

# Esport Extensions of Football Brands: Stakeholder Co-creation in Action

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## **Aim**

A steadily increasing number of sport organizations – a majority of them well-known football clubs with strong brands - have started launching competitive online games called esport. Academic research on this kind of computer gaming is still in its infancy, in particular in sport marketing. Despite the strategic importance and the impact of the launch of esport products on existing sport brands, sport management research has not taken much notice of the field so far. By answering the question: “How does the development of an esport brand influence the meaning of the parent sport brand?” this research aims at filling a gap in academic knowledge and making a contribution to managerial knowledge.

## **Theoretical Background and Literature Review**

Esport is a dynamically emerging new field of business and research. Academic research on esport is rather recent and very much limited to specific physiological, social, motivational, informational, communication and sponsoring aspects. The relationship between the development of esport activities and potential changes of the meaning of a parent sport brand has not been investigated yet. Researchers interested in the field have rather focused on value co-creation of fan communities (Woratschek, Horbel, & Popp, 2014) and the relevance of sport brand communities for team loyalty (Popp, Wilson, Horbel, & Woratschek, 2016). Based on social representations theory Mühlbacher and Hemetsberger (2014) suggest to view brands as socially mediated processes involving a multitude of stakeholders with varying interests and as outcomes of these processes at the same time. According to this integrative concept interested stakeholders co-create brand meaning in an ongoing discourse concerning co-generated brand manifestations (Mühlbacher & Hemetsberger, 2013). Esport activities represent new brand manifestations that become subject to sense-making discourses of interested stakeholders. These discourses potentially lead to changes in the meaning of the incumbent brand to the stakeholders, that is, in the “dynamic collective set of knowledge, emotions and symbolic interpretations related to brand manifestations, brand stakeholders, and the interaction processes among these stakeholders” (Mühlbacher & Hemetsberger, 2013, p. 9). A strong fit between consumer associations with the parent brand and associations with the extension reinforces brand meaning (Völckner & Sattler, 2006). Reversely, the meaning of the brand extension can influence the meaning (and equity) of the parent brand (Völckner, Sattler, & Kaufmann, 2008). What happens to brand meaning when a sport brand introduces esport activities has not been researched yet.

## **Research Design and Data Analysis**

To analyze the development of brand meaning during the launch phase of esport activities by football clubs this research conducts a netnographic study of the ongoing discourse of fans of AS Monaco before and after the introduction of esport under the same brand name. The study focuses on AS Monaco because the club currently is at an early stage of its esport development. Recency of the phenomenon helps avoiding the risk of largely biased memory of interviewees concerning the past due to intermediate events. The researchers observe the discourse of members of the official community of AS Monaco football fans and of participants in an independent community of fans, the Ultras Monaco 1994 in Twitter,

Facebook, and Forum. The researchers gather topics and contents of posts and threads before and after the creation of the AS Monaco esports product between June 2016 and June 2018 and content analyze the data by the help of Atlas.ti (Hwang, 2008). Interviews with sport brand employees and the analysis of documents provide information of actions taken by the football club. Interviews with online fan community leaders deliver in-depth knowledge concerning the impact of management decisions on the brand related fan discourse. Content analysis of sport media commenting esports activities and in particular the launch of AS Monaco esports completes the research by establishing the potential influence of public media on changes in brand discourse and meaning. A comparison with the posts and threads of fans during the same period as well as the actions taken by club management allows an assessment of public media and management influence on the fans' discourse related to the sport brand and on changes of brand meaning.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

The research findings to be presented at the conference enhance academic knowledge concerning the co-construction of brand meaning by various different stakeholder groups and in particular in the field of esports. Understanding of changes in sport brand meaning over an extended period due to the launch of esports activities is essential for managers who are responsible for the development of their brand and for establishing the best communication strategy within the fast growing market of esports.

### **References**

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