

Game Meets Game. Integration Gains And Pains By Connecting Football Club Networks With E-Sports Networks

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Aim of the research/project

The eSports industry is growing continuously. ESports revenues are expected to grow at an annual growth rate of + 35.6% to reach a value of \$1,488 billion by 2020. Within this industry, a new phenomenon has emerged, namely football clubs buying or establishing eSports teams. Those participate in tournaments and integrate into regular eSports leagues. In Europe there are currently about 22 football clubs, with their own eSport department and/or signed gamers. For example, the German football club Schalke04 has a League of Legends team, Manchester City contracted a 19-year old boy for FIFA tournaments and FC Valencia got four Hearthstone players in their team. Although the internationally extensive media report extensively about other football associations joining this movement, there is no existing academic research. To fill this gap, the researchers suggest the theoretical framework of Stabell and Fjeldstads (1998) understanding of value networks. If football clubs are understood as value networks, they may generate competitive advantages through the horizontal and vertical integration of eSports. From this consideration, the following research questions (RQ) were formulated:

(RQ1) Which units/elements of the football club and which units/elements of eSports are currently inter-linked?

(RQ2) How will these units/elements be networked in the future?

(RQ3) What is the potential of these units?

(RQ4) Which points within this network will be accessed by football association and what kind of value will be generated?

(RQ5) What are the exchange relations?

Theoretical background or literature review

The value network creates value through simultaneous activities aimed at an intermediation (Stabell & Fjeldstad, 1998). To identify "the nature of value creation and economic exchange in sport" (Woratschek, Horbel, & Popp, 2014, p. 11) it is required to seek compensation from another theoretical framework. With the service-dominant logic (SDL) the authors can identify which units of the eSports industry has been chosen by football clubs with what kind of value creation? It has shown that operant resources like skills, competences and knowledge are the most important factor for the creation of value (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Furthermore, to enhance the values within a value network the authors are set to discuss and motivate the decision-making process regarding the strategies of vertical and horizontal integrations and their respective opportunities and risks. This form the authors definition of two independent networks, which are enhancing their network connections to each other for creating new value.

Methodology, research design, and data analysis

To answer the research questions of this project the authors consider qualitative in-depth interviews as most suitable. Hence, the authors interview the heads of eSports departments of various European football clubs as well as managers of football clubs without an eSports division. With the help of a repertory grid, the experts will explain the exchange relations between eSports and traditional football. They portray how strong these two networks are currently linked, explore the future possibilities and analyze the underlying potentials of it. The authors will therefore analyze what value generating units of eSports can be utilized in various elements in the football club. With a qualitative approach, the authors see the possibility to identify the individual components within networks and thereby gain an in-depth understanding of these objectives.

Results, discussion, and implications/conclusions

The first interviews with eSports department manager have shown how integration of eSports can structure the digitalization path of a football club. The results are expected to further show in-depth how the integration looks like. Until the end of June 2017 the empirical research of this study will be conducted. The authors plan to complete the research report until the end of July, so the project along with its results will assuredly be presented at the conference in Bern in September 2017.

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