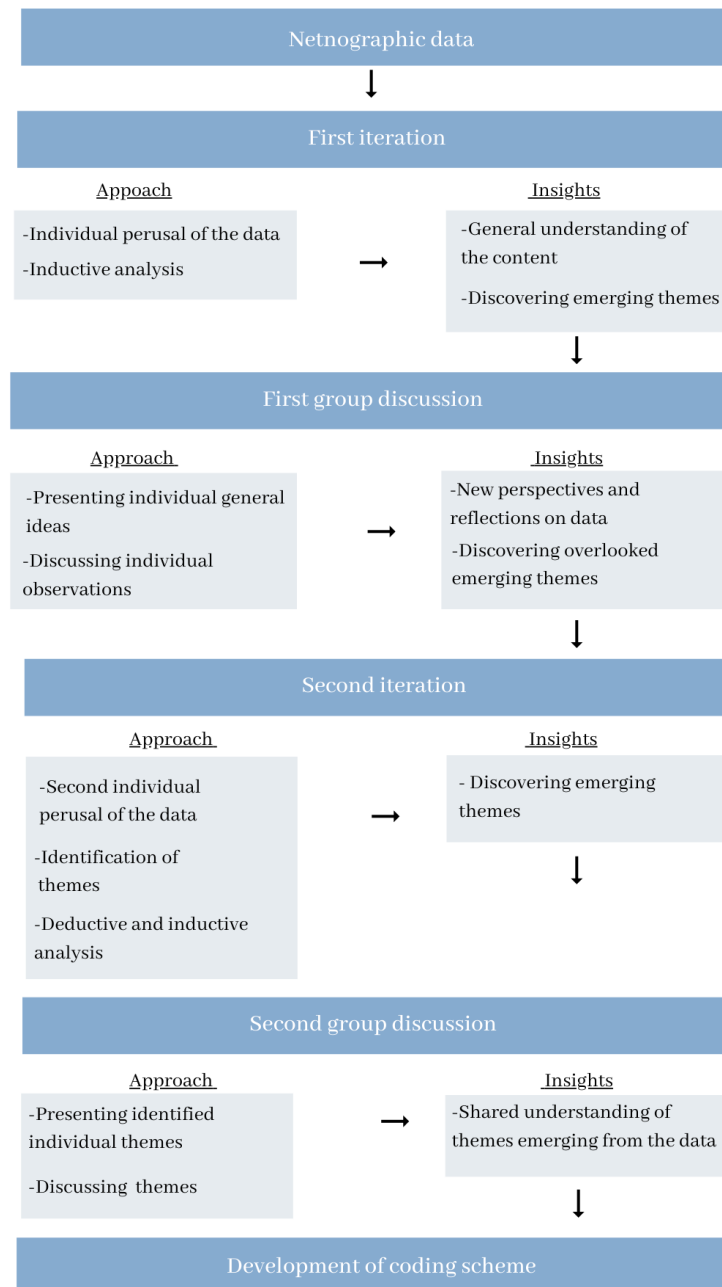


Figure 1: Netnographic coding process

Elements of the coding process

“Netnographic data” represents the data collected from Twitch, amounting to a data set size of 3,000 comments posted in the chats by Twitch users.

“First iteration” represents the first individual analysis of the data. In this section, the researchers read exploratively through the data to discover general themes and gain a general understanding of the data. During the initial coding of this section, the researchers should remain open to all theoretical directions that the reading may entail, as it shapes the ensuing analysis (Charmaz, 2014).

Secondly, the themes are shared among the researchers in the “first group discussion” to confirm individual understandings and discovered themes and provide new perspectives on the data. This process seeks to identify indicators of consistency in the collected data, and furthermore it ensures that the researchers share a common understanding of the following iteration. This prior understanding is applied in “the second iteration”, in which the data is explored again with the observations of the other researchers in mind.

In the “second group discussion”, the researchers present their individually identified themes and discuss which themes are emerging from the data. This process enables the development of a coding scheme, which is introduced during the analysis chapter when the process is completed.

5.5 Depth interviews

By conducting depth interviews, the researchers are able to gain an in-depth understanding of a topic that the informant is familiar with and able to speak about due to a personal interest in that topic (Belk, Fischer, & Kozinets, 2012). The topic being explored is usually something important in the informant’s life, which means that they can be encouraged to reveal reflections about the topic (Belk et al., 2012). The depth interview is particularly concerned with the flow of the conversation, and navigating between different topics is considered more natural than challenging. However, this does not mean that the interviews of this study do not have any

questions formulated beforehand, but the researchers pay attention to the conversation and its natural shifts between topics rather than following a fixed order of questions (Belk et al., 2012).

The in-depth understanding gained from the interviews enables this research to uncover hidden meaning processes between users of eSports. The informants are treated as experts within eSports whereas the interviewers are stripped from any previous knowledge and solely focus on the interviewees' life-worlds. However, this does not mean that the researchers should avoid demonstrating any sign of shared understanding of the topic being explored, but focus should be on learning from the informants rather than trying to push them in a certain direction (Belk et al., 2012). To explore the interviewees' lives through knowledge of eSports, the researchers constructed a semi-structured interview guide, which the interviewee at all times could deviate from. The interview guide is presented later in this chapter.

Each interview lasts approximately 60 minutes, which was considered necessary in order to cover all the relevant perspectives and give the interviewees time to talk at their own pace. The transcriptions of the interviews can be found in appendix 10, 11, and 12. The specifics of the interviews are listed below:

Interviews		
Interviewee	Interview length	Date of interview
Anonymous, interviewee 1	51:17	2020-04-15
Anonymous, interviewee 2	64:14	2020-04-17
Anonymous, interviewee 3	66:21	2020-04-15

Table 5: Overview of interviews

In an explorative study, complementing the netnographic approach and subsequent analysis with semi-structured qualitative interviews also opens up for potential new or complimenting

interpretations of the explored subject (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). To complement the netnographic approach, hearing first-hand from individuals that engage regularly in eSports ecosystems can provide deeper apprehension of the netnographic observations. This will enable the researchers to further explore the patterns discovered throughout the netnography, such as underlying motivations for engaging in eSports ecosystems. Moreover, in line with the inductive and explorative approach, the researchers remain open to new perspectives presented during the interviews.

Purposive sampling of interviewees

Three consumers of gaming and eSports streaming platforms were selected for the interviews. The three interviewees had a regular use of streaming platforms within gaming and eSports in common. However, they slightly differed from each other in terms of familiarity and engagement with the live chats related to the streaming sessions. By choosing three interviewees, it was expected that the findings of the netnographic approach would be complemented with personal views and experiences that emerge when using streaming platforms.

When selecting the interviewees, a list of specific criteria was made. It should be noted that by choosing three interviewees based on a specific set of criteria, the researchers risk a process of purposive sampling. The purposive sampling technique is characterized by being a non-random and deliberate choice of interviewees due to the qualities that the interviewees have (Tongco, 2007). Purposive sampling involves an inherent bias when selecting the interviewees, as the research question that the researcher is trying to answer has influence on informant selection. Also, purposive sampling is used when time and resources are too limited for random sampling (Tongco, 2007), which was the case in this project due to the COVID-19 situation, as it presented challenges in terms of finding interviewees as well as meeting with them.

The risk of purposive sampling is that the researcher may be likely to exercise judgement on the informant's knowledge beforehand, and then use this judgement in the selection process (Tongco, 2007). Ultimately, this implies that the interviewees are carefully selected for the project and that they are highly knowledgeable about eSports ecosystems. The interviewees have

been purposively selected, as it is expected that the interviewees have distinct opinions on the topic and are familiar with eSports practices, which will help to answer the research question. Despite the risks related to purposive sampling, the researchers decided to select interviewees based on a set of criteria rather than selecting them randomly, to ensure a relation to and further exploration of the netnographic observations. Therefore, it was found necessary to interview individuals with a high level of engagement in eSports ecosystems and hereby enable an exploration of underlying motivations related to eSports consumption.

In short, the criteria focused on different levels of engagement in gaming and eSports streaming platforms. The criteria ensures that the interviewee is: 1) a consumer of eSports, 2) has extensive experience with eSports and streaming platforms, 3) is familiar with the live chat feature of streaming platforms, and 4) has engaged with the live chat at some point during its eSports consumption.

A description of the selected interviewees is provided below:

Interviewee 1	Interviewee 2	Interviewee 3
Uses streaming platforms regularly and follows the chat, but does not participate in the chat.	Uses streaming platforms regularly, participates in chat often, and has great familiarity with the chat.	Uses streaming platforms regularly and occasionally participates in the chat.

Table 6: Interviewee descriptions

As finding an active contributor to the Twitch chat turned out to be relatively challenging, the researchers made use of a social media group dedicated to eSports. In this group, a post offering a small amount of in-game currency was shared, which resulted in several inquiries. After a brief conversation with the seemingly most relevant interviewee, it was determined that “interviewee 2” met the criteria presented by the researchers.

The interview guide

The interview guide can be found in appendix 19. It has been structured on the basis of Kvale and Brinkmann's (2015) literature on qualitative semi-structured interviews. When preparing the interviews, Kvale and Brinkmann's (2015) outline of two interview guides is followed, ensuring that one interview guide answers the research question and that the other undertakes an everyday language to make the interviewees feel safe (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). For this reason, the research questions of the interview guide were translated to a more easily understandable language, for instance by leaving out complex formulations and theoretical terms; however, without removing the actual explorative focus of the questions. Instead, the language used involved common gaming lingo that the interviewees were expected to be familiar and comfortable with.

A funnel technique, also called a ladder technique, was applied when preparing the interview guide (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). This technique is characterised by having a slightly more indirect approach, i.e. by initially asking broad questions that serve more as conversation starters than actual insight generating (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). An example of the use of this technique can be found in the interview guide of the study, which starts out by asking more generally about the interviewees' relationship to gaming and eSports as well as what it means for them personally. The purpose of initiating the conversation in this way is to work from a general starting point, and then dig deeper into the subject and gain more knowledge as the interviews proceed (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Also, in line with the explorative approach, an emphasis was put on encouraging the interviewees to verbalize examples from their experiences in the eSports ecosystems.

Each interview was recorded with consent from the interviewees and subsequently transcribed (appendix 10, 11 & 12). Due to the COVID-19 crisis, which is elaborated on in the limitations section, the interviews were conducted through Skype. Despite the fact that most of the lingo and expressions within eSports are in English, the interviews were carried out in Danish. This choice was made primarily because all three interviewees were Danish. It was also determined that the interviews would be carried out individually, meaning that each researcher conducted one

interview each instead of doing them collectively. Once again, the reason for this was that talking to three different interviewers on Skype at the same time could likely overwhelm the interviewee. Moreover, it was expected that potential technical and communicative challenges would be easier to overcome on a one-to-one basis.

5.6 Interviews coding process

The coding procedure includes two different procedures to ensure validity. Firstly the interviews were coded through a color coding process, followed by an emic coding procedure. Each coding procedure is described in detail below.

Color coding process

Each interview was coded by using a color-coding approach (appendix 13, 14 & 15) and subsequently categorized into a scheme based on their color categories (appendix 16, 17 & 18). The purpose of this approach is to provide a general overview of the most prominent perspectives presented by the interviewees by categorizing them. Similarly to the coding of the netnographic observations, this color coding process will be divided into four stages aimed towards identifying main categories across the interviews. An outline of the color coding and categorization process is visualized on the next page.

Interviews color coding process

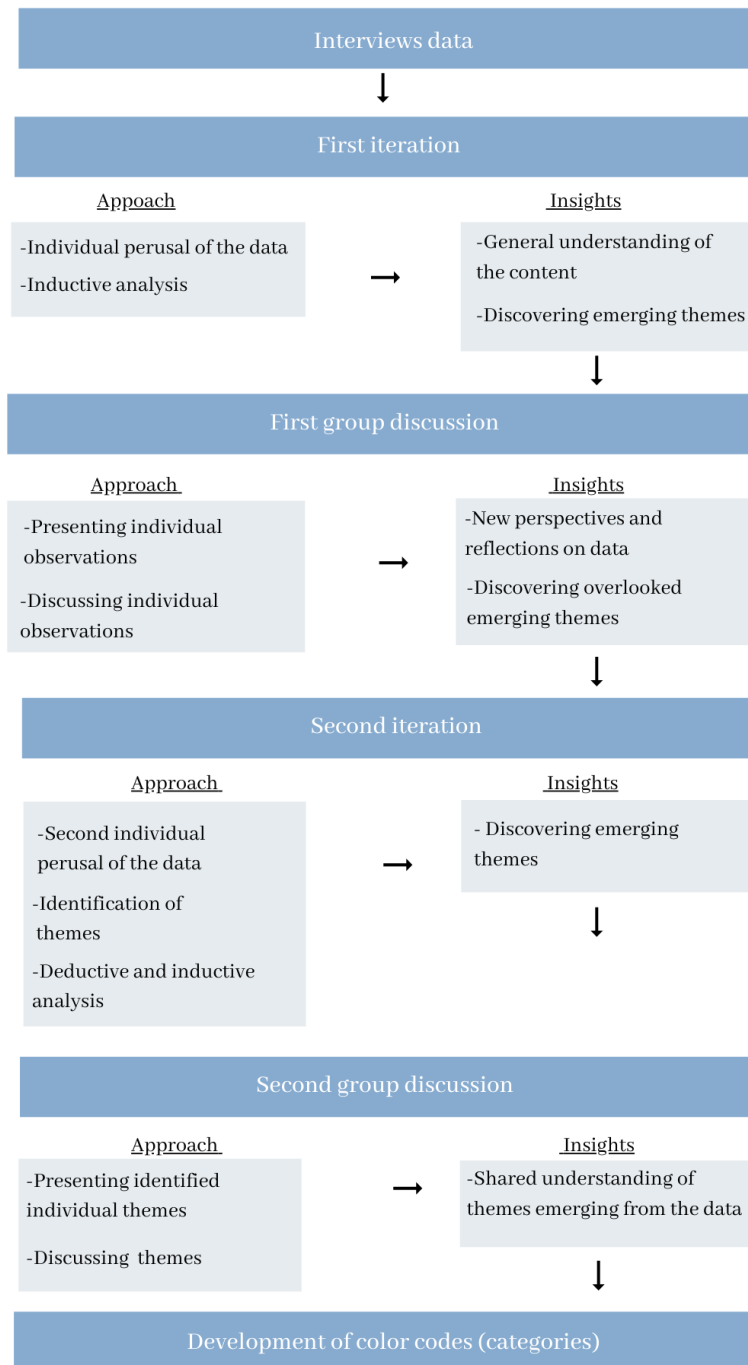


Figure 2: Interviews color coding process

Elements of the color coding process

For the “first iteration”, the researchers initially individually read through each transcribed interview and interpreted them. Similar to the netnographic approach, the researchers remained open to all theoretical directions that the reading entailed, as it shaped the ensuing analysis (Charmaz, 2014).

In the “first group discussion”, the researchers presented individual observations about the content of each interview, in order to find similarities and differences between the perspectives of the interviewees. By the end of the discussion, emerging themes will be discussed, and these will be considered in the second iteration.

In the “second iteration”, the researchers individually go through the transcriptions again in a deductive manner with the discussed themes in mind while remaining open to the emergence of previously undiscovered themes.

Emerging themes were discussed in the “second group discussion” with the purpose of reaching agreement on whether some themes should be revised or removed. The second discussion results in the identification of main color categories that will be explored further through an emic coding approach.

Emic coding

Emic refers to categorizing behaviour from the perspective of the insider in ways that are meaningful to the insider producing that behaviour (Chapman & Routledge, 2009), such as users of gaming and eSports streaming platforms. By applying an emic approach, the goal is ‘to understand the situation under investigation primarily from the participants’ and not the researcher’s perspective’ (Townsend & Urbanic, 2014, p. 202). This implies that an insider’s perspective of reality is taken rather than an outsider’s or etics perspective (Townsend & Urbanic, 2014). In this context the insiders are the three interviewees who are expected to have distinct knowledge about eSports practices that the researchers are likely to learn from. By applying the emic approach, the researchers are able to uncover relationships and interactions

that might otherwise be concealed or complex to understand (Townsend & Urbanic, 2014). As the emic coding approach enables a deeper exploration of the content of the interviews, the researchers will ultimately define a number of subcategories related to each main category.

5.7 Comparative analysis of findings

When the results from the netnographic approach and the interview coding have been analyzed, the findings will be compared for the purpose of identifying the most applicable findings retrieved from the two methods. In line with the research approach, the qualitative method of this project enables the researchers to interpret which findings are most critical in terms of answering the research question. The most critical findings will finally be illustrated in a strategic commercial framework at the end of the analysis.

5.8 Quality

The researchers acknowledge that the quality of the project in terms of the establishment of reliability and validity in the research process should be addressed due to the considerable length of the project as well as the collection of large amounts of data. Accounting for the integrity of the project is considered important due to the novel nature of eSports practices research, which necessitates a thorough clarification of the researchers' choices regarding the applied methods. This is especially of essence if the findings and results of the research are to be utilized by others or incorporated into similar or complementing future research projects (Noble & Smith, 2015).

Validity

Validity refers to “the integrity and application of the methods undertaken and the precision in which the findings accurately reflect the data” (Noble & Smith, 2015, p. 34). Validity is enhanced when the findings accurately represent the features of the phenomenon that it is intended to describe or explain (Long & Johnson, 2000). In other words, validity refers to whether the researchers are actually exploring the topic and research question, and whether the findings can be regarded as precise with the applied methods in mind. The researchers attempted

to ensure validity by combining different methods in a triangulation process and account for each selected method. By applying data triangulation, it was, as mentioned earlier, expected that the project would acquire more analytical strength than if one single method was used. By only applying one method, the topic would merely be examined from one lens. In this way, the methodical choices have the purpose of providing complementary and precise results to the study, which ultimately leads to a thorough answer to the research question.

Reliability

Reliability refers to the consistency of the research methods and its findings (Noble & Smith, 2015). In this regard, consistency relates to the trustworthiness and transparency of the applied methods, meaning that, ultimately, any other independent researcher should be able to replicate the methodical procedures and arrive at similar or comparable findings (Noble & Smith, 2015). Transparency is demonstrated in the methodological and methodical sections, where considerations about the specific chosen approaches are explicitly accounted for. Furthermore, several visual models are provided illustrating the approaches of the project. In this regard, the methodical coding processes and most prominent findings are illustrated to aid comprehension and transparency.

6. Analysis of netnography

In this analytical chapter, the findings derived from the collected data of the netnographic approach will be presented and analyzed. The exploration of the data will ultimately support the answer to the research question of the project. In this chapter, several expressions and a large amount of terminology unique to the eSports ecosystems will be applied when analyzing the results. Therefore, the researchers refer to the wordbook presented earlier, which contains explanations of some of the most commonly used terms in eSports ecosystems.

6.1 Qualitative coding process

The first individual iteration focused on making general observations of the data while inductively discovering emerging themes by interpreting the observations. This was followed by the first group discussion, in which the researchers' individual general observations of the data and discoveries of emerging themes were shared and subsequently discussed. The observations that were discussed included:

The streamer has influence on conversation topics. Users will on some occasions pick up on the streamers' comments on a certain topic and start interacting with each other on that particular topic.

Users tend to comment more frequently when something extraordinary happens during the stream, and these passages of comments are usually low on content and conversation, but high on gaming terminology, emotes, and appraisal of certain players.

Personal matters and other topics that are out-of-context suggest that Twitch is used as a forum for communication between user-streamer, but also user-user.

Gaming terminology occurs often throughout the data.

Users ask the streamers questions about gaming setups, which can lead to interactions with other users.

The level of users responding to each other varies from stream to stream.

So-called "subscriber badges" are discussed by users. These badges appearing in front of users' usernames indicate paid subscriptions and vary depending on the length of the subscription.

Users often attempt to interact with the streamers despite the streamers only responding to users' comments in rare instances.

All chats have some amount of conversation starters, which can be un- or related to the content in the streams.

Some users share personal matters in the chats such as announcing a birthday. Combining this observation with the users attempting to start conversations, and the users trying to interact with the streamers, they could suggest that Twitch is a forum for individuals seeking social relations.

Some users seek expertise and are not necessarily seeking company or relations, but looking for advice to improve one's abilities within the games.

The language and tone seem similar across streams and games.

Figure 3: First group discussion - observations from first iteration

As it appears, observations are both descriptive and interpretive. This was a result of the process of confirmation and rejection among the researchers, as a descriptive observation such as "some users share personal matters" was discussed and interpreted among the researchers as an example of how some users seek social relations in the chat. Eventually, the discussion resulted in initial confirmation of four emerging themes based on users' characteristics:

1. Users seeking social relations outside of the game.
2. Users seeking social relations within the world of the game.
3. Users expressing fan characteristics.
4. Users seeking expertise to improve their own abilities within the game.

Figure 4: First group discussion results - emerging themes

With these themes in mind, the researchers commenced the second individual iteration of the data.

Second iteration and group discussion

The second group discussion was different from the first one as the researchers applied different approaches in the second individual iteration. Firstly, the second individual iteration was conducted in a more deductive manner, as the themes emerging from the first group discussion were explored. However, the researchers also explored new emerging themes inductively. The observations of the second discussion are summed up in the figure below:

The general content and format of user comments could be ascribed to the nature of the live chat. Due to the frequency and consistency of users commenting, comments rarely remain in the chat window for more than one minute, which could affect the style of users' language and content filter (or lack thereof).

The explicit comments from some users could be an attempt to gain attention.

Every streamers' live chat in the data features an automatic "bot", which is capable of answering certain standard questions made by users. The users address the bot by adding a "!" in front of their question, which is then automatically and immediately answered by the bot if it is programmed to answer that specific question. The bot appears as a regular user profile in the live chat and typically answers questions regarding e.g. streamer's age, game settings, and gaming equipment used by the streamer.

Instead of focusing on categorization of users, it might be more relevant to focus on the actual conversations that take place in the live chat. This conversation perspective allows the researchers to examine the user interactions and meaning creation in-depth.

It appears that two main themes in conversations exist: "eSports-related" and "unrelated to eSports". Within each main category, several sub-categories exist.

Figure 5: Second group discussion - observations from second iteration

As a result of the second group discussion, the researchers acknowledged that the emerging themes identified in the first group discussion were not sufficient in explaining user interactions and meaning creation, as they merely describe the types of users present in the live chats and not their underlying motivations for engaging in conversations. As a result of the second group discussion, however, the researchers confirmed the emergence of new themes, which are based on the types of conversations that take place in the live chats. The researchers concluded that the categorization of conversations was more relevant in terms of discovering the eSports practices that are carried out in the co-creational live chats on Twitch, as they allowed the researchers to explore user interactions and meaning creation in-depth. The final main categories and subcategories are displayed in the table below:

Main category Related to eSports	Main category Unrelated to eSports
Sub category Related to game in-stream Related to game Related to eSports	Sub category Related to streamer Unrelated to streamer

Table 7: Second group discussion results: conversation categories

Development of coding scheme

The discovery of the categories above allows the researchers to develop a coding scheme in which the data can be systematically divided into categories. However, prior to this, an illustration of the coding scheme was developed to visualize the categories, what topics they typically included, and how it relates contextually to the events taking place in the stream. Secondly, it was developed for the purpose of ensuring that the researchers were aligned in terms of how each category is identified and categorized. By applying this coding scheme in the coding process, the researchers systematically sorted the 3,000 comments into the main and subcategories in an Excel-sheet (appendix 7, 8 & 9) for the purpose of identifying patterns for interpretation within the categories. The coding scheme is illustrated on the next page.

Netnographic coding scheme

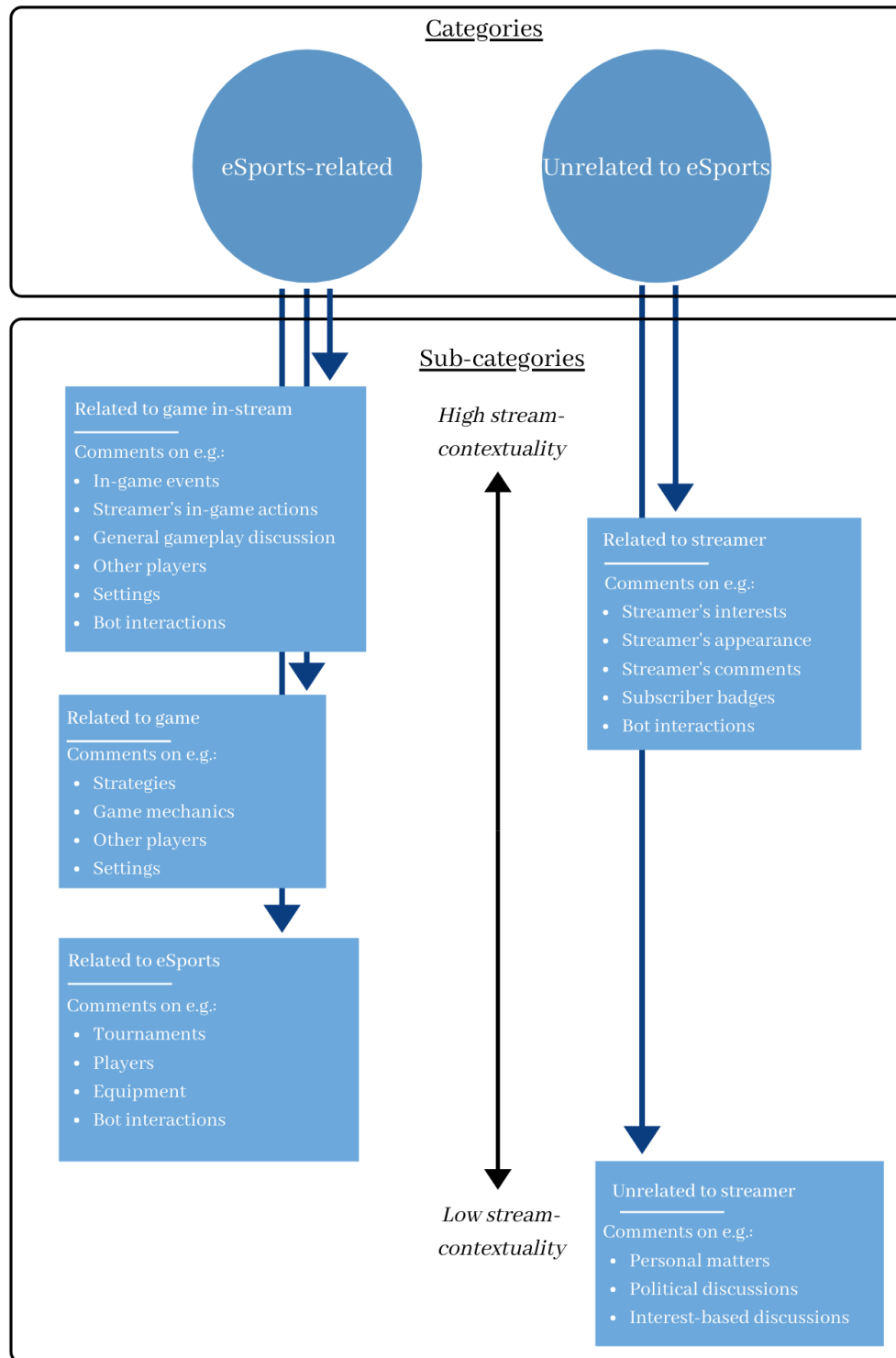


Figure 6: Netnographic coding scheme

6.2 Counter Strike: Global Offensive analysis

Introduction

For each subcategory, general observations of the “Counter Strike: Global Offensive” (“CS: GO”) stream broadcasted by the streamer will be presented first, followed by more elaborate examples of conversations or comments that stand out. The following section will analyze the comments and conversations retrieved from the chat related to the streamer Stewie2K’s live stream of Counter Strike: Global Offensive. The observations of the live chat will be presented and explored in depth in order to provide insights into some of the conversations that take place on Twitch. The stream had an amount of approximately 5,000 viewers at the time of the observation.

It should be noted that the usernames of Twitch users will be included wherever possible. This will provide a clearer overview of the frequency of postings from the same users and interaction between them. Some users have chosen to keep their usernames hidden and can therefore not be mentioned by name. Such comments are labelled “anonymous” when examples are provided.

Category: eSports-related

Subcategory: Related to game in-stream

General content of this category

This subcategory primarily consists of comments related to specific events or incidents taking place in the game being played by the streamer. The comments often include gaming lingo, questions about something in the game in-stream, and praise addressed to the streamer. In line with the coding scheme, comments belonging to this subcategory are categorized as highly stream-contextual. As the streamer is screen sharing, meaning that users can see what the streamer sees on the screen, they are naturally able to follow every move or action that he performs, as if they themselves were a part of the game being played.

Comments addressing the actions taking place in the game in-stream can be found in different forms. For instance, several comments deal specifically with the streamer performing an extraordinary or unforeseen in-game effort, such as taking down an enemy in a superior way, a

mistake, or questionable act made by another player, or a round being won in a short amount of time. This is apparent in a comment such as:

deathmsamawxc: “the bomb KEKW” (appendix 4, p. 170)

Figgi05: “wtf was that?” (appendix 4, p. 176)

The first comment addresses the streamer forgetting to remove a bomb in the game that he is playing, which results in the streamer losing a round. The comment signals a high level of amusement from the user based on the use of the gaming slang-word “KEKW”, which is gaming slang used to depict an exaggerated laughing expression. The second comment expresses confusion about an action made by the streamer in the game, and once again, a slang word, “wtf”, meaning “what the fuck” is used. The user deathsamawcx, who is mentioned in the first comment above, attempts to initiate a conversation several times during this period of play, e.g. through comments such as:

deathmsamawxc: “so in the pistol round they are buying armor” (appendix 4, p. 171)

deathmsamawxc: “nope, armor can’t save them KEKW” (appendix 4, p. 171)

In these comments, the user is referring to specific in-game items that can be bought to ensure a better chance of victory. Once again, the slang-word “KEKW” is being used to illustrate a feeling of hilarity by the user. However, as no other users or the streamer join in on the conversation, the user in question ceases to engage further. Some users also attempt to interact with the streamer by commenting on in-game events directed to him. Examples of this can be found in the comments:

hakkumasu: “how do you lose that LOL” (appendix 4, p. 172)

jimbobhihelloyes: “you were crouched right? I’m surprised you lost that” (appendix 4, p. 198)

Both of these comments address the streamer surprisingly losing a round in the game, and here the use of the personal pronoun *you* implies that both posters are trying to reach the streamer

personally rather than other individuals in the chat. In both of these instances, the streamer does not respond to the questions, which causes the users to stop commenting on any other events taking place in the game in-stream. Other comments in this subcategory aim to simply show excitement or support towards the streamer performing something extraordinary, as evident in comments such as: ‘‘godlike movement’’, ‘‘GREAT HALF!’’, and ‘‘what a legend’’. In the examples, the comments are arguably not representing attempts to engage directly with the streamer, which can be seen in the length of the comments as well as the lack of use of the streamer’s name. Neither are they to be regarded as conversation starters, but more as expressions submitted in what appears to be a random manner to convey the users’ dedication and engagement to the game in-stream. The examples of comments within this subcategory demonstrate how slang-words and gaming lingo is often being applied by users to express themselves about certain in-game incidents. Arguably, the use of gaming terminology is an example of how users seek a sense of participation with the rest of the users, displaying their knowledge about the lingo and using it to communicate with other users. This exemplifies how Twitch can be considered an institution in which a unique lingo is applied by users to communicate.

Category: eSports-related

Subcategory: Related to game

General content of this category

Some comments in the live chat are more related to the game CS:GO itself and address some of the more general elements of the game. In line with the coding scheme, conversations within this category can be placed in the middle in terms of stream-contextuality, as they are not directly related to the in-game events taking place on the streamer’s screen, but are concerned with the game on a more general level. However, they are still a result of the users’ interest in the streamer as well as the game being played. Comments within this subcategory generally address strategies and tactics, game mechanics, and other players of CS:GO. This can be seen in comments such as:

Hqdf1: “How do you type in commands in Csgo?” (appendix 4, p. 171)

zolyitza: “what resolution do you play?” (appendix 4, p. 175)

Kaytocs: “WHATS YOUR CURRENT RESOLUTION @Stewie2k?” (appendix 4, p. 173)

These comments indicate interest in the streamer’s way of playing the game in general as well as his preferences in terms of certain mechanics of the game, such as graphic settings. In other words, they demonstrate a sincere interest in the game itself. Additionally, these observations show that some users turn to the streamer for inspiration or suggestions about the game, which arguably relates to the users’ ambitions of improving their own abilities within the game. Other comments in this subcategory address different professional players and teams of CS:GO, such as:

Blackcat121998: “@Stew, top 5 players of 2019?” (appendix 4, p. 170)

Str1de: “@prius I'm saying a pro team like c9 or liquid” (appendix 4, p. 205)

The first comment is directed towards the streamer with the use of the “@” symbol in front of the streamer’s name, while the second comment addresses another user in the chat. Overall, this subcategory shows how some comments are expressions of individual interests and curiosity related to the game. Therefore, it appears that some users utilize the platform to get inspiration from the streamer and learn more about the specific mechanics, settings or strategies of the game itself. Arguably, the comments within this subcategory do not reveal any significant indications of how meaning is being co-created on Twitch, yet they show that some users are interested in the streamer’s opinion about certain game related questions.

Category: eSports-related

Subcategory: Related to eSports

General content of this category

Users of Twitch were observed to partake in conversations that are related to eSports in general. Comments within this subcategory often address eSports tournaments, gaming equipment, or questions about other professional streamers. In line with the coding scheme, comments within

this subcategory have a low stream contextuality, as they do not relate to the specific game being played, nor do they address the stream being broadcasted at the time. Instead, they demonstrate the users' curiosity and interest in some of the other aspects of the eSports ecosystems, such as tournaments and gaming equipment. This is apparent in comments such as:

Anonymous: “@Stewie2K when is the next big event?” (appendix 4, p. 166)

wintergr33n: “do professionals ever use headphones?” (appendix 4, p. 167)

Xxpowmanxx: “gotta love that SK chair” (appendix 4, p. 169)

Julius_v3: “what keyboard do you use?” (appendix 4, p. 214)

yvngmoh: “WHAT MOUSE DO YOU USE @Stewie2k” (appendix 4, p. 214)

The first comment is a question to the streamer about an upcoming eSports tournament. The other comments address gaming and eSports equipment. Stewie2k may be considered a branded personality in this regard by the viewers, despite not necessarily having any sponsorship agreements with the verbalized brands. It could be argued that the viewers associate Stewie2k with the “SK” brand, as he is sitting in an SK chair.

However, none of the comments receive a response from the streamer or any other users. These comments can all be regarded as attempts to interact with the streamer as well as other users about topics that are often discussed in eSports, but few of them result in an actual conversation. The lack of responses does not keep users from commenting the same things several times in the chat. Arguably, if the streamer responds to this he may have significant influence on the users' brand meaning, as they will most likely associate the gaming equipment brands to the streamer, who they clearly have an interest in. Moreover, one user seemingly pays attention to the specific gaming chair that the streamer is sitting in, expressing a positive meaning about the chair and its related brand.

Category: Unrelated to eSports

Subcategory: Related to streamer

General content of this category

Users of Twitch engage and interact through off-topic conversations that are unrelated to eSports, but related to the streamer. Furthermore, users show eagerness to express their support and loyalty to the streamer by greeting him, asking for shoutouts, or giving him compliments throughout the chat. The stream contextuality of this subcategory is just above medium due to how users might consider the chat an opportunity to engage in different social conversations. Yet it does not reach a high stream contextuality, as the conversations are not directly related to the game being played, the stream itself, or eSports in general. Instead, comments in this subcategory often address the streamer's appearance and look, the streamer's interests, or comments expressed by the streamer towards the users.

Throughout the streaming session, the streamer speaks whatever is on his mind and brings up different topics of discussion that are in many occasions picked up by the users. As an example, a topic could be food, as apparent in the comments:

Bombastix_: "try out Little Sister for dinner bro, they have sick chicken there"

(appendix 4, p. 166)

Bombastix_: "@Stewie2k they have some good marinated chicken, it's Asian bro"

(appendix 4, p. 168)

deathsamawxc: "you are on a diet xD" (appendix 4, p. 168)

The comments are a direct response to Stewie2K, who is asking for suggestions on what to eat during his live stream. In the first two comments, the repeated use of the nickname "bro" could imply that the user wants to express some kind of social connection to the streamer. The user deathsamawxc comments as if the user has detailed knowledge about the streamer's personal life and eating habits, which could indicate a similar perceived social connection to the streamer. The user deathsamawxc was also observed to be active earlier in the chat, commenting frequently on some of the in-game events taking place, but did not continue due to a lack of response. The fact

that the same user now returns to a different debate indicates a high level of engagement and eagerness to participate in the conversations taking place, and especially, it exemplifies the user's personal interest in the streamer. Furthermore, these comments demonstrate how a streamer can initiate conversations in the chat.

Music is another topic that is brought up in the chat on several occasions. Specifically, many users seem to have an opinion on the songs that the streamer is listening to while streaming, and often share these opinions or wishes about a specific song. This is evident in comments such as:

neurongod: "Turn on Roddy Rich - The Box please" (appendix 4, p. 168)

Vertical64: "this song though" (appendix 4, p. 167)

windows_: "this song is pure anxiety" (appendix 4, p. 167)

coltfnbr: "this song is a vibe" (appendix 4, p. 196)

Although these comments are not suggesting a lot about eSports itself, they are showing a certain level of interest and engagement in some of the peripheral elements that surround and influence the stream. Comments of this nature are seemingly considered to be redundant to other users, as expressed in the comment:

Twosprinkles: "why is everyone so worried about his settings, music and peripherals?? KEKW" (appendix 4, p. 167)

The comment above includes the word "KEKW", which is an expression used on Twitch to signal a feeling of hilarity about the situation. Other examples of users interfering in a conversation is evident elsewhere in the chat. At one point, users attempt to initiate a conversation with the streamer with rather provoking comments, such as:

kaytocs: "are you a virgin @Stewie2K" (appendix 4, p. 171)

Boermt_die_Buse: "are u a virgin @Stewie" (appendix 4, p. 172)

Vertical64: "No he is not a virgin KEKW" (appendix 4, p. 172)

The comments above are responded to almost immediately after by another user, smallfps, with the reply: “some questions you just don’t ask” (appendix 4, p. 172).

Despite these provoking attempts of creating interaction, the conversation never manifests itself in the chat. These types of comments arguably reflect alternative ways of attempting to interact with the streamer by any means, emphasizing the role of the streamer and the interest that users have in him. However, it also shows that some users are negative or even hostile towards the streamer, and that these users will often attempt to infiltrate the chat in different ways.

Several comments in the “related to streamer” subcategory can be regarded merely as expressions of dedication and interest in the streamer. Many of the comments lack relation to eSports in general, but depict the users’ apparent eagerness to share their engagement and interest in being a part of the same stream as the streamer. This can be seen in comments such as:

digitul7: “@Stewie2K what’s good my guy?” (appendix 4, p. 166)

joao_corsoa: “@Stewie2K say hello for Brazil, miss u haha” (appendix 4, p. 165)

Anonymous: “Sup Stew! Been a fan of you since you joined C9 and for me you’re the best!” (appendix 4, p. 167)

The comments above are examples of users attempting to interact with the streamer by expressing interest and dedication towards Stewie2k and his persona. Occasionally, the streamer will read out their usernames and greet or respond to them, which arguably motivates the users’ attempts to interact with the streamer through these types of comments. Other comments can be described as obvious calls for attention from the streamer, such as:

Hamza98lol: “@Stewie2K notice me senpai” (appendix 4, p. 169)

Vertical64: “STEWIE GIVE ME ATTENTION” (appendix 4, p. 169)

Other comments can arguably be seen as similar attempts of attracting the streamer's attention, but in a different and more intimate way:

Anonymous: "Hey Stew just wanted to let you know that u are really cute today"
(appendix 4, p. 177).

Anonymous: "HE'S CUTE EVERYDAY" (appendix 4, p. 177)

Benjahunter01: "you are amazing bro, love u ... u are so good" (appendix 4, p. 177)

Comments of this type generally seem to appear in rapid succession in the chat. This observation indicates that the users' motivation to show their support and dedication is twofold: Firstly, they seek to engage with the streamer directly by sending praising comments his way, sometimes writing in capital letters in order to attract more attention. Secondly, often when one user expresses positive thoughts about the streamer, others are quick to join in on the conversation with similar comments. In this way, opinions and views about the streamer are arguably co-created between several different users.

Category: Unrelated to eSports

Subcategory: Unrelated to streamer

General content of this category

Comments without any clear relation to eSports in general or to the streamer are also observed in the chat. In line with the coding scheme, conversations belonging to this subcategory have a very low stream-contextuality. These comments generally relate to personal matters or interest-based discussions and often include topics such as politics, other games, or simply thoughts about one's own situation and other users' behavior and personality.

Firstly, several users seem to join the chat with the purpose of getting inspiration for new games to play, as seen in the comments:

tylergoad: "there's like no good games to play" (appendix 4, p. 175)

Hishobisho1: "tell me a better game" (appendix 4, p. 211)

These comments are instantly picked up by another user, who responds with the comments:

Aero_1: “have you tried CS: GO?” (appendix 4, p. 175)

Aerio_1: “I heard Roblox isn’t that bad” (appendix 4, p. 176)

These two comments are clearly sarcastic due to the fact that “Roblox” is a game intended for children and since CS:GO is the actual game being streamed and played at that time. Moreover, political statements are expressed by different users, as seen in comments such as:

Anonymous: “TRUMP 2020” (appendix 4, p. 179)

TheBigBadBootyDaddy420: “TRUMP KEKW” (appendix 4, p. 179)

Boermt_die_Buse: “USA VS IRAN 2020 INCOMING GOOD JOB TRUMP”
(appendix 4, p. 180)

Vertical64: “TRUMP” (appendix 4, p. 180)

Boermt_die_Buse: “FREE HONG KONG BTW” (appendix 4, p. 182)

Once again, these comments are posted in rapid succession indicating that users are quick to pick up on other users’ comments and opinions. Whether these comments can be regarded as attempts to co-create meaning through political views is debatable, however, it seems that several users are eager to join in on the conversation. Attempts to initiate political debates, such as the ones mentioned above, generally seems to be frowned upon by some users, which is apparent in the responses:

Fancymonkeystick: “stop talking politics in chat...” (appendix 4, p. 181)

CulturalismS: “the amount of people talking shit in the chat while they watch someone play KEKW” (appendix 4, p. 218)

Both of these responses show that while some users use Twitch to engage in off-topic conversations, such as political debates, other users react negatively to such initiatives. Arguably, these users are present in the stream to watch the streamer performing in a game and may

therefore not be interested in conversations that are unrelated to eSports. Yet, they still express their opinions on the topic, indicating that they have some form of need to voice themselves to other users. Following these comments, the political topic is abandoned by the users who randomly initiated it and is not resumed again in the rest of the chat. A similar situation emerges when a user attempts to start a conversation about Russians, which is quickly picked up by other users:

Russsssian: “why do russians call stewie stivi KEKW” (appendix 4, p. 184)

Prius: “Russians are good people except when they’re racist” (appendix 4, p. 186)

Russsssian: “Russians don’t know the limit” (appendix 4, p. 186)

budgetkevin: “there’s a lot of rees in the chat tonight” (appendix 4, p. 218)

Similar to the political discussion described above, this conversation is short-lived. In budgetkevin’s comment, the user is applying the word “rees”, which is an abbreviation of the patronizing word “retards”, making it obvious that the comment represents a feeling of discontent with the conversation taking place. These instances imply that users of Twitch are highly influenced by the opinions of others, making them more likely to stop engaging further in conversations if they are not agreed with or positively responded to.

Finally, several comments can be understood merely as expressions of a user’s state of mind at a certain time. Examples of this can be found in the comments:

Russsssian: “I have never been more bored in my life” (appendix 4, p. 192)

Russsssian: “can’t wait to sleep” (appendix 4, p. 192)

These types of comments are not to be regarded as conversation starters as they have no clear receiver, yet it can be argued that they illustrate a basic need to be present on the platform and express one’s presence. This argument is grounded in the fact that the user has every opportunity to withdraw from the streaming session, but yet chooses to remain in the chat despite expressing severe boredom.

It appears that the comments within this subcategory are not necessarily triggered by the streamer. Instead they seem to be results of personal views and a wish to initiate some kind of interest-based and meaningful discussion with the remaining users of the platform. In these instances, it can also be argued that the streaming session itself does not necessarily play a decisive role in terms of the topics that are being discussed by users. This observation supports the notion that Twitch users use the platform to engage in off-topic conversations beyond the specific game being played and eSports in general. Arguably, this subcategory holds several examples of how users co-create meaning with each other through social interactions and conversations on topics that go beyond eSports.

6.3 Main findings of the CS:GO netnographic analysis

The netnographic analysis of users commenting on Stewie2K's stream of CS:GO indicates that Twitch is being used as a forum for online interactions and conversations between user-streamer and user-user. The 1,000 comments collected from this stream exemplify how Twitch users seemingly have different purposes in terms of online interaction. The main findings of the CS:GO netnographic analysis are presented below:

Twitch is used for social interactions beyond the context of eSports

Several examples indicate that a large number of Twitch users are interested in engaging with other users and the streamer more than the actual game being played in the streaming session. While the observation of the chat did identify comments and conversations addressing the game and eSports, many of the conversations taking place in the "unrelated to eSports" subcategories indicate that Twitch is being used as a platform for online interactions and social engagements beyond eSports.

Twitch users often engage in conversations highly related to the streamer

A large number of comments involve or address the streamer, either through comments about the streamer in general, or through attempts to engage with the streamer directly. Throughout the streaming session, the streamer appears to speak whatever is on his mind and occasionally

he brings up different topics of discussion that are often picked up by the users, showing that the topics presented by the streamer have a large influence on the conversations that users engage in. These topics could be e.g. food, gaming equipment, or music, which several users seemed to have an opinion about. This finding supports the argument presented earlier about the streamer being a source of information for the users present in the stream.

Users tend to comment more frequently when something extraordinary happens during the stream

This finding is based on different examples that address the in-stream events, such as the streamer winning a round, showing a high level of skill, or performing an action that is perceived as being entertaining or extraordinary in the eyes of the users. These passages of comments are usually low on content and conversation, but rich on gaming terminology and appraisal of certain players, most often the streamer. Several examples illustrate that some users are eager to express their engagement in the events taking place in the game in-stream, and often, these users will post comments about the in-game events more than once.

Gaming lingo is being used to a high degree in the chat

The observations identified that gaming lingo was often used in the users' comments. Examples of gaming lingo is in the form of expressions that illustrate a specific emotion or reaction, or short words with a certain meaning, such as "KEKW", "LUL", and "POG", which are all expressions unique to eSports and gaming. The short expressions are used by Twitch users to underline their views about e.g. a particular incident in the game or a comment by another user. From the perspective of an individual unfamiliar with the ecosystem of Twitch, the eSports lingo might be difficult to comprehend. Nevertheless, it seems to be a large part of the interactions taking place within eSports ecosystems, and moreover, it exemplifies how users of Twitch apply gaming lingo to co-create meaning in the ecosystems. Arguably, the lingo is used to create a sense of relation and belonging on the online platform, as users may regard it as a prerequisite to understanding the communication that takes place on Twitch.

Figure 7: Main findings of the CS:GO netnographic analysis

6.4 Fortnite analysis

Introduction

For each subcategory, general observations of the Fortnite stream broadcasted by the streamer “Tfue” will be presented first, followed by more elaborate examples of conversations or comments that stand out. After these are analyzed, they will be summarized as main findings. During this chapter, it should be noted that on some occasions, the comments should be considered in the context of the streamer recording himself while playing. If such context is relevant to understand the comment, the content of the recording will be specified when examples are presented. Certain content also presupposes knowledge about the “subscription” feature on Twitch. On the platform, some channels require that users subscribe to the channel in order for them to get access to participate in the chat, and users have to pay a monthly subscription fee to become subscribers. All subscribers receive a badge in front of their username and the appearance of the badges vary based on subscription seniority: In the first month, users will have a specific badge, which is then “upgraded” after 3 months, etc. This feature is illustrated below:

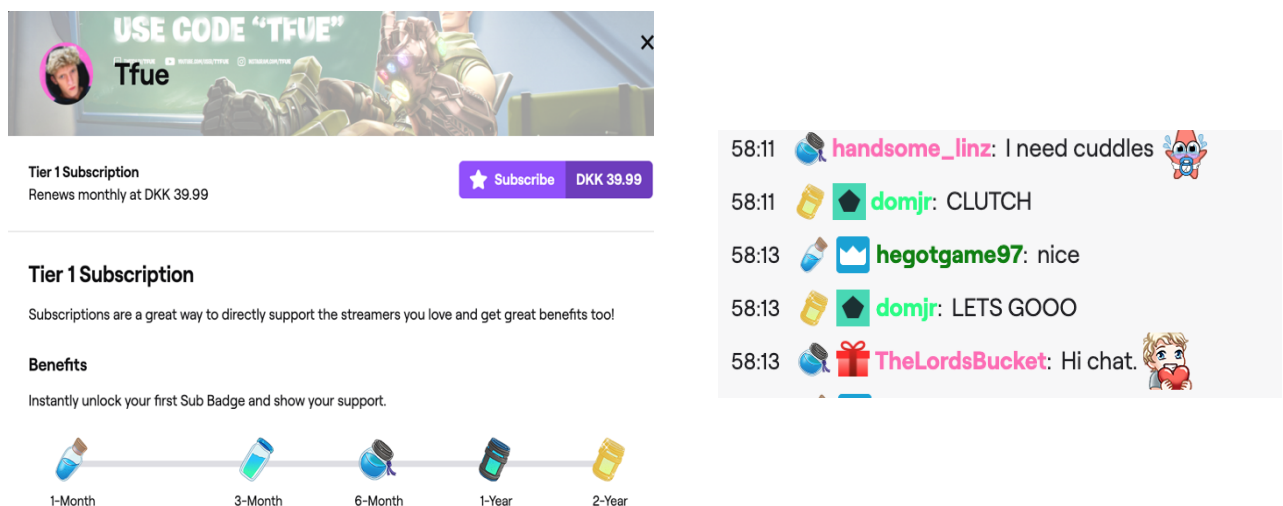


Illustration 5: The subscription feature on Twitch and subscriber badges in front of usernames

The chat in Tfue's stream is only for subscribers, meaning that all users participating in the chat are paying a monthly fee and have a visible badge in front of their usernames. The stream had an amount of approximately 5,000 viewers at the time of the observation.

Category: eSports-related

Subcategory: Related to game in-stream

General content of this category

This subcategory primarily contains user comments on events happening in the game, gaming lingo, questions, and praise addressed to Tfue about his gameplay. The examples typically overlap, as gaming lingo is often applied by users when commenting on events happening in-game. Generally, the comments in this subcategory are shorter compared to the observations from different subcategories. Moreover, this subcategory has the highest amount of comments, which could be a result of the high stream-contextuality. Despite the shortness of the comments, some comments are more elaborate than others. Elaborate comments mostly appear when an extraordinary event takes place in-game, and the numerous user reactions and comments turn into a conversation in some instances. Such examples will be elaborated below.

Conversations on extraordinary in-game events

These conversations are characterized by a high frequency of comments. Comments being posted immediately after an extraordinary in-game event tend to be short and mainly consist of gaming lingo. Examples of user comments and reactions to an extraordinary in-game event can be seen below:

N1ckhulk: "HOLLLLYYYYY" (appendix 5, p. 273)

Jamins: "PogU" (appendix 5, p. 258)

Imnotdaniilo: "CRACKED" (appendix 5, p. 275)

Zakz: "PepeLaugh" (appendix 5, p. 276)

However, as the stream progresses after the initial low content reactions, the users' comments become more elaborate and a conversation develops:

MiSterS0L0: "some cold shit" (appendix 5, p. 276)

Mecheros_: "guess whos happy" (appendix 5, p. 276)

Bluecheesesalad: "i knew that was gonna hit" (appendix 5, p. 277)

Mike_litorious14: "That snicker laugh lmao" (appendix 5, p. 279)

Spiderman4: "#Vaultheavysniper @Tfue" (appendix 5, p. 279)

Jordanmcatee: "Heavy sniper is so bullshit haha" (appendix 5, p. 280)

KindredDJ: "Someone clip that" (appendix 5, p. 280)

It can be argued whether the examples above can be considered an actual conversation, as the users do not seem to interact directly with each other's comments. However, they do comment on the same subject, which could resemble a conversation as they are focused on the same topic. Regardless, a pattern appears in terms of how the lengths of the comments increase over a short time span. Users might realize that in the moment of the extraordinary in-game event, other users are eager to comment and express their reaction. When this initial wave of reactions is over, users might consider this an opportunity to start a conversation on the in-game event and interact with other users by typing more elaborate comments.

An actual conversation, however, does not seem to develop in the examples above, but in a similar example, Tfue defeats a well-known streamer by the name of "Bugha" in-game, which initially results in numerous short user reactions and subsequently turns into a conversation:

TonyBrody: "that kid was bugha the whole time?" (appendix 5, p. 294)

Rixumayn44: "bugha is so mad" (appendix 5, p. 295)

Barryallen1996: "so bugha was grieving tfue ? lmao fucking dickhead" (appendix 5, p. 295)

Barryallen1996: "bugha has become such an emotional player" (appendix 5, p. 296)

Olliefirthhhhhh: "surely im delayed cus i havent seen bugha die yet" (appendix 5, p. 296)

Brunooassmann: "@olliefirthhhhhh scoped killed him" (appendix 5, p. 297)

In this example, users start responding to each other's comments after the initial reactions to the in-game event. The examples could indicate how some users participate in the chat primarily for social interactions, but as the context of the conversation is highly stream-contextual the user engagement and interaction could also be a result of their shared interest in the game and the gameplay.

Based on these observations, it appears that users are highly engaged during extraordinary in-game events. As these comments and conversations are close to the context of the stream, it could be seen as a result of the users' shared interest in the current game and the streamer, yet it still suggests that numerous users are eager to participate in the chat based on the high volume of comments. During these occasions, it was also observed that the users often express themselves through single-word gaming lingo. It could imply that some users participate to engage in social interactions and gain acknowledgement from other users and the streamer. However, as user comments are only visible in a short time span, it arguably becomes more difficult to engage in conversations with other users. As a result, a conversation does not develop before this wave of initial reactions and comments passes, but it might still give the users a sense of participation and belonging.

With the observations above in mind, this could explain why a conversation often develops in instances of extraordinary gameplay: When users have displayed their initial reaction to a certain event and achieved a sense of participation and belonging, they start interacting with other users to engage in deeper social interactions. This can be supported by the examples of how some users initially react to the event and then shortly after contributes with more elaborate comments:

Ryanmcg: "NICE" (appendix 5, p. 288)

Ryanmcg: "bugha has been playing like a rat the last fuckin 10 min" (appendix 5, p. 294)

TonyBrody: "disgusting" (appendix 5, p. 276)

TonyBrody: "my biggest fear in the game" (appendix 5, p. 279)

Comments using gaming and eSports lingo

As mentioned, gaming lingo often consists of single words and abbreviations. As it was observed, high volumes of gaming lingo tend to appear during extraordinary in-game events, but also appear in lower volumes throughout the chat. Examples include:

Imnotdanilo: “CRACKED” (appendix 5, p. 275)

Grantt0: “poggg” (appendix 5, p. 276)

Csamps07: “POG” (appendix 5, p. 276)

The use of gaming terminology could indicate how users seek a sense of participation and belonging, as they might attempt to display their engagement in and knowledge about the gaming lingo by using it themselves. During the high frequency passages, users might not expect other users to interact with or even notice their comments, but commenting might still provide them with a sense of participation.

Category: eSports-related

Subcategory: Related to game

General content of this category

This subcategory mainly consists of users asking questions directly to Tfue, such as the comments:

Flacoxsoccer: “update on settings?” (appendix 5, p. 252)

Flacoxsoccer: “can we see your keybinds” (appendix 5, p. 243)

Jetsgang503: “@Tfue everytime i reset my game the ping goes lower” (appendix 5, p. 258)

The questions are primarily about specific game settings used by Tfue. Despite the subcategory only consisting of a minor amount of comments, one conversation develops in a passage in the chat. This conversation involves users discussing in-game weapons. The conversation is elaborated below.

Conversation on in-game weapon mechanics

This conversation initiates when Tfue loses a match in-game and makes a comment about the weapon that his opponent was using. Users then start commenting their own opinions on this topic, as seen in these examples:

Leprechavn: “they should vault all guns. pick axe only” (appendix 5, p. 266)

Morehumblebaristasplz: “smg, heavy snipes, traps,” (appendix 5, p. 266)

Honourednebula: “possibly bring burst smg back” (appendix 5, p. 266)

Alexseealexdo: “no smg and snipers” (appendix 5, p. 267)

Psolony: “we don't even need the smg in the game” (appendix 5, p. 268)

The conversation continues for a while and could be considered an example of how some users have a general interest in the game that goes beyond the events taking place in the specific stream. This conversation seems to support how the streamer influences the conversation topic. In this example, Tfue makes one comment that motivates several user contributions to the topic and a conversation emerges as a result. At this point, this seems to be a recurring event in the chat, as multiple conversations have started after Tfue performs an action or makes a comment.

[Category: eSports-related](#)

[Subcategory: Related to eSports](#)

General content of this category

This subcategory generally consists of users asking Tfue questions regarding championships, gaming equipment, tournaments, and eSports organizations. The subcategory has the smallest amount of comments compared to the other subcategories, and no actual conversations develop. In other words, users mainly interact with each other and the streamer in the other subcategories. However, there seems to be a general pattern appearing while observing the comments of this category: Users address Tfue frequently with questions regarding e.g. championships and tournaments within the game of Fortnite, the organization that Tfue belongs to, and the gaming equipment that he is using, as seen in the comments below.

Ic3inmyve1ns: “How many points do you need for champion?” (appendix 5, p. 239)

Artrinidad18: “where's your custom keyboard? @Tfue” (appendix 5, p. 247)

Momoxcrazy: “Are u gonna play tfault any time soon” (appendix 5, p. 254)

Proollyajaxxx: “are you gonna join another org or make your own??” (appendix 5, p. 261)

Based on this pattern, this subcategory seems to consist mainly of comments submitted by users who seek information related to the externalities of the game being played in the stream.

Category: Unrelated to eSports

Subcategory: Related to streamer

General content of this category

The contents of this subcategory generally consist of users addressing Tfue directly with either greetings, questions, or comments. The questions include topics such as music, diet, food, subscriber badges, and workouts, and they mostly occur without any relation to conversations already taking place between users. Also, they are only answered by Tfue on rare occasions, but still occur repeatedly throughout the chat. This is also characteristic for the greetings and the general comments made by users in relation to Tfue, which also appear often in the chat, but generally remain unanswered. Considering this observation in relation to the finding of users seeking social interactions, all the users addressing Tfue could be examples of how they attempt to start conversations with the streamer, but also with other users. As an example, a user asks Tfue about his opinion on a new music album, but the user might not even expect Tfue to reply to his comment, as this would be a rare instance. Instead, the motivation for the user to ask this question could be to interact with other users, as they might answer the question and initiate a conversation.

Despite Tfue not generally addressing comments directed to him, there are some occasions where he is not focusing on the game being played, which means that he has an opportunity to start reading the comments aloud and respond to some of them. These brief sessions appear to spawn multiple user comments on a certain topic, which supports how Tfue influences the

conversation topic. An example of such a conversation and its characteristics will be elaborated on during the “conversation on the streamer’s sports interests” paragraph.

Another recurring observation involves some users that address the streamer by his real name “Turner” (appendix 5, p. 239) rather than his username “Tfue”. It might be an attempt at proving their engagement in the streamer as a person, as it could be considered a way of proving one’s knowledge about Tfue’s personal life. These comments could also be considered an attempt at addressing the streamer in a more personal manner, thereby potentially increasing the chance of achieving a response. Regardless, this type of comment seems to support how some users participate in the chat to engage in social interactions with the streamer and other users.

Finally, comments related to subscription to Tfue’s channel appear often throughout the chat. They are typically focused on emotions associated with being a subscriber and the subscriber badges as symbols of seniority. In general, users often contribute with their own ideas for new subscriber badges designs and some even offer Tfue their assistance for producing these. The specific examples of conversations taking place on this topic will be analyzed during the “conversations on subscription” paragraph, but, in general, the subscription feature and the symbols it entails appear to have a certain meaning to the users due to how engaged they seem when conversing about these.

MMA and UFC-related conversation

This conversation is about professional combat sports tournaments within Mixed Martial Arts (“MMA”) and Ultimate Fighting Championship (“UFC”) and is taking place between the users throughout the chat. The conversation has primarily been categorized as “unrelated to streamer”, but some parts of the conversation also belongs to this subcategory, as there is a notable passage where users address and mention Tfue in relation to the topic of MMA and UFC:

HeyYoEasy: “You would be good at mma” (appendix 5, p. 256)

Psolony: “you should have a boxing match with someone” (appendix 5, p. 259)

DedicatedLife: “become an mma fighter. you got the shape for a good jui jitsu fighter” (appendix 5, p. 261)

Rit_ualize: “tfue's featherweight prolly” (appendix 5, p. 262)

The comments that suggest that some users share interests with Tfue, and they could indicate that users are aware of Tfue’s interest in MMA and UFC, as they consider him and include him in a conversation that has been primarily unrelated to Tfue up to this point.

Fitness products-related comments

Similar to the beginning of the MMA and UFC-related conversation, a user appears to address Tfue when he drinks from a shaker that seems to contain a protein drink:

Lamb_toslaughter: “What pre workout u drink” (appendix 5, p. 231)

Other users then start commenting on this topic, mainly by addressing Tfue directly:

Derfscott96: “I need a tfue x gfuel collab ASAP brother” (appendix 5, p. 234)

RogueThreat: “@Tfue when are we getting tfuel?” (appendix 5, p. 236)

Justinvp13: “dont gain to much weight” (appendix 5, p. 235)

Vagoreka: “@tfue are you sponsored” (appendix 5, p. 235)

Savagepigeon22: “I use ghost preworkout. Shit gets me pumped” (appendix 5, p. 235)

These are the only comments related to this topic, so an actual conversation does not develop. In the examples, however, the user engagement is also motivated by Tfue, as the comments appear to begin at the moment that he drinks from his shaker. The conversation might not pick up due to how Tfue does not address the comments, but, regardless, they could also be examples of how users share personal interests with Tfue, similarly to the users in the MMA and UFC-related conversation. The user Savagepigeon22 does attempt to start a conversation unrelated to Tfue, as

he shares his personal experience with a pre workout product, but no users interact with this comment. Considering this comment in relation to the indication that some users participate in the chat for social interactions, Savagepigeon22's comment could support this indication, as it is unrelated to the streamer and might be an invitation for other users to share their personal experiences. The fitness products-related conversation could also support the indication on how Tfue has influence on the conversation topic, as the simple action of drinking from a shaker motivates several comments on this topic.

Conversation on the streamer's sports interests

As mentioned, Tfue starts addressing user comments on certain occasions when he is not occupied with the game that he is playing. On one such occasion, Tfue responds to the comments related to him in the context of combat sports which seems to spawn multiple suggestions from users on the sports that he could become a professional in:

Coreyy_95: "Professional bowler" (appendix 5, p. 271)

SCHMECK88: "go pro in hockey" (appendix 5, p. 271)

Xabx1997: "stick to gamin" (appendix 5, p. 271)

Jerrad2beasty: "As someone who plays golf some what seriously for 15 years, You couldn't win a semi pro women's event with only a Year practice lmao" (appendix 5, p. 272)

This conversation remains on-going for a while and could be considered an example of how Tfue influences the conversation topic. It results in users rapidly commenting in order to participate in the conversation, arguably because they may consider it an opportunity to interact with Tfue. Thereby, it also supports the indication that some users seek social interactions.

Subscription-related conversations

In the previous two examples on topics on sports and fitness products, Tfue's comments or actions appeared to motivate conversations that are unrelated to eSports, also without continuous involvement from him, resulting in a low level of stream-contextuality in line with the coding scheme. As mentioned in the CS:GO analysis, this indicates how the streamer can initiate

conversations in the chat, which arguably holds commercial opportunities. It was previously argued that the subscriber-only nature of the chat could explain why some users appeared to have prior knowledge on the topics, as their subscription could indicate that they share interests with Tfue that apparently go beyond eSports.

As explained in the introduction, subscriber badges indicate the seniority of user subscriptions. These badges are commented on by users on multiple occasions:

M3lko88: “@Tfue how about new sub badges ?” (appendix 5, p. 243)

Starscream11203: “Spongebob badges @tfue” (appendix 5, p. 244)

Aftermaf: “I remember when he said new sub badges still waiting” (appendix 5, p. 238)

On the Twitch platform it is also possible to “gift” (i.e. donate) subscriptions to other users, which users comment on in the examples below. They also include examples of users expressing emotions related to being a subscriber:

Dannyspitt: “Thanks for the gifted bro” (appendix 5, p. 256)

Ezomad: “hey, whoever gifted me a sub, thanks” (appendix 5, p. 229)

Haleplaysyt: “@15mk7gti my sub ended today that I had bought and it expired today all of a sudden I was lucky and I got gifted again I’m so happy” (appendix 5, p. 228)

Justinpvp13: “THANKS pigeon for gifted sub” (appendix 5, p. 242)

Flxsh11: “Feels good to finally be a sub” (appendix 5, p. 235)

In the first group of examples, users seem curious about the idea of new subscriber badges and directly ask Tfue whether development of such are in progress. Furthermore, new badges seem to be an urgent matter for some users. In the second group of examples, users express positive emotions related to being a subscriber, such as happiness and gratitude. The curiosity and positive emotions could be considered an insight into the users’ emotions toward Tfue’s channel. This might drive the users’ engagement in the content of the channel, but also the streamer as a person. Furthermore, the comments show how some users display their support and dedication to

the channel for other users and Tfue to see. This could also support the indication that some users are not necessarily participating in the chat for discussing interests similar to Tfue's, but for social interactions and relations.

The users' interest in the subscriber badges could also be interpreted as an interest in displaying subscription seniority and thereby how long the users have been supporting the channel and the streamer. Arguably, this supports the indication regarding users participating in the chat for social interaction: as the subscriber badges are symbols of seniority, the badges might reflect the level of engagement that a user has in Tfue's channel. In other words, the badges could potentially foster recognition and social acknowledgement.

Category: Unrelated to eSports

Subcategory: Unrelated to streamer

General content of this category

The contents of this category primarily consist of conversations featuring opinions and arguments from users that are unrelated to eSports and the streamer. The conversations are especially focused on sports, where the most prominent one is the conversation on specific combat sports tournaments such as MMA and UFC. As this one stands out, it will be elaborated on in its own paragraph below. Other sports-related conversations feature basketball and fitness products and the users' opinions on these. As these conversations are prominent in the chat and have no context to the stream, it could suggest that users subscribing to Tfue's channel have a personal interest in sports. This finding will be analyzed in-depth during the analysis of the lengthy combat sports-related conversation.

Users tend to comment their opinions and arguments even without motivation from an active conversation on a topic, such as sports. In this category, several comments are simply meanings, such as when users state their favorite singers, which could be attempts at starting new conversations. This can also be seen in comments where users ask a question in the chat, such as when users ask other users about their favorite food place, which could be an invitation to other users to contribute with their own meanings and initiate a conversation. Other comments that

generally appear throughout the chat could also be attempts at starting a conversation, but they are arguably lower on content and less likely to gain a response from other users. These comments include users simply stating what they are doing at the moment, such as the user browngetsbodyez who comments “I am getting a tattoo right now” (appendix 5, p. 246), or users greeting the chat. However, these are not responded to by other users on any occasions. It does, however, support the observation that some users attempt to start new conversations unrelated to conversations already taking place.

MMA and UFC-related conversation

As mentioned, a prominent conversation on combat sports tournaments within MMA and UFC is taking place between the users throughout the chat. These comments have been categorized as “unrelated to streamer”, as one particular user attempts to start the conversation on two occasions without involvement from the streamer:

hansi12333: “what u think about ufc fight yesterday?” (appendix 5, p. 237)

hansi12333: “Yoel Romero lost yesterday” (appendix 5, p. 239)

Between the comments, no users reply to the questions from hansi12333, but then the streamer starts responding to live chat comments including hansi12333’s. This response from the streamer appears to initiate the conversation between the users that remains on-going for the majority of the live chat. Under these circumstances, the conversation could be considered related to the streamer, as his response initiates the conversation. However, as the users keep interacting with each other on this topic without the streamer’s continuous involvement, the conversation becomes unrelated to the streamer. The beginning of this on-going conversation could indicate how Tfue has a certain influence on the topic of the chat.

As the stream progresses, more users join this particular conversation, sharing their meanings on who is the better MMA or UFC fighter. This is apparent in comments such as:

bnathan3: “wtf yomero is not the better fighter” (appendix 5, p. 249)

woochriss: “Izzy has beat the better competition he out classes yeol in every way”
(appendix 5, p. 253)

Some users contribute to the conversation frequently by expressing their meanings on multiple occasions:

woochriss: “It wasn’t Izzy fault since when does Izzy have a boring fight now look at hell”
(appendix 5, p. 243)

woochriss : “He beat robbery whitter he has the highest take down defense in the division lol”
(appendix 5, p. 250)

woochriss: “Izzy has beat the better competition he out classes yeol in every way”
(appendix 5, p. 253)

woochriss: “Connor will get smash his next fight watch” (appendix 5, p. 257)

Other users do not necessarily contribute to the conversation frequently, but type longer comments such as:

Rit_ualize: “lmao so many casuals.. jones is fkn old and hes not in his prime. izzy in his prime, he has all the skills to beat jones if he can make the weight” (appendix 5, p. 259)

The examples above prove how this particular conversation generates engagement from numerous users. This engagement could partly be a result of the chat being accessible for subscribers only. As users pay a monthly subscription fee to gain access to the live chat, they have arguably already proven that they are engaged in the content of the streamer’s channel. This could also explain why some users appear to have pre-existing knowledge on this particular conversation topic. When selecting which streamer to subscribe to, sharing personal interests with the streamer might motivate the users to support that particular streamer. Hansi12333’s attempts at starting this conversation might therefore not be completely unrelated to the streamer, if the streamer has displayed his interest in this topic in previous streams.

Also, due to the length and content of the conversation, it appears that participating users already had some prior knowledge on the topic, suggesting that some of the streamer's viewers share his interests unrelated to the game. Based on the engagement from all users participating in the chat, however, the continuous flow of the conversation is not necessarily based on awareness of the streamer's interest in the topic, suggesting that the conversation becomes unrelated to the streamer. The level of stream-contextuality is therefore discussable, but it remains in the "unrelated to eSports" main category.

Other comments exemplify how some users ask questions in relation the conversation:

M3lko88: "Who won Joanna or the chinice girl ?" (appendix 5, p. 251)

Samirhendawi: "khabib or tony?" (appendix 5, p. 258)

SCHMECK88: "u think khabib could beat gsp?" (appendix 5, p. 266)

Hansi12333, the user who initiated the conversation after Tfue addressed his questions in the chat, also asks questions during the conversation, but repeats them in rapid succession as no users answer him. Finally, he follows up with his own meaning after receiving no responses:

Hansi12333: "what`s your honest opinion on Conor McGregor?" (appendix 5, p. 242)

Hansi12333: "your thoughts on conro mcgregor?" (appendix 5, p. 246)

Hansi12333: "conor mcgregor is better then everyone" (appendix 5, p. 250)

Hansi12333: "conor mcgregor is ufc best fighteer" (appendix 5, p. 253)

All these comments could also be examples of a different pattern: Some users do not only participate in the conversation unrelated to eSports because they share interests with the streamer, but also because they seek social interactions and relations. Hansi12333's comments in particular could exemplify how some users are so eager to interact with other users that they do not accept being ignored. In other words, it can be questioned whether these types of users are genuinely interested in the topic of conversation, or if they are just attempting to interact socially with other users. This finding can be backed by the previous finding on users that share

unmotivated opinions or questions as attempts at starting a conversation. They might not have the knowledge or personal interest to participate in a particular sports-related conversation, and, instead of just observing the chat, they attempt to initiate a conversation that they are able to participate in. The existence of this main and subcategory itself (unrelated to eSports and streamer) could also support how some users participate in the chat for social interactions, as they are not engaging in the stream solely based on their interest in the game or the streamer.

6.5 Main findings of the Fortnite netnographic analysis

The main findings of the Fortnite netnographic analysis are presented below:

The users participating in conversations unrelated to eSports share personal interests with the streamer

This finding is based on the occurrence of sports-related conversations, which initiates as a result of Tfue commenting on specific topics, such as combat sports tournaments, or performing certain actions, such as drinking from his shaker. Some users are also actively contributing to the conversations, which suggests that they have pre-existing knowledge and interest in the topics. The subscribers-only nature of the chat and the subscriber badges it entails also indicate that users are particularly engaged in the streamer, possibly beyond their common interest in eSports. Finally, the users also include Tfue in the conversation at a specific point, which could prove the users' awareness of Tfue's interest in combat sports.

Some users participate in the chat to experience social interactions

This finding is arguably the most prominent one, as it is grounded in observations and analyses across all subcategories. The main observations include certain user behaviors and patterns in terms of e.g. how some users contribute frequently to conversations both un- and related to eSports, and how some user comments are completely unmotivated and are arguably attempts at starting new conversations. In some instances, users also attempt to interact with the streamer based on their tendency to address Tfue in different conversations, and this also appears when the frequency of comments increases as a result of Tfue responding to user

comments on some occasions. It was also evident in the chat that some users ascribe a certain meaning to seniority of subscription to Tfue's channel and offer their suggestions and assistance for new subscriber badges.

Users are highly engaged in the chat during extraordinary in-game events to achieve a sense of participation

This finding is mainly based on the users that comment during these events despite the high frequency of user comments. There is an excessive use of gaming lingo during these in-game events, which could be seen as attempts to display user engagement and knowledge on the lingo, ultimately resulting in a sense of participation.

The streamer has influence on the conversation topic

This finding is based on the numerous occasions on which Tfue engages with the chat or performs an action resulting in a user conversation on a specific topic, such as when he responds to the comments on combat sports tournaments, expresses his thoughts on which sports he would be good at, and drinks from his shaker. The examples prove how Tfue drives the topic and motivates user engagement.

Figure 8: Main findings of the Fortnite netnographic analysis

6.6 League of Legends analysis

For each subcategory, general observations of the League of Legends stream broadcasted by the streamer "Gosu" will be presented followed by examples of comments and conversations from the chat. Lastly, the observations will be summarized as main findings.

The analysis is based on 1,000 comments retrieved from a League of Legends stream chat. More specifically, it is retrieved from a stream broadcasted by the streamer "Gosu". Approximately 5,000 users were following the stream at the time that the comments were submitted and retrieved. The exact number of users differs from minute to minute, or even second to second, as

users join and leave the stream frequently. Gosu's Twitch chat is categorized as a "follower only chat", meaning that only users who are following Gosu, which is free of charge but requires a minor action, are able to comment on the stream. The comments from Gosu's stream chat are divided and described through each category specified in the coding scheme.

Category: eSports-related

Subcategory: Related to game in-stream

General content of this category

The comments related to the game in-stream generally include comments on actions and events taking place in-game, the characters involved in the game, and the decision-making carried out in-game. Generally, these comments appear to be immediate reactions to what is happening on the stream.

Many users comment on specific actions taking place in the game. Examples of users doing this are:

Sagaba: "Sylas ulting leona LULW" (appendix 6, p. 303)

anyen: "that irelia got huge shutdowns on the last top fight" (appendix 6, p. 303)

In the first comment, the user refers to two characters in League of Legends known as "Sylas" and "Leona". The word "ulting" refers to a specific powerful ability that every character possesses, which can be used on enemy players. The word "LULW" is a short expression for something being ridiculous and laughable and is frequently used on Twitch. Hence, the user Sagaba seems to believe that the fact that the character Sylas is "ulting" the character Leona is laughable or stupid. In the second comment, "shutdown" refers to receiving vast amounts of in-game currency, which the character "Irelia" receives after winning a fight.

Comments like these are representative for a majority of comments in the related to game in-stream subcategory. Some users' comments have even deeper specific focus on the characters in

the game and the specific state of each character. An example of a user commenting on the characters involved in the game could be:

silvur17: “how come every time I see a lee sin he's fed af no matter in which elo”
(appendix 6, p. 325)

In this example, “lee” is short for “Lee Sin” who is another character in League of Legends. Being “fed” refers to being “fed up”, meaning that the character currently is stronger and has an obvious advantage compared to the other characters present in the game.

Lastly, many comments related to the game in-stream revolve around the decision-making taking place in the game, in other words the tactical decisions made by the streamer who is playing, such as:

TickleMyFancy35: “shoulda flashed over wolves” (appendix 6, p. 303)

This user seems to believe that Gosu should have acted differently in-game to save his character’s life by “flashing over wolves”, which is in-game lingo for a specific ability and a specific location in the game. It is apparent from the highlighted comments that several users pay close attention to the stream and have opinions on different aspects of the game, which they express through the chat. Altogether, these comments indicate that users are likely to express their meanings on in-game activities and the comments clearly demonstrate a gaming lingo with “common” gaming expressions and expressions unique to League of Legends.

At one point in the stream, Gosu ends his League of Legends game. When initiating a new League of Legends match, a queue is entered while League of Legends’ matchmaking system arranges the next match. During this queue time, which is often longer for streamers with high rankings such as Gosu, he plays a different game called “Apex Legends”. This means that the users are temporarily watching a different game while waiting for the next League of Legends

match, which seems to affect the users' conversations and overall terminology. Several users indicate their dissatisfaction with the queue time and the choice of game, such as:

Brian2512: "16 minute queue Pog" (appendix 6, p. 315)

Appropriate_Kappa: "and don't why don't don't play apex, 3rd party crap" (appendix 6, p. 315)

In terms of the most apparent comments in this subcategory, they indicate that the events taking place on the stream influences the users' comments and the chat as a whole. In this regard, some of the expressed opinions related to the game in-stream occasionally tend to have a negative attitude towards the streamer and his actions, as seen in the comments:

Yalkerz: "Man why you go full melee" (appendix 6, p. 303)

Itzjaypee: "I literally get tilted when I watch you seing how bad adc role is" (appendix 6, p. 304)

The user Yalkerz does not seem to understand Gosu's decision-making and actions in the game. Going "full melee" refers to Gosu engaging his character in close combat with other characters, despite Gosu playing a character that has a long range, making him more effective at a longer distances. Itzjaypee gets "tilted", which refers to a mental state, often triggered by bad luck or poor play, where one becomes frustrated which subsequently results in aggravation of one's gameplay. These comments indicate that some users are skeptical and rather negative in regard to the gameplay performed by the streamer and that it even affects the mood of some users. This could also indicate that while a large number of users are seemingly supporters of the streamer, some users comment negatively towards him, which might indicate that not all users are supportive of the streamer. Altogether, users' meanings are not necessarily supporting the stream or the streamer, but are instead presented in a negative manner.

The comments related to the game in-stream also show that disagreements between users appear. On many occasions, this results in explicit language being exchanged between some users in the chat, as apparent in the following conversation:

blueginn: “why did she leave him directly?” (appendix 6, p. 321)

russelfanboy: “@blueginn are u stupid? if she stayed with aphelios, she would have die” (appendix 6, p. 321)

blueginn: “thx for asking me if i am stupid” (appendix 6, p. 321)

blueginn: “idiot” (appendix 6, p. 322)

In this conversation, the users blueginn and russelfanboy clearly have contradictory meanings on how the game should have been played out, which is another example of the strong meanings that the users have about the gameplay. Moreover, this conversation demonstrates how a simple disagreement in users’ meanings can lead to an argument. In such instances, the users are quick to call each other out and the tone becomes rather personal as seen in the use of the words “idiot” and “stupid”. Again, it appears that some users are rather negative when expressing themselves.

As already touched upon, some users express their opinions on what other users are commenting, such as in the examples below:

Jireun: “backseat gamers in chat” (appendix 6, p. 304)

うみの鏡 (moseschan167): “beautiful chat” (appendix 6, p. 305)

In both comments, the users presumably respond to other users commenting on Gosu’s playstyle as well as to the suggestions on how he can improve his skills. In terms of skills, Gosu is widely known as being among the very best of League of Legends players in the world, yet, some users present suggestions on how he should alter his gameplay. Again, these comments indicate that some users pay close attention to the other comments of the chat and that users are likely to express their meanings on other users’ expressions and meanings.

Category: eSports related

Subcategory: Related to game

General content of this category

The comments that are related to the game itself, but not the current activity on the streamer's screen, generally include different perspectives, such as the users' opinions on the current state of the game, advice for the game, and questions regarding the streamer's opinions and preferences within the game. League of Legends is regularly updated and altered by its game developers, which happens through so-called "metas" or "patches", which might be the reason for fluctuant views and for users' interest in Gosu's opinion about the current state of different aspects of the game. An example of a question regarding the game itself could be:

marko12123: "Which champ is the best adc rn in your opinion?" (appendix 6, p. 310)

The word "champ" is short for champion, which is a synonym for a character in the game. "Adc" is short for "attack damage carry", which is a specific type of character in the game. "Rn" is short for "right now". In sum, the user is asking the streamer about his opinion on the best characters within a specific category at the moment of the current meta. Comments like this demonstrate engagement and interest from users, not only in the game, but equally in Gosu's meaning about the state of the game. Inquiries directed to Gosu are apparent through several subcategories and demonstrate how users are interested in Gosu's opinions and meanings. With their interest, users are arguably likely to be influenced by Gosu's perspectives.

Another common topic of interest in this subcategory is advice and suggestions for the game. Users seem to seek advice in the chat, both from other users and from the streamer, and on some occasions users reply to each other's requests. Examples of this include:

my_name_got_banned: "is sett commonly played in the jg too" (appendix 6, p. 304)

Vilaov: "@my_name_got_banned Not that common but it can be used in jg yeah" (appendix 6, p. 304)

The comment from my_name_got_banned is not explicitly directed at anyone, e.g. other users or the streamer, however, another user responds to the question. This conversation is about a League of Legends character known as “Sett”, more specifically whether or not that character can be played in a specific role known as “jungle” or “jg”. It is apparent that the user Vilaov may perceive himself as a sort of expert by answering the question in that specific way, as he is expressing what he believes is common within the game.

Within this subcategory, one specific conversation stands out:

Elchapokush: “@FeelMyTears u on euw?” (appendix 6, p. 301)

FeelMyTears: “@Elchapokush no EUNE” (appendix 6, p. 301)

Elchapokush: “@FeelMyTears i can hop eune” (appendix 6, p. 301)

“EUW” is short for “Europe West”, and “EUNE” is short for “Europe Nordic/East”, which are two servers within League of Legends. In order to play together, players must have accounts on the same server. The users Elchapokush and FeelMyTears have a lengthy conversation throughout the chat, and this excerpt from the conversation shows how one of the two users suggests changing his server in order for them to play together. It is assumed that the users do not have any form of earlier established relationship before conversing in the chat. Hence, the conversation indicates that some users of the chat are eager to pursue social relations, e.g. by looking for like-minded individuals to interact and play with. Besides users addressing their interest and opinions on the current updates and other game-related advice, users seem to willingly share their own experiences within the game in different ways, as shown in the conversation about a specific character above. Another example of users expressing themselves in a game-related manner is:

Appropriate_Kappa: “i tried switching to top but its like relearning the game” (appendix 6, p. 317)

In this comment, it is apparent that the user has experienced challenges when changing his in-game playstyle, which he wishes to share with like-minded gamers who might have the same challenges.

Category: eSports related

Subcategory: Related to eSports

General content of this category

The comments of this subcategory are mostly addressing in-game settings. The most apparent topic within this category is related to specific gaming equipment, such as discussions about which gaming mouse and settings work best for certain games. Some of these conversations include complex definitions and descriptions about particular equipment features, which arguably necessitates a pre-understanding of the eSports ecosystems. An example of such a conversation can be seen below:

cleosathility: “@IceFluuxx wish my mouse supported 400DPI PepeHands I constantly switch between 800(games) and 6400(design)... ” (appendix 6, p. 309)

Hamza_NA: “you can also convert your league mouse settings to apex to try out using the converter on mouse-sensitivity dot com” (appendix 6, p. 310)

IceFluuxx: “@cleosathility My mouse is 11 y old and can switch to any dpi to 12k” (appendix 6, p. 310)

The users above are discussing mouse specifics and settings. The user Hamza_NA seems to be highly active on this topic and continuously offers his advice and support on mouse settings throughout the chat. Once again, engagement like this may indicate how some users act as experts, not only on the game, but also on other eSports related topics.

Category: Unrelated to eSports

Subcategory: Related to streamer

General content of this category

The comments in this subcategory are naturally directed to the streamer with different inquiries. These comments generally involve simply writing the name of the streamer, in what appears to be in the hope of getting his attention, e.g. by asking Gosu about his well-being or questions regarding his music taste and the music played in the stream. In contrast to some of the previously described negative comments towards Gosu and his gameplay, other users appear to be fond of Gosu, and these users express their positive views and interest towards him. This is evident in comments such as:

sorari95: “good morning gosu <3” (appendix 6, p. 313)

jednorogg: “@Gosu how are u today” (appendix 6, p. 319)

maxbd: “how old are you ?” (appendix 6, p. 310)

It appears that some users are eager to make Gosu feel better by wishing him a good morning and asking about his well-being, and in some instances, emojis depicting a heart are applied. Moreover, some users seem to be interested in personal characteristics of Gosu that are not related to eSports, such as his age. Again, these comments indicate users’ interest in Gosu, expressed in a way that resembles admiration. Arguably, several users admire Gosu, indicating that these users are likely to be influenced by his meanings. Other users apply an alternative approach in expressing their support and interests towards Gosu, and the comments posted by these users sometimes have underlying sexist connotations, such as the comments:

tartooq69: “show us your diiik @Gosu” (appendix 6, p. 302)

tartooq69: “Why don't u show face?” (appendix 6, p. 302)

It appears that the user tartooq69 is interested in the physical attributions and appearance of Gosu, who does not have a camera recording himself while streaming in contrast to many other streamers on Twitch. The user is rather explicit in regard to language use and apparent

intentions. However, other users pick up on the comments, expressing dissatisfaction with both the language and intentions of the user:

cleosathility: “@tartooq69 are u here for his face or gameplay?” (appendix 6, p. 302)

Elchapokush: “@tartooq69 language bro” (appendix 6, p. 302)

The rather offensive comments submitted by tartooq69 appear to be conflicting with the guidelines of the chat based on both the researchers’ own observations and from the reactions of other users. In this connection, it could be argued that the users cleosathility and Elchapokush are taking Gosu’s stand, defending him from an offensive user, which seems to be evident in other conversations within the same category:

tartooq69: “@Gosu Your emotes are trash mkae better” (appendix 6, p. 309)

silvur17: “these emotes are the best imo” (appendix 6, p. 309)

Again, the user tartooq69 presents a rather controversial comment directly towards the streamer. However, commenting one’s meaning on the streamer’s emotes does not seem to be unusual. In the example above, it could be argued that the user silvur17 is defending Gosu, as this user expresses an opposing view on the emotes. Despite the many comments directed to the streamer, the researchers observed that only few users are getting responses from him throughout the chat. However, it does happen occasionally, which at one point results in the following reaction from a user:

Elchapokush: “wow gosu responds to chat that's new i feel important now hahaha even tho i am working xd” (appendix 6, p. 300)

This user’s comment confirms the researchers’ observation regarding the lack of responses from the streamer, underlining that the streamer responding to comments is not common. Hence, when the streamer actually responds, it appears to excite the users. By responding, Gosu seemingly

makes the user feel important. Again, it appears that some of Gosu's viewers admire him and that these are likely to be highly influenced by his opinions and meanings.

Category: Unrelated to eSports

Subcategory: Unrelated to streamer

Unrelated to eSports - Unrelated to streamer

The comments that are unrelated to eSports and unrelated to the streamer include comments that apparently have no relation to either eSports in general, the events that are taking place on the streamer's screen, or the streamer himself. Yet, this subcategory contains a large number of the overall comments submitted to Gosu's streaming session, which indicates that several of the comments and conversations between users can be described as off-topic. This subcategory is wide-ranging with comments addressing different personal matters, the COVID-19 pandemic, music, drugs, and other interest-based topics. Furthermore, this subcategory seemingly has no limits in terms of the topics being discussed and it appears that the conversations can go in any direction.

Gosu is listening to music while streaming, which the users can also hear. Several comments indicate that some users are interested in the streamer's choice of music in different ways. Some users express their personal opinions on the music, while others want to know what exact music is being played at a given time, as apparent in the comments:

ViniGTR: "I love this song!!!" (appendix 6, p. 303)

Angel_man1: "Im dancing xD, what the name of song?" (appendix 6, p. 317)

Based on the comments, it appears that some users are willing to share personal meanings on other aspects than eSports and gaming. The users are expressing themselves by sharing how they feel about certain elements from the stream, which may be considered a type of self-expression or an attempt to engage in a conversation with others. Other conversations address topics of contemporary issues or areas of interest, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and these are also occasionally brought up in the chat, as seen in the following examples:

ynbswe: "corona is in my small town, Rip" (appendix 6, p. 305)

cleosathility: "@ynbswe it's literally no big deal people only freak out because it comes from another country." (appendix 6, p. 306)

This conversation is on a topic that, at the time of the study, was of high interest globally, yet it had no relation to the game, the streamer, or eSports in general. It appears that the user ynbswe is personally affected by the pandemic, while the user cleosathility seemingly attempts to calm the other user down by appearing knowledgeable about the COVID-19 situation. Similar to earlier observations, this may be considered an example of a user who acts as an expert on a given topic. Based on this conversation, it appears that topics of high interest in the general society make their way into eSports ecosystems.

Personal matters and events related to a specific user are also shared in the chat. At one point in the chat, the user dark__sovereign posts a comment announcing his birthday, which results in several congratulating responses as seen in the examples below:

dark__sovereign: "hi chat! today is my birthday" (appendix 6, p. 319)

boteo: "HAPPY DAYS" (appendix 6, p. 319)

gimmeluckinfo: "happy bday" (appendix 6, p. 319)

Nyaowi: "Happy birthday!" (appendix 6, p. 319)

lel2025_bruno: "@dark__sovereign happy birthday! I hope you enjoy it" (appendix 6, p. 319)

feelsuneasy: "happy birthdayyyy" (appendix 6, p. 319)

dark__sovereign: "awww ty guys" (appendix 6, p. 319)

Around 15 different users congratulate dark__sovereign. With this vast amount of feedback on the announced birthday, once again it appears that several users are paying close attention to the chat and are eager to join in on conversations whenever the topic is appealing to them. The amount of feedback on dark__sovereign's comment is unusual compared to other personal comments throughout the chat, as there are usually only few or no responses to these. Yet in this instance, several users pick up the comment and express their congratulations. Arguably, this

illustrates the users' motivation to engage with the rest of the Twitch platform and establish some form of social relations with other users. Other comments in this subcategory are seemingly not generating similar engagement in the chat based on responses. An example of this is a user asking the chat about entertainment recommendations:

kirbymain4th: "can someone please recommend me new good netflix series or movies"
(appendix 6, p. 309)

This attempt to engage with other users through an off-topic conversation is completely ignored, which is in contrast to the birthday conversation described above. Another type of message posters are also present throughout the chat. While these are not representative for a larger number of users, their comments were observed as noteworthy. The comments from these users are even more personal than simply stating one's birthday or asking for recommendations, as seen in the examples below:

techtreeman: "dont want to be alone" (appendix 6, p. 307)
theXuei: "i hate myself" (appendix 6, p. 310)

These two comments are not appearing in extension of each other and do not seem to be related in any way, as they are posted on different occasions in the chat. However, the underlying messages of the comments can be considered as rather depressing and private messages that one would most likely not normally share in a chat room with several strangers or anonymous users present. Hence, the anonymity of the users can once again be highlighted as a driving factor for the users' engagement and willingness to engage with others. As already touched upon, it appears that some users are engaging in the stream's chat seeking social relations on a platform with like-minded individuals. Whether this stems from the users not already having a satisfactory personal network or that they are simply looking to increase their current network can be questioned. However, with the comments mentioned above in mind, it appears that some users are present in the chat because they are simply lonely and looking for any kind of company to fulfill their social needs.

Looking at the types of comments in this subcategory indicates that neither eSports, the game in-stream, or the streamer exclusively drive the ongoing conversation topics in the chat. Even though it initially seems like the streamer and in-stream activities are driving the topics of the chat, a closer exploration reveals that the chat topics can be taken in several directions. When this happens, the conversations are not necessarily related to either eSports or the streamer, but are controlled by the users themselves and the conversations that they wish to engage in.

The researchers noted that some users comment randomly without any clear connection to the current topic or conversation, whereas other users are highly active throughout the chat and consistently attempt to engage in the conversations that they find relevant, such as the previously mentioned user tartooq69. Not only is tartooq69 an example of a highly active user, but also exemplifies the diverse topics of the stream's chat. The three different comments listed below demonstrate some of the topics and conversations that this user engages in. They are not listed in chronological order, but appear on different occasions in the chat:

tartooq69: "Bronze builds are back KEKW" (appendix 6, p. 307)

tartooq69: "guys is a 2.1 gpa good" (appendix 6, p. 300)

tartooq69: "show us your diiik @Gosu" (appendix 6, p. 302)

The first comment is related to the game with no specific recipient, as the user is commenting on something happening within the specific game in-stream. The second comment is unrelated to eSports as it concerns grades. Furthermore, this comment is apparently directed to other users of the chat, as the "guys" being addressed are assumed to be other users in the chat due to it being in the plural form and therefore not directed towards Gosu. The third comment, which has also been highlighted earlier, is in many ways explicit and offensive. However, it is an example of how some of the comments can be rather extreme and inappropriate. It can be argued that the posting of such comments is based on eagerness to get attention from the streamer or other users. Altogether, the three comments from the same user also show different types of approaches for engaging in conversation, with the first comment having no specific recipient, which makes it

rather open, the second targeting other users, and the third having the streamer as the main recipient.

6.7 Main findings of the League of Legends netnographic analysis

The main findings of the League of Legends netnographic analysis are presented below:

A large amount of comments goes beyond the topic of eSports

The most common conversations and the majority of the 1,000 comments explored throughout the League of Legends stream relate to the game itself or eSports in general. However, a significant amount of comments is not related to either eSports, the streamer, or the game itself. Rather, these comments or conversations span from users' birthday wishes and other personal matters to the COVID-19 crisis. These types of comments indicate that Twitch streams and Twitch as a platform are used for more than conversations on eSports and gaming.

Three conversation drivers exist: The stream, the streamer, and the users

It appears that three drivers exist that influence the conversations. Firstly, the events or incidents happening on the stream. Secondly, the topics that the streamer is talking about, and thirdly, what the users in the chat are talking about. This means that the streamer and the streamer's actions are not the only drivers of the conversations taking place, but that the users themselves also drive the initiation and development of conversations in the chat.

Negative comments create chat tensions

While one might be likely to believe that users of Twitch join a stream that they simply find enjoyable and can engage in and learn from, it appears that it is not the motivation of all users. In other words, some comments show that not all users seem to have a positive view on the stream and the streamer. While several users express positive views, some few other users express a negative view towards the streamer's actions or behavior. Moreover, the users are also prompt to be negative towards each other if they have conflicting views and meanings on

a certain topic in the chat. In general, it appears that it is important for many users to express their meanings on most topics in the chat, even if it leads to an argument.

Unique lingo is used in the chat

The vast majority of comments highlighted throughout the observations show a high presence of misspelling and in-correct, if not completely absent, punctuation and grammar. Thereby, it appears that many comments are of spontaneous nature. Also, most users express themselves through the use of gaming lingo. Some of the expressions are unique to League of Legends, as they relate to characters, abilities, locations, etc. that only exist in this game.

Figure 9: Main findings of the League of Legends netnographic analysis

6.8 Emergence of patterns across the streams

This section compares the main findings from the analyses of the three streams for the purpose of determining whether any patterns can be identified across the streams. The main findings from the analyses have been collectively discussed by the researchers in order to identify similarities and differences.

After a collective discussion on the main findings, as they are summarized at the end of each analysis, the researchers identified certain patterns. In the process of analyzing the 3,000 comments, the researchers approached the data from each stream inductively. This implies that the researchers would not approach the other analyses in a deductive manner with previous findings in mind. As a result, a finding that initially seemed to be present only in one stream was not immediately dismissed but was instead discussed and evaluated. In other words, observations and main findings from one stream that are not presented in another stream do not imply that similar observations are completely absent. They might still occur, but not to a degree to which they were emphasized during the analysis. The identified patterns are presented on the next page.

User participation is based on social motivations beyond common interest in eSports

This pattern relating to social interactions in the chat is present across all streams. First and foremost, conversations on eSports-related topics were observed in every stream. However, a large amount of comments and conversations are about topics unrelated to eSports. Thereby, it appears that the social interactions on the Twitch platform go beyond the common interest in eSports and gaming, which indicates that Twitch is also widely used as a forum for social interactions.

Gaming lingo is prevalent in the chats

This pattern was observed in all streams, as comments in the chats include a frequent use of gaming lingo. Knowledge and understanding of this unique lingo are arguably prerequisites to fully understand the content of the chat and meaning of the language. Moreover, it was observed that each game had its own unique language related to the game, such as in-game characters, maps, and items. However, several expressions recur across all chats and seem to be universal in the eSports ecosystems and not game specific. Examples of these expressions include “KEKW”, “LULW”, “lol”, and “pog”.

Subscribing users are particularly engaged in the streamer

As the chat in the Fortnite stream was the only subscriber-only chat in the streams, this pattern is naturally only emphasized in the Fortnite analysis and is therefore observed on fewer occasions in the other live chats. During the Fortnite analysis, it was found that subscribing users seem to share interests with the streamer to a larger degree compared to users in the CS:GO and League of Legends chats. Despite the fewer observations on subscription-related comments in the other chats, this pattern should not be dismissed, as this is arguably a natural outcome of the subscriber-only chat.

The streamer, the stream, and the users drive the conversations

Across all streams, it was observed that three main drivers of conversations exist: 1) the streamer, 2) the stream, and 3) the users. It was found that the streamer has a major influence on the conversation topic, such as when Tfue addressed the combat sports-related comments in the

Fortnite chat, or when Stewie2K asked users about food suggestions in the CS:GO chat. Moreover, it was observed that certain in-game events often motivate conversations, such as when users react to something happening in the game in the stream. Finally, users were also observed to drive conversations, as they would often engage in lengthy conversations without involvement from the streamer and discuss topics unrelated to the stream.

User comments have unpredictable and spontaneous traits

As the highlighted comments illustrate across all three streams, user comments have a high presence of misspellings and grammar errors, and a general absence of punctuation, which makes the comments appear spontaneous. This could be a result of the nature of the chat, as it is live, fast paced, and users are anonymous. It could also explain why some comments appear random and out of context.

Negative comments create chat tensions

The League of Legends stream analysis in particular found numerous user comments expressing negative attitudes directed towards e.g. other users or the streamer. In the instances where other users respond to such comments by expressing their conflicting views, an argument develops and chat tensions arise on some occasions, and these arguments develop without the streamer's involvement. Negative comments are also present in the Fortnite and CS:GO chat, however not to a similar degree as the League of Legends chat. In the case of Fortnite, the lower degree of negativity may be due to the fact that paying subscribing users could have a predetermined positive view on the streamer's channel and its content and may therefore be more supportive to the streamer by nature.

Summary of patterns

The patterns emerging from the analysis of the netnographic observations are as follows:

User participation is based on social motivations beyond common interest in eSports.

Gaming lingo is prevalent in the chats.

Subscribing users are particularly engaged in the streamer.

The streamer, the stream, and the users drive the conversations.

User comments have unpredictable and spontaneous traits.

Negative comments create chat tensions.

Table 8: Emerging patterns across Twitch streams

7. Interview analysis

In this analytical section, the data from the three depth interviews will be analyzed. As described in the methodical section, the data has been categorized into four color-based main categories through a process of individual iterations and group discussions. After identifying the color-based main categories, all interview transcripts were color coded (appendix 13, 14 & 15) and systematically sorted into a scheme (appendix 16, 17 & 18). On the basis of the color-coded scheme, an emic coding approach was applied in order to explore the main categories and identify emerging patterns within. The color-based main categories and emerging patterns are illustrated on the next page, in which the main categories are marked in bold.

Gaming consumption	Stream consumption	Chat engagement	Commercial experiences
Social aspect	Social aspect	Passive and active engagement	Integrated commercial aspect
Interconnection with stream consumption	Streamer persona	Social relations	Different attitudes
	Platform characteristics	Interactions	
	Consumption habits	Gaming lingo	
	Interconnection with gaming habits		

Table 9: Color-based categories and emerging patterns

The interview analysis will follow the structure of table 9, analyzing the results in line with the categories and patterns identified through the color- and emic-coding approaches. As the interviews were conducted in Danish, the extracts introduced in the analysis are translated to English as accurately as possible in order to properly reflect the meaning of the expressions. As a result, the translations resemble casual spoken language.

7.1 Gaming consumption

All three of the interviewees have distinct gaming habits. They are all experienced gamers in the sense that they have played many different video games throughout their lives and that they are currently playing multiple video games on a weekly basis. In other words, gaming is an integral part of their weekly routines and it appears that gaming takes up a considerable amount of time in all of the interviewees' spare time. Additionally, all interviewees play video games several hours a week on an average basis.

Social aspect

The pattern "social aspect" is identified as the social aspect of gaming is expressed in all three interviews. The social aspect of video games and the opportunity of socializing through the

games appears to be a major, if not the greatest, contributor to why the interviewees are so engaged in gaming and eSports. When interviewee 3 is asked what gaming means to him, he responds:

Interviewee 3: “It means a lot. I use it as a free space where I unwind and talk to my friends. It’s a good way to talk to someone who lives in e.g. Copenhagen, who you don’t see that often. To catch up on everything. Really just to sit down and have a good time in the same way you would over a cup of coffee.” (appendix 12, p. 392)

It appears from the quote that gaming is used as a way to socialize. Also, it exemplifies how gaming substitutes physical interaction from the perspective of interviewee 3, as a similar sense of social interaction is seemingly obtained through gaming. Therefore, gaming appears to be used as a way to nurture friendships in general, but also as a way to nurture friendships that are outside of one’s physical reach. Interviewee 1 describes the social aspect as the primary driver of his gaming consumption and expresses that the social element has been the foundation of the games he chooses to play, which is why he prefers playing team-based games. He adds that the games he plays typically have large online communities related to them. Interviewee 2 emphasizes group cohesiveness when asked about his relation to gaming.

Interconnection with stream consumption

The second subcategory identified within gaming habits is “interconnection with stream consumption”. It appears that the gaming habits of the interviewees play a major role in their stream consumption and vice versa. All three interviewees primarily watch streams related to games that they are currently playing. However, watching a stream on e.g. a new game also appears to inspire the interviewees to play the specific game in the future.

7.2 Stream consumption

Social aspect

Across each of the interviews, an observed pattern is that the interviewees associate the use of gaming and eSports streaming platforms, such as Twitch, with social aspects. When asked about their motivations for using a streaming platform and following a specific streamer, a commonly shared notion was that the social aspects have a large influence. This can be seen in the responses from interviewee 1:

Interviewee 1: “at the same time, the social aspect counts, as the ones that you play with will also follow that stream, and through that you establish a common interest.” (appendix 10, p. 351)

Interviewee 1: “since Twitch is so large in size, there is also a bigger community.” (appendix 10, p. 353)

The views about the importance of socializing is also expressed by interviewee 2, as apparent in his response when asked about the choice of streamers:

Interviewee 2: “I would be more likely to follow them if they have an appealing behavior rather than if they did not engage in the chat. Someone that integrates himself with the stream and with the viewers.” (appendix 11, p. 372)

Interviewee 3 shares the focus on the social aspects, especially in regard to the choice of streamers, who are also mentioned in the quotes by their streamer names, e.g. as seen in the response:

Interviewee 3: “imaqtpie is a classic. He is cozy. Then there is Midbeast, he is kind of the same type, a type that you can identify yourself with.” (appendix 12, p. 397)

The quotes from interviewee 2 and 3 compliment each other in regard to the apparent importance that the streamer has in relation to their stream consumption. The social aspect is emphasized when the interviewees use expressions such as “appealing”, “integrate”, “cozy” and “identify”,

as these reveal the importance of the social aspect in their stream consumption. Moreover, what these responses arguably have in common is that they depict a picture of social needs and motivations in terms of streaming consumption. The focus on Twitch as an online community, the likeliness to follow a streamer who engages with the chat and being able to identify oneself with the streamer could suggest that Twitch can be seen as an eSports ecosystem in which consumers have motivations beyond watching gaming and eSports.

Streamer persona

This subcategory is in many ways inextricably linked with the social aspect as the streamer seems to be a major factor in terms of creating a social environment on Twitch. However, there are some statements from the interviewees that can be explored exclusively with a focus on the streamer's persona and the significance that this has for the stream consumption of the interviewees.

Each interviewee describes what they personally emphasize when participating in a streaming session, particularly how the streamer can influence the overall experience of a stream. In this context, a recurring characteristic is "behavior". Most of the expressions essentially revolve around a certain behavior as a prerequisite for a positive streaming experience. Interviewee 1 expresses how he prefers certain streamers:

Interviewee 1: "[I] return to certain streamers because they knows how they do things, how they behave and talk during the stream." (appendix 10, p. 355)

On the other hand, interviewee 1 also provides an example of a streamer that he dislikes due to his behaviour:

Interviewee 1: "[The streamer] uses a lot of energy on trash-talking other streamers or players and generally misbehaving" (appendix 10, p. 355)

Interviewee 3 refers to the same streamer when describing negative streaming experiences, as evident in the statement:

Interviewee 3: “When he is streaming, his whole persona is built around being a loud, macho kind of guy, who tends to throw his keyboard around and punch his screen and so on (..) some probably find that entertaining, but it makes me leave immediately.” (appendix 12, p. 398)

Interviewee 2 seems to share the notion that the characteristics of streamers have a large influence on the choices regarding stream consumption, as expressed in the response:

Interviewee 2: “If something catches my attention, for example a guy like Simon Talbot, who is streaming something. He is just very entertaining, and that makes me more willing to watch him” (appendix 11, p. 373)

In this quote, interviewee 2 is referring to the Danish comedian Simon Talbot who has a streaming channel on Twitch. The willingness to watch a streamer who appeals to the interviewees’ own personality reflects the social aspect explained above, where the behavior of the streamer was identified as being significant for the interviewees’ streaming consumption. Interviewee 3 stresses the appreciation of following a streamer who is “cozy” and “identifiable”, which suggests that he selects streamers based on their personal traits. In the same sense, interviewee 1 explains that he prefers streamers that he knows well, e.g. in terms of their behavior and the way that they talk during the stream.

Altogether, it appears that the interviewees tend to follow the streamers that appeal to their own personal values, either through a specific behavior or the way the streamers talk and act during a streaming session. Moreover, it illustrates the large influence that a single streamer has on the interviewees’ stream consumption.

Platform characteristics

Each interviewee express that they prefer Twitch over other streaming platforms. When asked about their motivations for selecting Twitch, the interviewees highlight different characteristics that they personally find important. As explained earlier, Twitch currently dominates the live streaming market in terms of users and hours watched, which is also something that the interviewees address. Besides this observation, other elements seem to affect their choices, such as a wide selection of streamers and games, and the platform's user-friendliness. Interviewee 1 states:

Interviewee 1: “[I] would typically choose Twitch, as it is the biggest streaming platform, and at the same time it has been around for the longest time.” (appendix 10, p. 352)

At first, this response suggests that using Twitch could just be a habit more than an actual choice, which is also brought up by interviewee 3:

Interviewee 3: “As with everything else, I am a creature of habit, and Twitch has been around for so many years. Twitch is kind of rooted in me, so it is not really an active choice made by myself.” (appendix 12, p. 396)

However, other selection criteria are also highlighted, as interviewee 1 considers Twitch as the platform with the best selection and the biggest online community. Interviewee 1 also seems to pay attention to the language that is being used on Twitch, explaining that “the language and the professionalism found on Twitch is more adjusted to a person who spends several hours every week on a game” (appendix 10, p. 353), which might imply that the interviewee prefers a platform in which the content is more suited for dedicated eSports consumers as himself.

In terms of criteria, interviewee 3 describes the importance of user-friendliness, as seen in the comment:

Interviewee 3: “on Twitch, I only need to click three times to join a stream that I like. That does not happen on Mixer. And Twitch is also much more user-friendly and easy to use.” (appendix 12, p. 396)

Interviewee 2 also points to the wide selection of streamers on Twitch, which is one of the deciding factors for him when choosing a streaming platform, as expressed in the statement:

Interviewee 2: “The ones that I follow the most are streaming on Twitch. So I do not see any reason to move to a platform such as Mixer and find new streamers.” (appendix 11, p. 370)

However, when asked about his willingness to move to another platform, e.g. “Mixer”, interviewee 2 also expresses that he would be likely to do so if his favorite streamers moved to that platform. Again, this could indicate that the role of the streamer is one of the core criteria when choosing a platform, and at the same time, it raises a question of whether the platform itself is actually secondary to the role of the streamers. This question is enhanced by interviewee number 3, who expresses that he would consider moving to Mixer if his favorite streamers started streaming exclusively on that platform.

Consumption habits

The interviewees highlight different factors that influence their stream consumption habits. In this context, the subcategory relates to the way in which gaming and eSports streaming have become an integral part of the interviewees’ lives through everyday habits. A general pattern in this relation is how streaming has in many ways become a substitute for other services or sources of entertainment for the interviewees, such as flow-TV or Netflix. All three interviewees share this notion, as expressed by the interviewees when asked about using Twitch instead of another service:

Interviewee 1: “Often, I do not want to start looking for a new tv-show, and in that case I will use streaming instead. In the evening before I go to sleep, for instance, I will often watch a streamer for maybe half an hour. So I do it more than I might think.” (appendix 10, p. 350)

Interviewee 2: “I do. If there, for example, is a big CS: GO tournament taking place, I will always choose that one instead of Netflix or something like that.” (appendix 11, p. 379)

Interviewee 3: “In many ways, I think it is a direct substitute for e.g. flow-TV. Many people, myself included, use it in the same way as watching TV. I use it when I need to relax in the evening, and I use streams while eating breakfast, where I previously would have watched Go’ Morgen Danmark.” (appendix 12, p. 395)

These examples demonstrate the significance of eSports streaming in the interviewees’ everyday lives, as it is clearly prioritized over other traditional entertainment sources such as flow-TV.

Furthermore, it becomes evident that the streaming consumption on Twitch is multi-faceted in terms of how it is being used by the interviewees. Besides the fact that it seems to be a substitute experience for other channels, the interviewees stress that using Twitch and following streamers is also a question of improving their own skills within a specific game. This is apparent in the responses:

Interviewee 1: “They are professional in what they do and they play it 24/7, so you learn some things that make you better at a game. You become inspired by some very good players and teams.” (appendix 10, p. 351)

Interviewee 2: “There is an eSports coach who streams and occasionally shares advice. I think that is cool.” (appendix 11, p. 378)

Interviewee 3: “I sure do (...) I tend to watch World of Warcraft streams to learn tactics.” (appendix 12, p. 399)

These quotes illustrate how Twitch has multiple functions for the interviewees in regard to their consumption. Seemingly, the consumption of Twitch fulfills several needs simultaneously, as the

interviewees are both able to use it for leisure purposes and relaxing, but at the same time, they also consume it for educational purposes and improving their own skills while consuming something they are already highly engaged in.

Interconnection with gaming habits

This subcategory demonstrates the interconnection between the games that are considered interesting by the interviewees and their consumption of streams. In the interviews, it is evident that the interviewees' choices regarding which streamers to follow and which games to watch are highly influenced by their gaming habits. Arguably, this resonates with the consumption patterns described above, as all three interviewees stress how they also use streams to improve their own skills within a game. This helps to exemplify the interviewees' levels of engagement in gaming and in streams, and moreover, it shows that they tend to follow a streamer who shares the same interests as themselves in terms of games. Once again, the social aspect of streaming habits can be highlighted, as a reason for choosing a streamer who shares the same interests might also be linked to the importance of being able to identify oneself with the streamer. Also, as described in the gaming consumption category, the interviewees' streaming consumption may influence their gaming consumption: If they watch a stream on a new game and find it appealing, they are likely to try the game out themselves.

7.3 Chat engagement

Passive and active engagement

All interviewees have engaged in chats, but at varying degrees. Interviewee 2 participates regularly for different reasons, whereas the two other respondents primarily use the chats to observe participants' reactions to certain in-game events. Despite not actively participating by contributing with comments, their interest in the chat indicates a passive engagement, which is expressed in the following:

Interviewee 1: “Despite not participating in the chat, I am following it, and if there are a couple of thousand viewers on the stream, the chat typically explodes and it is difficult to not notice it.” (appendix 10, p. 358)

Interviewee 3: “If I am watching a streamer and he does something stupid, such as dying in a situation where he should not have died, then I might follow the chat when it goes crazy. Just to sit and think that people are dumb (...) Or the other way around, if the streamer does something really well, it is amusing to see how the chat suddenly explodes and people write all sorts of stuff.” (appendix 12, p. 401)

Despite not participating in the Twitch chat regularly, interviewee 3 states that he participates in a separate and private chat on another platform with individuals that he plays games with, as it is less hectic and more private than the chat on Twitch. The interviewee makes the following point when asked about his motivation to participate in this chat instead:

Interviewee 3: “It is like all other types of spectator sports. It is social. It is fun to watch something at the same time that interests my friends and me. It is no different from watching a football match.” (appendix 12, p. 405)

Interviewee 2 regularly participates in chats and is more actively engaged than interviewee 1 and 3. He also makes a point similar to the expressions by the other interviewees, in which he comments on chats with a large amount of comments:

Interviewee 2: “In general, if I am watching streamers who have a lot of viewers, I do not participate in the chat. I do not see any reason to spam more as all the others. It just seems unnecessary. If it is being written 20 times, I cannot see how my comment can make a difference (...) But if no one is writing anything, then I might write something.” (appendix 11, p. 376)

The examples above indicate how the interviewees engage in the chat differently. As mentioned, interviewee 1 and 3 are more passively engaged in the public chats and appear to be motivated

by the entertainment that the chat provides, but also by the specific situations in which the chat “explodes” or “goes crazy”. Despite only passively engaging in the chat, it could be a way to passively share their emotions and reactions towards the events in the game with the users participating in the chat. This can also be supported by the point made by interviewee 3 when he expresses his motivation to participate in a private chat when watching eSports with his friends. Interviewee 2 made similar observations in terms of the passages in the chat with high volumes of comments, which discourages his active participation. If there is a low frequency of comments, however, he expresses how he might actively share his reaction in the chat, which could be a way to actively share his emotions and reactions towards events in the game with the other chat participants.

Social relations

All three interviewees noticed that a social aspect of the chat exists, which is not necessarily connected to the game or eSports. Interviewee 1 and 3 have observed how chat participants seem to have social relations to each other and the streamer:

Interviewee 1: “If they are writing to the streamer, then I have noticed that people write something personal to the streamer, like a “how are you” message. It is almost a friendly conversation that is going on.” (appendix 10, p. 359)

Interviewee 3: “[on certain chats with fewer participants] Then it seems like a small community. These are users that spend a lot of time in there and kind of know each other in there.” (appendix 12, p. 404)

Interviewee 2 has even developed social relations through the chat, as he expresses by stating:

Interviewee 2: “you start knowing the same users by being in the same chat for months. They are typically frequent visitors. And slowly you start developing a relationship with them. Then you chat with them. I have experienced it myself, I have become friends with several fellow spectators.” (appendix 11, p. 384)

These expressions seem to agree that social relations develop in the chat, primarily between more frequent participants that engage in the chat regularly. The relations could be based on their common interest in the specific game or the streamer, as it was found earlier that personal gaming habits influence the interviewees' engagement in a certain streamer. However, the social relations could also be more personally motivated, as it is arguably not necessarily the common interest in the game or the streamer that drive chat engagement. Particular observations on conversations unrelated to the chat was made by interviewee 2, in which chat participants use the chat as a forum to:

Interviewee 2: "... get some aggressions out and share their problems with others than themselves and to get information that they might as well have found elsewhere." (appendix 11, p. 383)

These expressions suggest that the social relations in the chat could be based on common personal interests beyond eSports.

Interactions

During the interviews, the interviewees express different reflections on what drives chat engagement. In this regard, some of the most consistent drivers seem to be the streamer, the stream, and interaction opportunities. Reflections on how the streamer drives chat engagement can be seen in the expressions below:

Interviewee 1: "I definitely think that the chat is important for the more hardcore fans of some of these streamers, as it is their opportunity to communicate with this streamer. If they did not have the chat, they might as well watch it [the stream] on TV, where they would not have any way to communicate with the streamer. There are definitely some people who use these streams to communicate with the specific streamer." (appendix 10, p. 360)

Interviewee 2: “Yes, I sometimes write a comment to the streamer. If I know, for example, that he needs advice, then I might say, *hey, this I know, you just have to do this and that.*” (appendix 11, p. 375)

In the examples above, interviewee 2 expresses how he occasionally writes a comment to the streamer, and interviewee 1 reflects on how the opportunity to interact with the streamer drives some chat engagement. Interviewee 1 also observed how some users interact with the streamer in a more personal and friendly manner by having conversations unrelated to the stream. This was primarily observed by the interviewees in chats on streamer channels that had a small amount of followers and participants, yet it still supports how the streamer can drive engagement. It seems that the opportunity to interact with the streamer is particularly critical in terms of driving chat engagement, as both interviewee 1 and 2 observed and reflected on how streamer interactions affect the chat. Additionally, as previously referred to, interviewee 2 does not participate in a chat if the frequency of user comments is too high, as the streamer will most likely not see the comment. On the other hand, if there is a low volume of comments, the interviewee occasionally writes a comment to the streamer.

In terms of opportunities to interact with the streamer, it appears that interviewee 1 and 2 consider this as a driver of chat engagement. Put differently, it appears that a streamer’s interactivity with its participants directly affects the chat. As seen in the interviews, the three interviewees express how low streamer interactivity affects their perceptions of the chat and the streamer:

Interviewee 1: “If there is a stream with a lot of viewers, then my impression is that the chat is indifferent, as the streamer does not have time to follow it and respond to comments.” (appendix 10, p. 359)

Interviewee 2: “I have seen several streamers that completely ignore their chat. And I think that is just wrong, as you are streaming for other people and when they interact with you and you do not respond, I do not think that it is okay.” (appendix 11, p. 377)

Interviewee 3: “[on the content of the chat being indifferent and meaningless] Definitely. Or it changes. All the established streamers have the opportunity to go into *subscriber mode*, where it is only paying subscribers who can comment in the chat. Then the chat is less hectic, and people can actually write to each other.” (appendix 12, p. 403)

It seems that all interviewees share perceptions of how low streamer interactivity affects the chat in a negative way. For interviewee 1 and 3, the chat becomes meaningless and arguably low on content. Interviewee 2 elaborates on this by expressing his negative opinions towards streamers that do not interact with their viewers. This could be related to the streamer’s persona, but it could also be a consequence of the streamer’s popularity, as more viewers entail less availability, which results in lower chat content. It could also simply be a result of the streamer being occupied with the game. However, as interviewee 3 expresses, a subscriber-only chat is arguably higher on conversations, as users pay a monthly fee to participate. Interviewee 2 also seems to recognize these characteristics in subscriber-only chats, as he expresses how:

Interviewee 2: “There is a huge difference. People do not spam [in subscriber only chats], and people are much nicer, and do not write dumb stuff. And they respect others. But that is also because they pay to do this.” (appendix 11, p. 388)

In relation to the content of the chat, a subscriber-only chat arguably results in less participants, which results in higher streamer interactivity. Based on these observations, it appears that the streamer interactivity is affected by streamer availability and chat accessibility.

Based on the current indications of the interviewees’ expressions, passive engagement can be characterized as following and paying attention to the chat, and active engagement can be characterized as participating in the chat. It appears that the interviewees that engage passively are unaffected by the chat content, as they follow the chat regardless, but the interviewee that engages actively is affected by the chat content, as a high volume of comments seem to discourage his chat participation. The chat content seems to be affected by two factors: Streamer interactivity and chat accessibility. In terms of streamer interactivity, it was found that it was

affected by the streamer's availability and persona. The streamer might be less available if he or she is occupied with the game or has reached a high level of popularity where a high amount of users comment. The chat accessibility is affected by whether the chat is for paying subscribers only or accessible to all users for free. Considering the indications above in relation to the development of social relations in the chat, it could be argued that a chat high on content provides better circumstances for participants to interact with each other and the streamer, and thereby better circumstances for developing social relations.

Gaming lingo

All interviewees seem to recognize a certain lingo in the chat that the participants use in their interactions. However, they all seem to struggle with understanding every part of this lingo, as they express in the following examples:

Interviewee 1: "I do not think that a regular person would be able to understand what is being written in the chat, unless they had some sort of knowledge of the game being played or the gaming world in general. And that is because people use in-game words, like words that are used to describe a weapon, a map, or a way to play the game, but also because the words are abbreviations of all sorts of stuff. It is considerably more esoteric." (appendix 10, p. 363)

Despite interviewee 2's engagement in Twitch, he also struggles with understanding the language being used:

Interviewee 2: "There is a lot of formulations and abbreviations that are used on Twitch. A lot. In the beginning, I understood absolutely nothing, but the more I use it, the more I understand now. You could say that many of the words or sentences that are used nowadays on Twitch have been created on Twitch. For example, something could have been said during some live stream and then it has turned into a slang." (appendix 11, p. 385)

Interviewee 2 also expresses his struggles to understand this particular lingo despite his active engagement in the chat, as he has limited knowledge on what many words of the gaming lingo

actually mean. Regardless of the interviewees' lack of full understanding, they all seem to agree that there is a certain lingo on Twitch and streaming platforms in general, which is in continuous development and requires knowledge of the games being played and eSports in general to understand.

7.4 Commercial experiences

All three interviewees recall having been exposed to advertisement in eSports ecosystems, specifically in connection with games, streams, and tournaments. Interviewee 1 and 2 recall being exposed to commercials inside a game and all three interviewees recall being exposed to commercials in connection with individual streamers and in eSport tournaments. When asked whether interviewee 3 could remember the specific experiences of being exposed to commercial content, he responds:

Interviewee 3: “100 percent. Even very clearly. Because it’s exposed in connection with some individuals that you’re invested in, in some strange way, so naturally I connect them with the things I see among them.” (appendix 12, p. 406)

Interviewee 3 also claims that his experiences have resulted in awareness and underlines how clearly he recalls both the brand and the specific content. The interviews also demonstrated that the way in which the interviewees experience commercial content in eSports ecosystems differs slightly. When asked about his experiences with commercials on Twitch, interviewee 1 says:

Interviewee 1: “To me it is rather important, because I know that the commercials appearing on a stream equals money to the streamer. Naturally, Twitch and the other streaming platforms get their share, but the streamer also profits from it. So I don’t mind having to watch a 20 second commercial at the beginning of a stream, as long as the stream is not interrupted midway with commercials.” (appendix 10, p. 354)

He further claims that the commercials do not affect him negatively and that being exposed to commercials on Twitch affects him less negatively than when being exposed to advertisements in connection with e.g. professional football games. Interviewee 3 shares a somewhat similar view on commercials in eSports ecosystems. When asked about how he perceives commercials on Twitch, he answers:

Interviewee 3: “Neutral I guess. At least not bad. However, there’s not a lot [of the commercials] that is directed to me. But if I were exposed to a super nice product which e.g. Midbeast was using, then I’d definitely consider buying it.” (appendix 12, p. 407)

Interviewee 3 appears to have a positive view on the commercials in eSports ecosystems as well, and it seems that the streamer has a high influence on his view on the specific commercial. Interviewee 3 later explains that he thinks that commercials in eSports ecosystems are no different from commercials appearing in other contexts and that streamers naturally should have their share of the profits earned from commercials. It appears that both interviewee 1 and interviewee 3 are not bothered by commercials in the eSports ecosystems, as long as it profits the streamers that they enjoy watching. When asked whether the amount of commercials are appropriate, interviewee 3 states:

Interviewee 3: “Yes [the amount is appropriate]. If that is the price I have to pay for free entertainment, then I am happy to do so.” (appendix 12, p. 408)

It appears that the interviewees perceive commercials on Twitch as a way to support the streamers that they spent a lot of time watching, which may explain why they do not mind being exposed to it.

Interviewee 2 has a more skeptical view on commercials on Twitch. He fears that if the amount of commercial content in eSports ecosystems becomes “too much”, it will negatively influence his experience within these. In this regard, he makes a comparison to the amount of advertisements in Super Bowl, and furthermore adds that he believes that Danes do not have the

same patience in regard to watching commercials compared to Americans. He claims that if eSports ecosystems reach a similar level of commercial exposure than what is the case in e.g. Super Bowl, then the number of viewers will drop. However, just like interviewee 1 and 3 explains how watching an ad equals financially supporting the streamer, so does interviewee 2. Interviewee 2 does not want to spend his time watching commercials. He says:

Interviewee 2: “It is not that I do not want to give them [the streamers] money and support them, it is more that I do not want to waste my time watching commercials. I do not want to spend a minute watching a commercial for something I do not want to spend my time on.”

Instead of watching commercials and supporting the streamer that way, interviewee 3 prefers to support streamers by donating money directly, subscribing to channels, and by giving away subscriptions to other Twitch users.

8. Comparative analysis of the netnographic and interviews analyses

The comparative analysis compares the main findings of the netnographic observations to the main findings of the analyses of the depth interviews. The purpose of this comparison is to present the final findings of the analyses, focusing on the most apparent observations that have been discovered through the use of each methodical choice. Ultimately, the findings will be illustrated in a conceptual framework that can be used by brands for strategic commercial ends in eSports ecosystems. In this way, the comparative analysis and the conceptual framework will function as the foundation of the discussion, in which the researchers will explore the findings in the context of the literature and theories presented in the literature review.

Firstly, the main findings from the netnographic method are provided below:

User participation is based on social motivations beyond common interest in eSports.
Gaming lingo is prevalent in the chats.
Subscribing users are particularly engaged in the streamer.
The streamer, the stream, and the users drive the conversations.
User comments have unpredictable and spontaneous traits.
Negative comments create chat tensions.

Table 8: Emerging patterns across Twitch streams

Secondly, the main findings of the interviews are provided below with each main category and related subcategories in their own distinct colors:

Gaming habits	Stream consumption	Chat engagement	Commercial experiences
Social aspect	Social aspect	Passive and active engagement	Integrated commercial aspect
Interconnection with streaming habits	Streamer persona	Social relations	Different attitudes
	Platform characteristics	Interactions	
	Consumption habits	Gaming lingo	
	Interconnection with gaming habits		

Table 9: Color-based categories and emerging patterns

By comparing the findings of the two methods, the researchers identified three final findings, which are introduced below.

Gaming lingo is frequently used and continuously co-created in the ecosystems

It was found during the netnographic analysis that the chats related to each stream and game include a frequent use of unique gaming lingo. This lingo is applied and exchanged between users of Twitch for different purposes, such as commenting on in-game events, expressing one's meaning on a certain topic, often unrelated to eSports, or addressing the streamer. Essentially, the lingo is seemingly an essential practice in terms of tying the users together in co-creational processes through social interactions and to create meaning. The depth interviews stressed that the comprehension of this lingo requires prior knowledge of the unique language used within eSports ecosystems. Based on the results of the interviews, it appears that the unique language may be rather difficult to fully understand, even for highly engaged individuals in eSports ecosystems such as the interviewees. Therefore, it appears that gaming lingo is not only frequently used and necessary to understand for making meaning of the content of the chat, but it is also ever-evolving and continuously co-created in the eSports ecosystem.

The streamer is the main driver of interactions and streaming consumption in the ecosystem of Twitch

The streamer is a main driver for the chat interactions taking place in the three Twitch chats as well as the interviewee's consumption of streaming. During the netnographic observations, it was found that the streamer highly influences the conversations in the chats across all three streams. As described in the analyses of the netnographic observations, other drivers also influence chat conversations, specifically the users and in-game activities taking place on the streamer's screen. However, results from the interviews indicate that the streamer is the main driver for not only interactions, but also the overall streaming consumption of the interviewees. More specifically, the results of the interviews demonstrated that the persona and behavior of the streamer seem to be critical factors in terms of the interviewees' streaming consumption. As described earlier, the persona comprises personal characteristics, popularity, games played, type

of entertainment, degree of interaction with chat, and chat accessibility. Therefore, it appears that users select streamers that reflect their individual environment.

The social interactions of the ecosystem go beyond the common interest in eSports

A social aspect is pervading in gaming consumption, streaming consumption, and chat engagement, as expressed by all interviewees. The social aspect and its influence was also observed on many occasions in the netnographic analysis, as chat interactions were often found to be based on motivations beyond common interests in eSports. The social aspect goes beyond the common interest in eSports related topics. In other words, the researchers initially expected that Twitch would be used mainly for eSports-related conversations and interactions, as Twitch is intended for streaming of gaming and eSports. However, it was discovered that conversations that are not directly related to eSports take place, and that users co-create meaning through these interactions, such as conversations on everyday matters, personal topics, and occasionally conversations on brands without the explicit involvement from brands. This indicates that the social aspect is largely embedded in eSports ecosystems and goes beyond eSports related topics, and that users engage in conversations based on an eagerness to socialize.

Strategic framework

The final findings are illustrated in a strategic framework depicting three main dynamics within the Twitch ecosystem. The main dynamics are illustrated as three interrelated gears with the emerging insights listed on the side. It is presented on the next page.

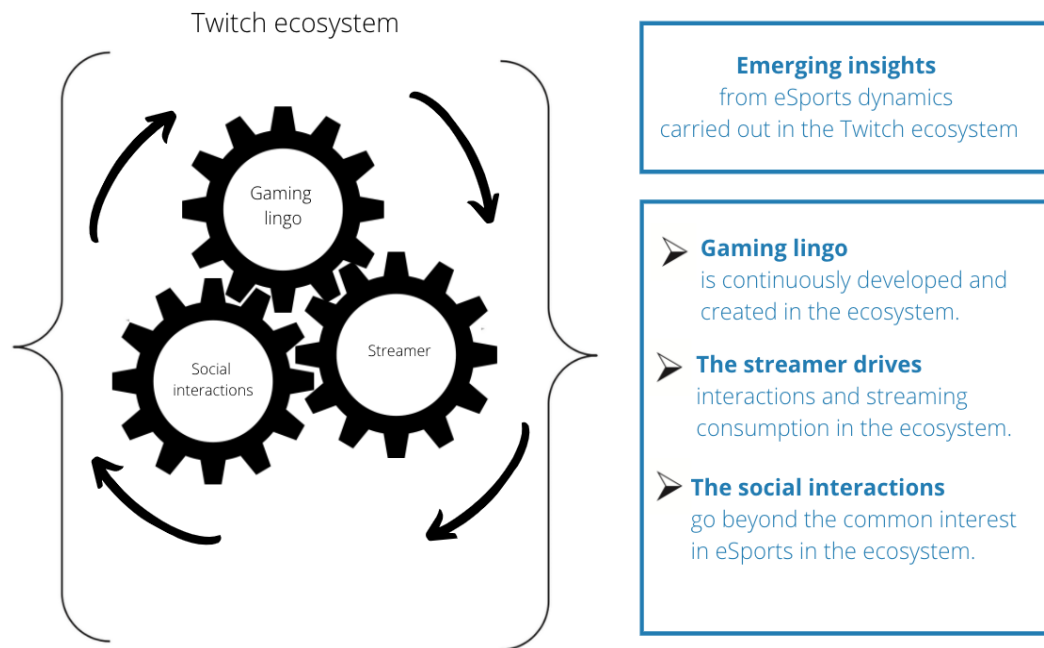


Figure 10: Assemblage of dynamics in the Twitch ecosystem

9. Discussion

This project explores how eSports practices are carried out in co-creational ecosystems to make meaning and how these meanings can be used by brands for strategic commercial ends. The findings are illustrated as three dynamics in the Twitch ecosystem from which insights emerge. Based on this framework, the first part of the discussion focuses on how eSports practices are carried out in co-creational ecosystem to make meaning by discussing the dynamics in relation to existing practice, co-creation, and brand meaning literature. The second part of the discussion focuses on how brands can use the meanings emerging from the eSports practices for strategic commercial ends from a strategy as practice perspective.

9.1 The practices of the Twitch ecosystem

Drawing on practice theory, the three dynamics can be considered examples of eSports practices in which the chat participants and the interviewees engage in routinized behaviour consisting of interconnected bodily and mental performances (Reckwitz, 2002). The participants and interviewees are the carriers, or practitioners, of the interconnected bodily and mental activities, which are performed in each practice.

The gaming lingo practice

The continuously developed and created lingo in the chat consists of the bodily activity of typing comments and sharing them in the chat and the various mental activities that are connected to this bodily activity. It was found during the literature review that the mental activities consist of several elements such as knowledge, understanding, and motivations (Reckwitz, 2002). It was observed during the netnographic analysis that a unique lingo exists in the Twitch ecosystem, which requires prior knowledge to fully understand. Also, it was expressed during the interviews that the interviewees did not fully understand the lingo despite their engagement in the ecosystem. From a practice theory perspective, these observations and expressions suggest how prior knowledge and understanding are critical to engage in the gaming lingo practice. During the interviews, it was also found that the lingo is continuously developed and created, which indicates the dynamic nature of the practice and arguably complicates consistent knowledge and understanding of the gaming lingo. Motivations to engage in the practice could include interests in the game, the streamer, or eSports in general, as found in the analysis, but they could also be based on social aspects beyond eSports interests.

The social interactions practice

It was found that participants engage in the chat for social motivations beyond the common interest in eSports, as they were observed to participate in conversations unrelated to eSports. During the interviews, the interviewees supported this finding by expressing similar observations and added that social relations develop in the chat. In the practice theory perspective, the practice of social interaction consists of the similar bodily activity as the gaming lingo practice, as it also takes place in the chat, but the mental activities are arguably different.

For this practice, the knowledge and understanding elements are arguably unrequired, as the conversations of this practice are unrelated to eSports. However, knowledge and understanding of one's co-participants and the conversation topics may still be required to establish social relations. The motivations and emotions of the participants could be considered the most critical elements when engaging in this practice, as participants must be socially motivated to establish social relations based on interests beyond eSports. The motivations to engage in this practice could be based on factors unknown to the participants themselves (Chia, 2004; Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009) and certain emotions. Indications of emotions such as loneliness and aggressions were observed in the netnographic analysis and expressed in the interviews, but participants also displayed more positive emotions towards certain conversation topics such as combat sports tournaments, as they seemed highly engaged and personally interested in participating in the conversations. This continuous development of social relations through e.g. unrelated conversations emphasizes the dynamic nature of this practice.

The streamer driven practices

As found during the netnographic analysis and the interviews, the streamer influenced the chat interactions and streaming consumption in the Twitch ecosystem. The chat practice includes the interactions taking place in the chat between the participants, and the interactions taking place between the streamer and the chat participants. The streaming consumption practice includes the streamer and the audience, which also includes chat participants. The bodily activities of the chat participants and audience are similar to the previously mentioned practices, as they only include the activity of typing comments or watching a stream. However, the bodily activities performed by the streamer could be considered a critical element in the context of these practices, as it was found during the netnographic analysis that the streamer's actions and behaviour influenced the conversation topic. It was also expressed during the interviews that the streamer's persona and availability influenced chat interactions and streaming consumption, which could include certain bodily activities, such as paying attention to the live chat, reading comments aloud, and general behavior.

In terms of mental activities, the interviews indicated that the interviewees' streaming consumption and preferences for certain streamers depended on different streamer characteristics such as skills within the game, entertainment abilities, and personality. In the netnographic analysis, it was also found that some participants seemed particularly engaged in the streamer and shared personal interests beyond eSports. From a practice theory perspective, it appears that mental activities of the streamer such as knowledge of the game and other topics, understanding of the audience, and motivations to stream influence participants and users depending on their preferences. Thereby, the bodily and mental activities of the streamer collectively influence participants' interactions and the audience's streaming consumption in the Twitch ecosystem. It could also be argued that the streamer influences the mental activities of the audience in the chat interaction and streaming consumption practices, as they can improve their own skills within a certain game by watching the streamer, which was a motivation for the interviewees for watching a certain streamer. Similar to the gaming lingo and social interaction practices, these are also considered dynamic, as the characteristics of a streamer can change over time, which affects the streamer's influence on the audience.

9.2 Dynamic and interrelated practices

During the literature review, it was established that the concept of practices is complex due to its interrelated and entangled nature (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009). In line with Schatzki (2006), the ecosystem of Twitch is constituted by various interrelated practices such as gaming lingo, social interaction, chat interaction, and streaming consumption. So far, it has been established that the practices are dynamic, but they are also interrelated, as discovered in the analyses.

Relations between practices

In terms of the gaming lingo practice, it is used in the practices driven by the streamer, and the practice in which social relations are created. As examples, chat participants were observed to use the lingo when discussing streamer driven conversations and when engaging in conversations unrelated to eSports and the streamer. As it was found during the interviews, the unique language is dynamically and continuously co-created in the Twitch ecosystem, which could be a result of

the streamer performing a certain activity in a stream or in-game that the chat participants react to. This way, the gaming lingo is created through the other practices in the ecosystem.

The streamer driven chat interaction practice is also related to the other practices in the Twitch ecosystem. As mentioned, the gaming lingo is dynamically created in the chat through interactions driven by the streamer. However, social interactions are also practiced in the chat, as it was found that the streamer also has some influence on the conversation topic, whether this is related to eSports or not. As an example, it was found during the netnographic analysis that a lengthy conversation on combat sports spawned from the streamer addressing a single participant's comment. The conversation is an example of how the participants engage in social interactions, which were initially driven by the streamer. In the interviews, it was also found that some participants have or attempt to have friendly conversations with the streamer, which emphasizes how the streamer driven chat interactions are interrelated with the social interaction practice. This social relation between chat participants has also been found in a previous study, where one type of Twitch broadcasts was driven by the social ties between the streamer and the audience (Gandolfi, 2016).

9.3 Co-creational processes in eSports practices

This project has explored how eSports practices are carried out in co-creational ecosystems to make meaning. In the following discussion, the co-creation literature will be discussed in relation to the findings derived from the netnographic analysis and depth interviews.

Co-creation through social interactions on Twitch

The findings revealed that eSports consumers engage in co-creational processes to a large extent and that there are different ways of creating and exchanging meaning depending on individual motivations. "Illustration 3" depicts the social construction process as well as how so-called "institutions" (Larsen, 2012) in eSports are created through social interactions, such as on Twitch. Through a process of subjectivization, externalization, objectification and institutionalization, an institution and common worldview is finally co-created and shared

between eSports consumers. As value should be approached and understood in relation to the context of networks that are part of dynamic ecosystems (Mertz et al. 2009), the findings show that eSports consumers can be considered endogenous to value creation for brands. The consumers of eSports, more specifically the users of Twitch, are part of such a dynamic ecosystem. They make up a collective that continuously co-create through the contexts of their own lives (Mertz et al., 2009), e.g. by engaging in dialogues that are both related and unrelated to eSports. In this collective, value is uniquely determined by each individual using Twitch, which necessitates an understanding of their motivations. If such understanding is obtained, it may be possible to place a brand into the context of the users.

Through the observed practices on Twitch, e.g. the different types of social interactions, a social reality is constructed where opinions, meanings, and views are being co-created and exchanged between users. The users in this social reality often share beliefs and views on different topics, e.g. other types of sports, fitness, music, and occasionally specific products such as energy drinks or gaming equipment. Arguably, this provides a potential for creating meaningful brand experiences for the users. Being able to tap into their knowledge base and influence their practices and conversations is critical in order to produce meaningful commercial experiences within eSports ecosystems (Berthon et al., 2009).

As argued in co-creation literature, consumer-to-consumer communication and dialogue is providing consumers with an alternative source of information and perspectives independent from a firm (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). The findings of this project arguably support this view, especially based on the observations about the way in which Twitch users engage in social conversations and interactions with each other. The users seem to use each other as sources of information on a wide range of topics, and they arguably influence each other through the perspectives that they share in the Twitch chats. As consumers generally have become informed, connected, empowered, and active co-creators of value (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004), it may be beneficial to facilitate high quality interactions and dialogues that enable the individual eSports consumers to co-create unique experiences. Twitch is arguably already facilitating similar interactions and dialogues, which provides a commercial opportunity for brands to

participate in these co-created unique experiences. In other words, the findings revealed that there is a potential in terms of influencing eSports consumers on Twitch and getting them to engage in dialogues about e.g. a brand in a way and context that is meaningful to them.

Co-creation through the use of unique gaming lingo

As the findings have demonstrated, Twitch can be seen as an ecosystem made up of individuals that co-create meaning collectively through e.g. the use of unique gaming lingo. This co-creation of meaning through gaming lingo was expressed by interviewee 3 when he commented on the lingo used on Twitch:

Interviewee 3: “There is a lot of formulations and abbreviations that are used on Twitch. A lot. In the beginning, I understood absolutely nothing, but the more I use it, the more I understand now. You could say that many of the words or sentences that are used nowadays on Twitch have been created on Twitch. For example, something could have been said during some live stream and then it has turned into a slang.” (appendix, 12. p. 384)

In this quote, interviewee 3 emphasizes how gaming lingo is co-created by the users on Twitch, and that an understanding of the lingo develops as users use it to communicate and make meaning with each other. Arguably, the construction of the gaming lingo on Twitch is a specific result of a continuous co-creational process between users, which underlines the view that eSports consumers are endogenous to value creation in the ecosystems and that brands should consider this. Viewing Twitch as a co-creational ecosystem with unique practices, such as the gaming lingo, grants a brand the potential to customize specific commercial experiences to eSports consumers on a platform that they are already highly engaged in. This high level of engagement has been demonstrated both through the netnographic analysis, but also through the coding of the three depth interviews, which showed clear patterns in terms of the interviewees’ streaming consumption. In this sense, Twitch can be approached as a market, or forum, where understanding the lingo and conversations that take place between users is vital for brand value co-creation. Thus, it is about developing methods to achieve a visceral understanding of the lingo used on Twitch, as this creates a potential of facilitating meaningful co-creation experiences that

may enable brands to co-shape consumer expectations and experiences and create a sense of brand meaning (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004).

The “DART model” of value co-creation presented in the literature review can be included (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Hatch & Schultz, 2010). Paying attention to “dialogue” is of essence since a market can basically be viewed as a set of conversations (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004), which, as the findings of this project have revealed, also goes for Twitch, as several dialogues between users take place. Brands, however, can only become involved in these dialogues if the consumers have access and transparency into the broader thoughts and ideas of a company (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). In other words, brands arguably need to approach the eSports ecosystem of Twitch in an open and authentic manner, as this may allow them to get on the same level as the consumers that they are trying to resonate with. This could be done through e.g. branded personalities (Ligas & Cotte, 1999). Enabling the consumers to associate themselves with the brands, e.g. through a streamer, could have positive influence on the risk/benefit assessment related to a course of action or decision, such as sharing positive word of mouth about a brand in the dialogues taking place on Twitch (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004).

Co-creation through the use of Twitch streamers

The findings demonstrated that the streamer drives interactions and streaming consumption in the eSports ecosystem of Twitch. The findings are relatable to the argument that value creation has shifted from a firm-oriented to a more service-dominant view where emphasis is on intangible assets such as relationships and co-creation with consumers as a way to generate economic exchange (Vargo & Lusch, 2006; Mertz et al., 2009). The service-dominant view emphasizes the cultivation of relationships with consumers by involving their preferences and views in the development of customized value propositions (Vargo & Lusch, 2006), which is a view that brands should arguably consider when planning to resonate with consumers of eSports. In other words, the cultivation of a relationship between a brand and eSports consumers could be facilitated by involving a streamer in the process, as the users clearly have preferences and views about specific streamers. The findings of this project revealed that consumers within the eSports ecosystems have specific motivations when using Twitch, such as a wish to engage with

streamers on the platform, or simply watching a streamer to improve their own skills or to feel entertained. In both cases, the role of the streamer was found to be a major influence on the streaming consumption of the eSports consumers. Hence, it may be beneficial to place emphasis on the interrelation between the consumers and the streamer, as the streamer is clearly able to influence the opinions and views of his related Twitch viewers.

In regard to Ramaswamy and Ozcan's (2015) argument about the lack of consensus on what constitutes an act of value co-creation besides the fact that it includes the active roles of consumers, the findings thereby show what such an act could involve. By viewing the co-creation of value as a two-sided phenomenon where a brand attempts to co-create meaning and brand meaning with eSports consumers, e.g. through the use of a streamer as a branded personality, an act of value co-creation is made. This argument naturally leads to a further discussion of the role of the streamer on Twitch, which will be elaborated on later.

9.4 Brand meaning in eSports ecosystems

As described in the brand meaning literature review, meaning is constantly distributed into the world (Ligas & Cotte, 1999). The findings of this project demonstrate that Twitch, as an eSports ecosystem, facilitates a continuous distribution of meaning between different stakeholders within the ecosystem, such as between user-user and user-streamer. This is especially evident in the results from the netnographic approach, where users' meanings on anything from specific in-game characters to preferences regarding pre workout drinks are expressed in the chat and negotiated with others. That being said, meaning exchange taking place on Twitch is not necessarily related to specific branded products and thereby brand meaning. However, expressions of brand meanings do appear throughout the observed chats, such as in the Fortnite chat:

Derfscott96: "I need a tfue x gfuel collab ASAP brother" (appendix 5, p. 234)

RogueThreat: "@Tfue when are we getting tfuel?" (appendix 5, p. 236)

Savagepigeon22: "I use ghost preworkout. Shit gets me pumped" (appendix 5, p. 235)

As it appears from the comments, both Derfscott96 and RogueThreat are suggesting a collaboration between the streamer Tfuel and the energy drink brand GFuel. Both users are associating the streamer with this specific energy drink, arguably connecting the brand GFuel with the streamer Tfuel and his persona. This exemplifies how the users produce their own consumption experiences, meanings, and narratives of consumption that are not in connection with the brand nor related brand communities (Tarnovskaya & Biedenbach, 2018). In other words, the conversation about the energy drink is not facilitated by the involvement of a brand but is brought up independently by the users. Following this project's understanding of brand meaning, (i.e. brand meaning as a consumer's meaning towards a brand based on individual values and interpretation, which is continuously created, developed and negotiated through dynamic and social processes), these comments seem to be based on individual interpretation and values, in the sense that they are connecting Tfuel with a certain brand, implying a connection between the two and expressing a sense of brand meaning and potentially a branded personality.

A similar example was found in the CS:GO stream where another user expresses his meaning on a specific product observed in the stream:

Xxpowmanxx: "gotta love that SK chair lol" (appendix 4, p. 169)

This is another example of a user displaying his meaning about a brand and product in the stream without any involvement from the brand itself. Altogether, these examples demonstrate how expressions about brands and products are expressed in Twitch chats, arguably indicating users' brand meanings and as a result initiating brand meaning negotiation processes on Twitch chats outside of the brand's control.

Twitch facilitates social interactions and brand meaning negotiations

The findings revealed that social interactions are one of the main dynamics of the Twitch ecosystem. As argued in brand meaning literature, social interactions are determinant in terms of creating brand meaning as brand meaning can be seen as an ever-going and ever-shifting production and reproduction among multiple stakeholders in co-creational processes (Berthon et

al., 2009). Following the symbolic interactionist perspective on brand meaning, meanings are created through social interactions and continuously transformed through processes of interpretation (Tarnovska & Biedenbach, 2018). Additionally, individual meanings are most likely to be expressed towards others in social settings (Ligas & Cotte, 1999), such as on Twitch, where individuals were found to interact with and influence each other through certain practices. In this way, individual meanings, both on personal matters and branded products, are expressed on Twitch and subsequently interpreted and negotiated between eSports consumers. For this reason, it can be argued that Twitch is a platform with a great potential for the facilitation of further brand meaning development. As highlighted, brand meaning negotiation is already occurring to a minor degree on the platform, often without the explicit involvement of brands, meaning that brands might be able engage in these processes of brand meaning co-creation and influence the eSports consumers on Twitch.

The results from the netnographic analysis and depth interviews clearly demonstrate that consumers socialize through gaming and eSports ecosystems to a large degree. Focusing on Twitch, the platform facilitates conversations that go beyond the common interest in eSports and functions as a platform for social interaction. In this connection, it could be argued that meanings, and also brand meanings as highlighted, are distributed on Twitch outside of brands' control, but instead controlled by the eSports consumers on the platform and exchanged in social processes. This supplements the view presented by Tarnovskaya and Biedenbach (2018) who state that consumers have become the primary source of meaning creation within marketing as a whole, and Escalas and Bettman (2005) who argue that brand meaning is a result of dialogues between consumers and not just between consumers and the brand. It can be argued that Twitch functions as a social setting in itself, as the streamer and viewers are simultaneously present in the same media experience, co-creating and making sense of the stream, which itself is distinctive and meaningful for all participants (Woodcock & Johnson, 2019).

Exploring Twitch from the perspective of Ligas and Cotte's (1999) conceptual framework on brand meaning, it can be discussed how the dynamics of the marketing, individual, and social environments are intertwined on the platform. Following the results from the project, it can be

argued that the environments are too intertwined to justify a distinction of the dynamics within the environments. More specifically on Twitch, it can be argued that the marketing environment has merged with the social environment: In the case of a streamer promoting a product, either by verbalizing it in the stream or by exposing it through specific actions or brand names on the stream, the consumers are exposed to the brand in an already established social setting. Therefore, the instilled brand meaning from the marketing environment is replaced by the social environment in which the consumers, streamer, or other viewers, instill and interpret the meanings outside of the brand's control and reach. In this way, consumers, alongside the streamer, produce their own consumption experiences, meanings, and narratives of consumption, which are not necessarily in connection with the brand nor related brand communities (Tarnovskaya & Biedenbach, 2018). In many ways, the streamer's interpretation of instilled brand meaning may become the primary source of brand meaning for the users, resulting in the viewers not experiencing the brand's intended brand meaning, but only the streamer's interpretation hereof. These arguments undermine the brand's role, while emphasizing the role of the consumers in brand meaning (Tarnovskaya & Biedenbach, 2018). While the marketing environment is undermined in favor of the social environment on Twitch, the researchers still recognize the interrelated dynamics from Ligas and Cotte's (1999) conceptual framework on brand meaning.

Users make meaning through gaming lingo

The unique lingo used on Twitch is another main dynamic discovered within the ecosystem. As the results of the analyses show, gaming lingo is continuously developed and co-created on Twitch. Therefore, understanding the lingo used in the ecosystem is vital to make meaning on the platform, making the gaming lingo itself an essential part of brand meaning creation and negotiation on Twitch. Furthermore, by communicating through the gaming lingo, it could be argued that the users justify their relevance to the social group (Escalas & Bettman, 2005), i.e. the other users, which was also touched upon in the analyses. However, as all three interviewees expressed, an in-depth understanding of the lingo is difficult to obtain even for highly engaged individuals. Naturally, this entails both implications and challenges for eSports consumers and brands alike when engaging in eSports ecosystems. In other words, obtaining a mutual

knowledge base with eSports consumers requires an understanding of the unique lingo. This is not only a prerequisite for co-creating brand meaning on the Twitch platform, but also for creating assonant brand meanings with different stakeholder groups in the eSports ecosystems (Berthon et al., 2009). As described in the analyses, the lingo differs from game to game, but several expressions appear across the three games. Therefore, a group dedicated to one game on Twitch may not apply the same lingo as another group dedicated to another game, emphasizing the need for thorough exploration of these groups for a brand to obtain and share a mutual knowledge base and communicate assonant brand meanings with the eSports consumers.

The streamer's influence on brand meaning

Lastly, the streamer is identified as a main dynamic on Twitch. The streamer has a significant influence on the conversations taking place in the chat. In this regard, the streamer's influence on brand meaning is arguably also significant. It was observed that users in Twitch chats across all three games explored had a high tendency to ask the streamer about his personal meanings on different topics. There seems to be distinctive interest in the streamer's meanings and preferences, which is expected to influence the user's meanings and associations about the given topic. Questions directed to the streamer regarding gaming equipment were common. If the streamer answers these, the users' brand meaning on the brand will arguably be influenced, as they are likely to consider the streamers as experts within gaming, associating the brand with gaming experts and individuals that they like. Moreover, it was observed through the interviews that the users are not selecting streams and streamers randomly, but have different types of motivations for consuming the specific streams. These motivations range from interest in the game, interest in the streamer, seeking social interactions, or a combination of these. Altogether, the users have an interest in not only the stream and the game being played, but in the streamer as well.

Exploring the streamer's influence further, interviewee 3 clearly states how he is likely to be influenced by a certain streamer:

Interviewee 3: “ But if I were exposed to a super nice product which e.g. Midbeast was using, then I’d definitely consider buying it.” (appendix 12, p. 407)

While this quote does not address brand meaning directly, it indicates the streamer’s influence on the interviewee and his potential to buy a product. In other words, interviewee 3 is arguably likely to adopt meanings presented by particular streamers, e.g. the streamer Midbeast, who he expressed that he can identify himself with. This indicates how the interviewee is likely to use another eSports consumer, in this case the streamer, as a source of information (Escalas & Bettman, 2005), which may be due to the fact that they share similar interests and values, resonating with the consumer’s individual environment. Altogether, this indicates how streamers have the potential to influence not only consumption, but most likely brand meaning as well. Following the perspective from Ligas and Cotte (1999) on dynamic environments, it can be argued that the streamer becomes an active part of the merged marketing and social environments, which greatly influences the individual environment of the consumer and ultimately the brand meaning negotiation process as a whole. The streamer may even be perceived as a branded personality, despite not necessarily having any sponsorship agreements with brands. If the consumer shares implications of the self similar to the streamer (Ligas & Cotte, 1999), which seems to be the case with interviewee 3 and the streamer Midbeast, then the streamer’s influence is assumed to be significant.

Altogether, the streamer has significant influence on potential processes of brand meaning among his viewers. This influence is expected to increase with the level of interactivity that the streamer has with the chat. To influence brand meaning, the streamer must arguably address the chat and its inquiries from users. However, the streamer is also able to initiate a brand meaning process himself independently from the chat by initiating conversation on a specific brand. This was observed in the study, as the streamer’s actions and communication were often found to be reflected in the chat conversations among users, initiating a co-creational process of brand meaning. With reference to Woodcock and Johnson’s (2019) finding on the live Twitch broadcast as a meaningful experience for users and streamers alike, the findings of this project

revealed that there is a potential for a meaningful brand meaning process, as the streamer and the viewers are both simultaneously present in the same co-created meaningful media experience.

While the streamer can be considered a consumer that other consumers, e.g. users of Twitch, use as a source of information when evaluating their own beliefs in the world (Escalas & Bettman, 2005), the streamer might be considered an empowered consumer, or in many ways, an influencer. This comparison between a streamer and an influencer will be discussed in the following section.

Streamers as influencers in eSports

It is evident from the results of the project and the discussion above that streamers on Twitch have significant influence on the way that users carry out practices as well as their streaming consumption. As the findings also revealed, and as illustrated in the strategic framework presented at the end of the analysis, the streamer can be seen as the main driver for interactions and streaming consumption in the eSports ecosystem of Twitch. Hence, the eSports streamers that broadcast their gaming experiences to their followers can in some ways be compared to influencers. Influencers are described as human brands in their own right, working to build a perceived interconnectedness with their followers, which may result in intimate relationships through which consumer loyalty can be maintained (Driel & Dumitrica, 2020). Twitch streamers can arguably be considered as brands in their own right and may even be regarded as representing brands that they are not necessarily partnering with, such as the brands behind the games that they play. Whether a streamer has a large number of viewers or a smaller base of returning viewers, a potential for brands to expose themselves through the streamer arguably exists. Regardless of the number of viewers that a streamer has, this project highlights that there is a substantial interest in the streamers from Twitch users and that streamers influence the conversations and meaning creation in the chat.

Online gaming as a form of activity, and online social interaction more generally, is occupying an increasingly central position in more and more people's everyday lives (Kowert, Griffiths & Oldmeadow, 2012). As eSports is becoming more popular, seen e.g. in the number of viewers,

geographical spread, (Vækstfonden, 2019) and found in the data and findings, more and more of the so called gamers seemingly share highly social characteristics and a tendency to have an interest in things outside of the eSports ecosystem, such as sports, music, fashion, health, celebrities, food, and other types of consumption. In a study on the practice of blogging, Christensen and Erz (2019) found that some bloggers have commercialized their blogs in order to profit from it. These bloggers may for example adopt the language of a brand that they are sponsored by and follow a ‘to do’ list provided by that brand (Christensen & Erz, 2019). In this way, these bloggers start to conceptualize themselves as brands, thereby becoming brands of their own in a multiple-stakeholder network of different actors, such as readers (Christensen & Erz, 2019). In the same sense, eSports streamers on Twitch, who have their own base of followers and viewers, can be seen as being highly influential on these followers and could potentially follow a similar process to bloggers.

This comparison between streamers and influencers has already been studied by Woodcock and Johnson (2019). Their findings demonstrated that live streaming is developing into a form of strategic communication for companies and brands, and that the growth of Twitch is increasingly providing streamers with the same characteristics as influencers (Woodcock & Johnson, 2019). The close proximity between streamers and consumers allows the users to associate themselves with streamers that often share their interests (Woodcock & Johnson, 2019), which was also found in the netnographic analysis and interviews of this project. This proximity and sense of relationship between user and streamer is described as a highly effective route for communication (Woodcock & Johnson, 2019). In this way, Twitch arguably facilitates new methods for streamers of all sizes to act as influencers.

9.5 Practices of Twitch in a strategic commercial context

So far, it has been established that the dynamic Twitch practices are interrelated and collectively constitute a part of the Twitch ecosystem. From a strategy as practice perspective, it was discussed during the literature review that the consumers in the Twitch ecosystem are arguably not engaging in practices for strategic purposes. However, it has been argued in literature that

strategies can emerge from everyday practices (Feldman & Wanda, 2011), which has been explored in multiple studies (Vallaster & Wallpach, 2018; Echeverri & Skålén, 2011). In this project, three main dynamics of the Twitch ecosystem were identified: 1) gaming lingo, 2) the streamer, 3) and social interactions. In these dynamics, practices are carried out which comprise co-creational processes that the consumers engage in to make meaning. The strategic and commercial implications of the meanings emerging from the eSports practices are discussed from a strategy as practice perspective below.

Meaning emerges from the dynamic gaming lingo practice

As all three interviewees expressed, an in-depth understanding of the lingo is difficult to obtain, even for highly engaged individuals. In other words, the unique gaming lingo is a practice that requires prior understanding and continuous involvement for the carriers of the practice. Naturally, this entails both implications and challenges for brands seeking to engage in eSports ecosystems. If the gaming lingo used on Twitch is difficult to comprehend even for engaged users, then it is most likely also difficult for brands that have no previous experience or involvement in the eSports ecosystems. As the findings show, gaming lingo is a highly dynamic practice that is continuously co-created and developed on Twitch to make meaning between users. Arguably, the lingo on Twitch is used as an implicit tool in meaning creation processes. However, the lingo is unique to the eSports ecosystems and the lingo differs slightly depending on the stream and particularly the game played in the specific stream. It was also found that several gaming expressions tended to recur between each explored game, and therefore it could be argued that brands may not have to focus solely on one game specific lingo, but may focus on the commonly used lingo and expressions within eSports ecosystems when pursuing effective co-creational brand meaning creation. If brands understand this, they have demonstrated that they share a mutual knowledge base with the consumers, which might enable them to create assonant brand meanings with different stakeholder groups in the eSports ecosystems (Berthon et al., 2009).

Streamers influence brand meaning processes

As illustrated in the strategic framework, the streamer drives interactions and streaming consumption in the eSports ecosystem. The findings revealed that the streamer, his persona, and his actions are of high interest to the users on Twitch, and that many users seek to interact with the streamer through different approaches. Users actively seek advice and opinions from the streamer, indicating an openness from users to learn from streamers and a willingness to be influenced by the streamers' opinions and meanings. This holds a large potential for brands, as they can utilize streamers to advocate branded products and brand meanings to the followers of a particular streamer. Woodcock and Johnson (2019) describes that when users watch a trusted streamer, branded products are likely to bypass the users' defenses, making them more open to the communication from the streamer. Moreover, the streamer can evidently dictate the chat, as his comments and actions are often picked up by users and discussed. In this way, the streamer is not dependent on users to initiate a conversation on a certain topic, but instead, the streamer himself can initiate conversations that diffuse in chat interactions between users. From the perspective of a brand, it can therefore be argued that the choice of streamer is critical in terms of creating brand meaning for the users of Twitch, as users often have specific associations with a particular streamer based on their own meanings e.g. about a brand.

Social interactions on Twitch and their commercial potential

The strategic framework illustrates that social interactions are largely embedded in eSports ecosystems and that they go beyond eSports related topics, indicating that users have several social interests apart from gaming and eSports that they bring into the ecosystems. This demonstrates that the Twitch platform not only facilitates the consumption of eSports, but that it is also used to engage in meaningful social interactions based on the users' interests unrelated to eSports. This provides a commercial opportunity for brands to integrate their respective brand meanings into the context of the consumers' social reality. Users were observed to occasionally engage in conversations about specific brands and products without the active involvement of a brand, and in most instances, these products were not related to eSports. This indicates that Twitch can facilitate meaningful dialogues about brands that have no or limited overt relevance within the context of the eSports ecosystems.

Commercial risks

Potential pitfalls also exist when using Twitch for strategic commercial ends. The netnographic analysis found that some users on Twitch express themselves in negative and hostile ways towards the streamer and other users during the streams. This indicates that while the streamers clearly have a large and often positive influence on the users' opinions and conversations, users may in some instances be likely to reject meanings and commercial intents resulting in negative brand meanings. The hostile position of users is also recognized by Woodcock and Johnson (2019), who observed that this is particularly evident for some Twitch users when they are exposed to overt forms of advertising and strategic communication.

10. Conclusion

This project sought to explore how eSports practices are carried out in co-creational ecosystems to make meaning and how brands can use these meanings for strategic commercial ends. The findings show that three interrelated eSports dynamics are present on Twitch and that the eSports consumers carry out practices and co-create meanings through these. The dynamics consist of (1) social interactions, (2) gaming lingo, and (3) the streamer.

Firstly, consumers in the co-creational ecosystem of Twitch carry out the social interaction practices through engagement based on interests that revolve around but are not limited to eSports. While Twitch is first and foremost a platform intended for streaming of gaming and eSports, users engage in social interactions and conversations that are not related to eSports and negotiate meaning on the platform. This provides a commercial opportunity for brands to integrate their respective brand meanings into the social context of the users' reality.

Secondly, a unique gaming lingo was found to be continuously co-created and applied in eSports ecosystems. This dynamic demonstrates how users communicate and make meaning with each other and with the streamer through this unique lingo. The lingo differs slightly depending on the stream, including the game being played as well as the chat type, but several expressions recur across games. The lingo is a pervading part of eSports consumers' knowledge base and a

prerequisite for making meaning on Twitch. Brands may be able to create assonant brand meanings with users in the Twitch ecosystem by understanding this dynamic and its related practices, applying it in strategic commercial initiatives, and thereby obtaining and demonstrating a mutual knowledge base with the users.

Thirdly, the streamer was found to be the main driver of interactions and streaming consumption in the ecosystem of Twitch. The streamer highly influences the practices of chat engagement, streaming consumption, and the meaning that emerges from these practices. With the substantial influence on chat engagement and meaning creation, streamers represent a strategic commercial opportunity for creating and developing intended brand meaning for users through streamers. The most popular streamers often have a high amount of followers, which provides a potential for brands to expose themselves to many stakeholders simultaneously through a streamer.

Altogether, eSports ecosystems have distinct and unique dynamics in which practices are carried out to co-create meaning. Collectively, the dynamics of the Twitch ecosystem hold strategic commercial opportunities for brands to co-create meaning with the users and the streamers by adopting and carrying out the practices inherent in the dynamics.

11. Implications

Firstly, this project contributes with some theoretical implications. While an extensive amount of research on the concept of strategy as practice exists, only few studies have explored the social practices that are carried out within eSports ecosystems (e.g. Spilker, Ask & Hansen, 2020; Seo & Jung, 2016). Moreover, the research that explores eSports practices calls for further exploratory and qualitative studies on the topic, which makes this project a contribution to a relatively under-explored academic field of study, as it enriches current literature with new perspectives on the practices carried out in eSports ecosystems.

Secondly, the project contributes with some implications for brands. This project provides perspectives on the eSports practices and meaning creation that take place in co-creational

ecosystems by proposing a conceptual framework with three dynamics leading to three emerging insights: 1) the unique lingo used within eSports, 2) the streamer, and 3) the social interactions. Overall, the findings reveal that there is a close interrelation between these three dynamics, and that each one of them should be understood in order to be able to resonate with consumers of eSports. It was found that co-creating brand meaning and value with these consumers requires the facilitation of meaningful dialogues between eSports consumers, e.g. by using a Twitch streamer as a branded personality or influencer. In this way, the project holds implications for brands in terms of formulating a strategy for commercial ends in eSports.

12. Limitations and further research

In the process of writing this thesis, the researchers noted some limitations that should be accounted for. These limitations were both in the form of conditions that the researchers were not able to control, but also restrictions based on the methodical choices.

Firstly, the COVID-19 situation in Denmark meant that some elements of the data collection process needed to be altered. As stated earlier, the three depth interviews were initially planned to be carried out in a physical face-to-face setting, however, it was decided to conduct the interviews online through Skype due to the government's recommendations about keeping physical distance. While this change in setup still enabled the researchers to collect a large amount of data, it is possible that the findings of the interviews could have turned out differently under normal circumstances. In other words, being able to sit in front of the interviewees, shaking hands, and maintaining eye contact could contribute to the interviewees feeling more comfortable, which would most likely encourage a more natural flow of communication from them. Another restriction in this regard is the challenges posed by technical difficulties when conducting an interview online. Throughout the interviews, unforeseen technical challenges came up occasionally, such as microphone issues or connection timeouts, which slightly affected the conversation as well as the following transcription process. All of these external factors should be kept in mind in the interpretation of the results of the project.

Limitations can also be addressed with respect to the richness of the results collected from the interviews. As the project included three depth interviews, the findings from this method were limited to these which only provides a fragment of the opinions and experiences of eSports consumers. In other words, the project would need a larger amount of interviews to depict a greater picture applicable in other contexts. Therefore, further research on the topic should consider including several more interviewees to ensure more richness in terms of interview results, and to add even more depth and perspectives to the understanding of eSports consumers' motivations for using streaming platforms.

The scope of this project was to explore eSports practices in co-creational ecosystems and not to explore Twitch users' characteristics in-depth. Further research could explore the specific types of users that are present on Twitch, as this may enable a categorization of users based on characteristics such as the amount of comments posted in a chat by a user, the seeming interest that a user has in eSports and creating social ties, and attitude towards the streamer. Similarly to the method of this project, such exploration and categorization of users could be carried out through a netnographic approach, which would allow a classification of online users into different user-categories, which is useful for marketing research and marketing strategy formulation (Kozinets, 2002). Such research could contribute to brands' understanding of the diverse motivations of consumers in eSports, ultimately enabling brands to identify the best opportunities to resonate with eSports consumers and create meaningful commercial experiences as a result.

Finally, further research could explore the perspective of streamers as influencers. One study takes such an approach to comparing streamers to influencers (Woodcock & Johnson, 2019), and the findings of this project revealed similar patterns in terms of the potential for brands to collaborate with streamers. However, the scope of this project did not allow for a deep exploration of the influencer perspective. Future research could therefore further explore the influence that streamers have on the creation of brand meaning on Twitch as well as their influence on consumers of eSports.

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