

New scene, new company, new branding techniques?

SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE FOR THE BRANDING OF STARTUPS IN THE ESPORTS
INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays, social media is becoming increasingly important for building a brand for startups. For newly established enterprises in the eSports scene, the use of social media for branding is also highly relevant. Although the scene is rather young, yet growing tremendously, previous academic literature has barely examined the cybersport industry. Therefore, the purpose of this exploratory study is to examine the following research question: *How do startups in the eSports industry use social media for developing their brand?* Furthermore, it aims to – partly – fill the gap in academic literature regarding eSports companies, and their social media branding practices. In order to answer the research question, the research examines a Russian startup in the eSports industry. Data is gathered from a total of 11 qualitative interviews with core staff of this newly established enterprise, as well as other industry insiders. Subsequently, this data is coded and examined by way of thematic analysis. From the analysis and interpretation of the findings, three core ideas occurred: 1) social media is crucial for the branding of any company in the cybersport scene, 2) whereas co-creation or the inclusion of external people in the processes of the company are discouraged, the personal network of the stakeholders, and adopting and maintaining a professional attitude in the social media presence, are highly important for creating loyal customers in the eSports industry, and 3) the eSports industry has a specific audience which makes that in the social media marketing strategy a) content should be prioritized, and b) the design elements are of considerable importance as well. Finally, the current research hints at a strongly integrated international component. On one hand, the eSports industry seemingly operates transnationally. On the other hand, social media supposedly has a global reach. Nevertheless, the analysis of the Russian startup reveals that cultural diversity and preferences still bear heavily on the effect of the internet. This means that, in order to effectively reach a global audience, social media marketing strategies have to be locally adjusted. Therefore, this thesis lays a good foundation for further comparative research.

KEYWORDS: Branding; social media; entrepreneurship; eSports; startup

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1. INTRODUCTION

Word count introduction: 1719

Due to the prominence of mediatization in contemporary society, the branding of startups via social media is a growing and highly relevant topic today (Horst, Perze-Latre, & Järventie-Thesleff, 2018, p.1; Sitta, Faulkner, & Stern, 2018, p.18). In general, social media refers to “a specific set of online offerings that have emerged over the past three decades (Treem, Daily, Pierce & Biffl, 2016, p.769). Furthermore, it is defined as “any website or application that enables users to engage in social networking activities such as creating, sharing or interacting with information” (Nisar, Prabhakar & Strakova, 2018, p.265) or “as a set of affordances supported by a diverse and evolving technological infrastructure that enables people to communicate and collaborate in novel ways” (Kane, 2017, p.38).

Although these definitions exemplify the complex nature of the concept, a definition which distinguishes the concept from older information and communication technologies, is hard to provide (p.37). Despite the complexity of these definitions and their underlying phenomenon, social media is essential for startups today, since “engaging in social media will help strengthen the brand experience [of a company] which will support brand building” (Kadam & Ayarekar, 2014, p.5).

Indeed, companies are currently “increasingly taking advantage of social media due to its vast volumes of useful knowledge [...] and the speed of information diffusion within such media” (Holsapple, Hsiao & Pakath, 2018, p.32). After all, nowadays, “brands are expected to be present in all channels that consumers use in their purchase decision process and to be available at all times” (Sitta, et al., 2018, p.21). In contemporary society this mainly includes social media. Thus, more specifically, if utilized correctly and strategically, social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter enable entrepreneurs to connect with customers and build a good reputation as well as their brands (Baptista, Wilson, Galliers, & Bynghall, 2017; Hassan, Nadzim & Shiratuddin, 2015, p.269; Hidayanti, Herman, & Farida, 2018; Kadam & Ayarekar, 2014, p.5). Generally, in the entrepreneurial process, an idea is generated, the opportunity is recognized and exploited, and the new enterprise – or startup – is established (Blundel, Lockett & Wang, 2018). This means that startups have to position themselves in the market quickly in order to survive. Therefore, enhancing the connection with customers and rapidly establishing a brand are of great importance.

For starting businesses in the eSports scene, the use of social media for branding purposes is also highly relevant. eSports, cybersport or cyber athletics is the competitive scene of the gaming industry. The games industry is seen as “the youngest and fastest growing of the new digital industries” (Hotho & Champion, 2011, p.29). Over the years, also the cybersport scene “has experienced a remarkable success” (Rossell Llorens, 2017, p.464) and it is expected to grow even more in value and revenue in the years to come (Clairfield International, 2018, p.3). Overall, eSports “represents a sport entertainment product with substantial growth potential, requiring management expertise related to events, merchandise, sponsorship, endorsement, marketing, technology, human resources, social media, governance, legal issues, celebrity culture, and athlete well-being” (Funk, Pizzo & Baker, 2018, p.10). Therefore, the eSports is seen as an emerging context that provides many opportunities for new companies.

Indeed, this research is socially relevant since many startups hope to profit from the incredibly fast developing gaming industry. There is a “need for additional guidance for practitioners, as the infrastructure surrounding the eSports has not kept pace with [its] rapid growth” (p.10). However, like any other new business, cybersport startups need to create a solid brand in order to stand out and survive. A “brand is more than a name given to a product [service or corporation]; it embodies a whole set of physical and socio-psychological attributes and beliefs” (Ahonen, 2008), which distinguishes it from competitors. Creating a brand is therefore complex and takes effort. Furthermore, eSports mainly takes place online, and increasing the usage of social media for branding would therefore seem to be enormously beneficial for putting a startup on the market in this particular industry. Overall, “the eSports market is not yet saturated [and there] is a huge potential for brands to fill this gap” (Clairfield International, 2018, p.21).

Similarly, the research is theoretically relevant, because the cybersport, the creation of startups in the eSport scene and the related branding activities, are underexamined by academia. Martončík (2015), for example, criticizes this as well in that “so far there have been very few studies which have dealt with the demographic characteristics, playing style, identity or motivation of eSports players for playing” (pp.208). Recently, more articles have been written on the topic (Karhulahti, 2017; Rossell Llorens, 2017; Cunningham, Fairley, Ferkins, Kerwin, Lock, Shaw & Wicker, 2018; Funk, et al., 2018), and some articles have even appeared on how big brands get involved in the eSports to increase their revenue (Anic, 2018; Hultgren, 2019; Schultz, 2017). However, these still only elaborate upon

organizational and managerial implications in general. In their study about whether the eSports can be classified as sport, Funk, et al. (2018) claim, for a video game to be classified as eSport, it must not only have “structure (e.g., standard rules), organization (e.g., rule adherence), and competition (e.g., clear winners and losers)” (p.9), but also a certain level of institutionalization in which regulation and official governing bodies are included and add standardization. Furthermore, Martončík (2015) defines cybersport as “the area of game playing in which the player’s goal is to continually advance, regularly train, compete, and practice in leagues and tournaments” (p.208). The gamers are usually in their late teens or early twenties and specialize in one particular game in which they participate in local (LAN) or online competitions. Nevertheless, Martončík (2015) argues, eSports is “not just about sitting at a computer and playing games, but about studying a certain game, training together and devising new strategies, and about the thrill of competitions and meeting new players from all around the world” (p.211). The cybersport industry is thus indeed expanding, and for new companies entering the field it becomes increasingly important to delve into the role of media as well as branding in order to attract customers and beat competition. Yet, whereas the gaming and eSports industries are growing immensely, academic studies regarding these topics are still many steps behind. This highlights the gap in academic literature and the relevance of the current study.

The purpose of this paper is therefore to examine the following research question:

How do startups in the eSports industry use social media for developing their brand?

To answer this question, this research examines a Russian startup in the eSport industry and draws from qualitative interviews with core staff of this newly established enterprise, as well as other industry insiders. In September 2018 the founders started a project to train both coaches and gamers who aspired a career in the eSports industry. Due to the success of this project and new business ideas of the founders regarding expansion, a startup company was founded in December 2018. For the current research, this particular case is chosen since I have been granted access to the organization. Furthermore, it is a good case because the company is small and recently established, and since the attempts for establishing a brand can thus be tracked over time. The results of this research show that social media is crucial for establishing a brand in the cybersport scene. Furthermore, the findings illustrate how in this particular industry, there is not much difference between the branding activities of a startup and that of a well-established company. According to the results, social media and sufficient connections in the industry are crucial in branding a company in the eSports scene.

Furthermore, the social media branding process is positively influenced by a certain level of consistency and professionalism, by a good design, and by prioritizing content. Whereas loyal customers ought to be created to achieve constructive feedback which aids the improvement of the product or service, co-creation is something that ought to be avoided.

As elaborated upon above, the eSports scene is still relatively underexplored. The current paper is thus of academic relevance for it sheds light on the workings, infrastructure, and management of, and branding in, the eSports industry. This also hints at the social relevance of this study, since the eSports scene is still relatively young – as compared with, for example, the film, music, or television industries – yet it is dynamic and develops fast. The current research could therefore be beneficial for people and organizations working in the field, or startups which are planning on entering it. Besides the remarkable absence of academic studies about the eSports, Bresciani and Eppler (2010) have argued that “only few scholars have focused on the specific branding needs, limitations and opportunities of young companies” (pp.2). Since the current research provides insights in how contemporary startups use social media for branding, it therefore also aids in contributing to the discourses of, and bridging existing gaps in, academic research. According to Bresciani and Eppler (2010, p.3) this topic is interesting for inquiry since startups have not yet established a particular identity nor structure, they usually lack sufficient resources and obtaining customers rapidly is crucial for a startup’s survival. Abimbola and Vallaster (2007) emphasized the importance of “integrating branding, reputation building, [and] relevant and appropriate organizational identity” (pp.341) for small- and medium-sized enterprises. Finally, “scholarly literature regarding social media is limited in size and scope due to the relatively short time that these sites have existed” (Pérez-Latrel & Tsourvakas, 2013, p.203). The current study therefore bridges quite some gaps in existing academic literature by shedding light on the importance of social media marketing with regard to startups in the eSports scene.

Ultimately, the research has a strong integrated international component as well. This is visible in the context being a Russian startup in the eSports industry. The cybersport scene mainly resides in the online sphere and due to the presumed global reach of the internet, the eSports thus seemingly operates transnational. Nevertheless, as the observations and interpretations will show, a cultural aspect is added to the study as a result of differences between locales, and their cultures and preferences. This will be further reflected upon in the discussion section. Overall, this provides the foundation for a scientifically and socially

relevant, as well as interesting thesis, which may lay the foundations for further comparative research.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Word count theoretical framework: 7841

The entrepreneurial process consists of an idea being generated, an opportunity being recognized and exploited, and a new enterprise being established (Blundel, et al., 2018). During, and especially after this process, the entrepreneur should invest in attracting audiences and motivating employees – provided that the startup already has people working for it – in order to keep this startup alive and, ultimately, to make it grow. One of the ways to aid this, is via the usage of social media. This latter forms the core of the current study, and this theoretical framework therefore outlines previous research to highlight several relevant and important concepts and aspects. In the first subchapter – *Corporate Branding* – the concept of corporate branding will be explained since a certain level of knowledge of branding is needed for investigating the phenomenon of branding via social media. Furthermore, a particular understanding of corporate branding is needed since this is the type of brand that is attempted to be created in the startup under investigation in the current study. The second subchapter – *Branding in Startups* – elaborates on the different branding needs of, and implications for, Startups, Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), and entrepreneurs. In the subchapter *Managing Digital Media Marketing in Startups*, different social media marketing strategies and approaches will be discussed. This subchapter is divided in five sections – *The Roles of Traditional and Social Media Marketing; The impact of Cultural Diversity; The Dilemmas of an Open Strategy; Communicating and Connecting; and Spreading the Word* – and will discuss the implications of certain specific, yet important aspects of social media branding for startups. The final subchapter *Recap and Implications for the eSports scene*, shortly summarizes the theoretical framework and looks into the limited number of articles written on branding in the cybersport industry.

2.1 CORPORATE BRANDING

“Brands are important intangible assets that can significantly contribute to [a firm’s] performance” (Agostini, Filippini & Nosella, 2015, p.161). For example, they could prevent imitation by competitors, and enhance the creation of loyal and committed customers and “an image and mental association in the customer’s mind” (p.163). They could therefore be seen as “the most relevant reputational assets”(p.162). Corporate brands differ from, for instance, service or product brands, since they are “a systematically planned and

implemented process of creating and maintaining a favorable image and consequently a favorable reputation for the company as a whole, by sending signals to all stakeholders and by managing behavior, communication, and symbolism” (Einwiller & Will, 2002, p.101). It is a consistent, yet dynamic and co-created process which conveys a company’s unique characteristics (Ahonen, 2008; Foroudi, Suraksha, Kitchen, Melewar & Foroudi, 2017; Rode & Vallaster, 2005) and includes both the corporate image and the corporate identity.

The corporate identity refers to the corporate brand’s internal part and answers questions like “who you are, what you do, how you do it and where you want to go” (Foroudi, et al., 2017, p.574). It results from the network in which it is situated and all the stakeholders therefore actively participate in processes of developing the company’s image and products and thus in building the brand (Juntunen, 2012). The stakeholders include all sorts of people from employees and customers to family and relatives. Their behaviors and communication reflect onto the company and ought to be professional (p.237), since correct preservation of these features is linked with the success of the company (Foroudi, et al., 2017, p.574).

According to Rode and Vallaster (2005) the corporate identity includes four aspects. Firstly, it contains a corporate culture comprising of the company’s mission statement and core values, basic concepts and philosophy. Secondly, corporate brands contain a corporate design. This involves all visual aspects of the corporate brand, like name, logo and colors, and is often perceived as that what makes a company distinguishable from its competitors and thus recognizable (Foroudi, et al., 2017, p.578; Juntunen, 2012, p.232). The visual elements of a company are often still subjected to changes or updates over time. These not only happen in the startup-phase of a company, but also when the company has become more well-established. Thirdly, corporate brands entail corporate behavior, which bears upon the management of human resource processes. The fourth element is corporate communication. Whereas internal communication happens within the entire company, external communication allows for interaction with the audiences and thereby creates the corporate image of the company that these audiences perceive. A company’s corporate identity therefore becomes apparent from its verbal, visual and behavioral aspects (Foroudi, et al., 2017, p.576). Furthermore, communication happens both controlled or uncontrolled, and can be done via multiple channels. Communication therefore bridges the gap between the different aspects of corporate identity and image, as well as between the perceptions of internal and external stakeholders (p.575). It has thus a major impact (p.577).

The trustworthiness of the image of a company – and therefore the effect of the branding activities – depends on the consistency and transparency of the corporate identity (Rode & Vallaster, 2005, p.124). Trust, in turn, can enhance the loyalty of both customers and employees, and it can boost customer commitment and re-purchases (Foroudi, et al., 2017, p.580). Compared with well-established companies, the corporate identity of startups is usually less consistent because of their short period of existence and because corporate culture, design, behavior and communication are often still unfixed. However, for new companies, branding is of particular importance since they need to distinguish themselves from competitors and since they need to establish a customer base by creating a preference for their product, service or company (Juntunen, 2012, p.232). According to Sitta, Faulkner and Stern (2018), the size of the fanbase of a particular brand as well as the increase of this fanbase are in direct relation with the value ascribed to that brand (p.18-19). If startups do not situate themselves in the market relatively short after their founding, they will disappear from that market (Kadam & Ayarekar, 2014, p.3; Rode & Vallaster, 2005, p.124). Moreover, Edosowan, Prakasan, Kouame, Watson and Seymour (2011) argues that a well-established brand name makes the company more attractive for both its customers and employees. Similarly, Agostini, et al. (2015) found in their study that branding can positively affect the sales performance of a startup (p.170).

2.2 BRANDING IN STARTUPS

New companies have different branding needs, complications and opportunities than larger and well-established companies. These differences mainly occur due to a strong personal influence of the founders (Abimbola & Vallaster, 2007, p.343; Juntunen, 2012, p.244; Rode & Vallaster, 2005, p.124; Werthes, et al., 2017, p.290); a lack of resources, internal processes and structures; the urge to build a reputation and find customers rapidly (Bresciani & Eppler, 2010, p.3; Hassan, et al., 2015, p.263; Hsieh & Wu, 2019, p.316; Jones, Borgman & Ulusoy, 2015, p.611-612); and a lack of knowledge regarding branding in general (Juntunen, 2012, p.231) or of the benefits of, for example, PR, in particular (Bresciani & Eppler, 2010, p.7). Consequently, branding activities in startups are often restricted to word of mouth (WOM) advertising and the personal networks of the people involved.

Bresciani and Eppler (2010) argue that for startups there are four types of branding classifications which reflect both external expectations and internal strategy – that is, the branding strategy of the company. Companies focus on 1) both traditional and innovative

branding activities, since they consistently need to put effort in maintaining or improving their status, 2) only innovative branding activities, since they have a definite brand vision, 3) only innovative branding activities, since their industry does not require much branding attempts, or 4) only traditional branding activities, since they believe that branding does not add value (p.8). Depending on the background of the entrepreneur and the industry in which the startup is created, startups generally still need to build their image, and a combination of branding activities therefore seems most fruitful. Moreover, Abimbola and Vallaster (2007, p.342) stress the increasing role of brands, organizational identity and reputation for success in our contemporary customer-led competitive market. In fact, “corporate branding is an issue that may offer real opportunities for differentiation for SMEs” (Juntunen, 2012, p.231) and thus also for new enterprises.

Both Bresciani and Eppler (2010) and Rode and Vallaster (2005) offer suggestions for creating a brand for entrepreneurs and startups. First of all, “the entrepreneur should define the *brand strategy* accordingly to the strategy of the new organization” (Bresciani & Eppler, 2010, p.8). This includes clearly defining the brand mission, the organization’s purpose and business concept, values and philosophy (Rode & Vallaster, 2005, p.130), as well as developing a definite plan of how to execute and stick to these. This is challenging since these aspects need to be subjected to consistent decisions by, and agreement of, all people involved (p.124). Moreover, they ought to be creative in nature in order to increase innovation (Gundry, et al., 2016, p.57). The potential exit of one of the founders (p.132) as well as the company’s potential expansion should hereby also be considered (Bresciani & Eppler, 2010, p.9). Furthermore, “regular feedback [...] may help to reduce uncertainty and increase clarity of where to go” (Rode & Vallaster, 2005, p.132).

Secondly, the startup’s strategy should be accomplished via a suitable “*brand design* [which is] in line with the brand mission and philosophy” (Bresciani & Eppler, 2010, p.8). Although in startups the visual elements are often still unstable (Rode & Vallaster, 2005, p.129), they should be considered deliberately and require consistency. Bresciani and Eppler (2010, p.6), for example, stress the importance of the name choice regarding brand effectiveness, since the name forms the basis of the corporate image. Again, feedback can show how customers perceive the company. Indeed, one of the findings of Rode and Vallaster (2005) was that “personal contacts with the company’s audience were the most relevant information sources” (p.131). Pucci (2017) even goes as far as stating that

your job as an entrepreneur is not just to make a single sale: It’s to build relationships

with audiences who will grow your company. Focusing on a one-time sale will get you just that: one sale. But focusing on audience development—strategic growth and engagement of likely, long-term customers—creates a sustainable business (p.276).

Companies in general, but startups in particular, should actively keep developing their branding strategies (Bresciani & Eppler, 2010, p.9) in order to connect to, and engage with, both the audience and the employees, and to therefore develop and maintain their brand status.

Both internal and external communication are thus crucial. A consistent flow of information and feedback helps in developing a clear corporate image and reduces the risks of miscommunication or alienation. Ultimately, Juntunen (2012) argues that co-creation is beneficial especially for entrepreneurs, since multiple perspectives are involved, and since “utilizing the knowledge and ideas of the stakeholders is cheap” (p.245). Rather than solely relying on the ideas and decisions of the entrepreneur, a successful startup revolves around a team of collaborating stakeholders with each his or her own knowledge, experiences, skills and perspectives (Gundry, et al., 2016, p.57).

Besides personal contact with the audience, private contact on an internal level is therefore highly important as well: “this allows developing a sense of belonging, which, in turn may facilitate work identification and motivation” (Rode & Vallaster, 2005, p.132-133). Nevertheless, employees should be selected and appointed carefully, since they should not just meet the appropriate qualifications, but also “match[...] the defined corporate culture in terms of personality and attitude” (p.133). After all, “an online business has a greater chance for success if those who buy its offerings recognize its brand” (Abimbola & Vallaster, 2007, p.344). Nowadays the internet, and especially social media facilitate “organizations to connect with customers at the right time, directly with lower cost and higher efficiency than other traditional communication tools” (Hassan, et al., 2015, p.264). They are therefore eminent ways for startups to maintain and improve a company’s image, and to facilitate communication, enhance co-creation, engage customers, and increase brand awareness – if they are utilized correctly that is.

2.3 MANAGING DIGITAL MEDIA MARKETING IN STARTUPS

In the past couple of years, the processes of management, marketing, and creating startups have changed enormously due to the developments of social media technologies

(Constantinides, 2014, p.40; Horst, Perze-Latre & Hitters, 2018, p1; Kane, 2017, p.37) and the increasing importance of social media in people's daily lives (Alalwan, Rana, Dwivedi & Algharabat, 2017, p.1178; Hofacker & Belanche, 2016, p.74; Kasperuniene & Zydziumaite, 2019, p.2; Seth, 2018, p.3; Shiau, Dwivedi & Lai, 2018, p.52; Tiago & Veríssimo, 2014, p.703; Zhu & Chen, 2015, p.344) – especially among the younger segments of society (Pérez-Latrel & Tsourvakas, 2013, p.202).

Nowadays, social media is defined as “any website or application that enables users to engage in social networking activities such as creating, sharing or interacting with information” (Nisar, et al., 2018, p.265). It involves “various types of online services that add to the ability for interactive and participative communication” (Baptista, et al., 2017, p.326). Hereby communication is accelerated and expanded, and previous academic literature has therefore argued that social media provides many opportunities for organizations for creating a more differentiated brand, as well as stronger relationships with customers, employees and other stakeholders (Constantinides, 2014, p.41; Felix, Rauschnabel & Hinsch, 2017, p.123; Hudson, Huang, Roth & Madden, 2016, p.27; Jones, et al., 2015, p.611; Kane, 2017, p.38; Nambisan, Siegel & Kenney, 2018, p.357; Park, Im & Kim, 2018, p.1; Sitta, et al., 2018, p.17; Sparrer, 2018). While, Paniagua and Juan (2014) argue that social media only has a positive influence “on business performance [...] after a critical threshold of followers is reached” (p.720), Kim and Ko (2012) stress the increasing importance of social media nowadays. They argue that “social media can have a dramatic impact on a brand's reputation [and that] companies not engaging in social media as part of their online marketing campaign strategy are missing an opportunity to reach consumers” (p.1481). After all, “if most customers engage with social media, firms should engage with social media as well” (Tiago & Veríssimo, 2014, p.704).

With the rise of social media, communication shifted towards open participation, and collectivity, multivocality and visibility became new standards. Brands increasingly made use of these media, despite the fact that social media was initially believed to revolve around friends and family (Laroche, Habibi & Richard, 2013, p.76; Parasnis & Heller Baird, 2011, p.31). As a result, companies are argued to increasingly focus on managing their social media presence, rather than their products (Hofacker & Belanche, 2016, p.75-76). According to Hofacker and Belanche (2016), big companies are more active with social media for marketing purposes, and small enterprises use the medium mainly for customer services (p.74). Nevertheless, for entrepreneurs, utilizing social media is interesting for

other reasons as well. For instance, it lowers entry barriers, is cost-efficient, and allows for a fast establishment, improvement and visibility of the new enterprise due to enabling an open and a multiway communication (Arnaboldi & Coget, 2016, p.48; Jones, et al., 2015, p.614; Mays, 2017, p.276; Nambisan, et al., 2018, p.359). Kadam and Ayarekar (2014) go even one step further by stressing the importance of social media for entrepreneurs nowadays, since these aid in “keeping in touch with [...] suppliers, customers and contracts, recruiting employees, and promoting their profile and brand. [...] entrepreneurs who make use of social media networks are more likely to achieve greater success than those who do not” (p.4). Moreover, they argue, utilizing social media in a startup enhances the building of a good reputation, and thus also the building of a brand (p.5). Horst, et al. (2018) state that entrepreneurs can constantly recreate themselves via social media (p.10). It thus allows startups the flexibility to find the best suitable way of building a good reputation as well as their brand.

Regardless of the increasing importance of social media platforms, however, several scholars (Constantinides, 2014, p.43; Foroudi, et al., 2017, p.578; Jones, et al., 2015, p.613) argue that companies should not forget about the importance of a website. “Overall, a website is more unique and it allows the business to own the entire content and method of delivery” (p.613). In social media, a company has less control over when, where and how its audience will see the content. In the end, then, a website can be more effective since it has “the potential to be more compelling and persuasive” (p.613) and the objective of a company’s social media usage should be “to eventually attract customers to the web page” (p.614).

Social media can be included in a company’s marketing strategies in several ways. On one hand, a company could take an approach which Constantinides (2014) conceptualizes as “passive” (p.45), and Felix, et al. (2017) as “reactive” (p.119). In this scenario the organization uses the social media merely as low cost, but high-quality information source to get to know the needs and experiences of the customers, as well as the state of competition in the market. On the other hand, a company can take a more “active” (Constantinides, 2014, p.45) or “proactive” (Felix, et al., 2017, p.119) stance. This strategy revolves around direct communication and marketing, as well as enhancing customer commitment via the personalization of the customer’s experience (Constantinides, 2014, p.46). This personalizing aspect is conforming to the contemporary turn to targeting the individual rather than the masses (p.48). At the same time content communities can be used

or new online communities can be created. Finally, the Internet's Long Tail (p.47) can be used to reach a wider audience and to thus increase brand awareness.

Differently, Felix, et al. (2017) also distinguish between a “defender” or “explorer” approach to social media marketing (p.121). In the former strategy, social media is merely used as means of one-way communication to promote a product to the consumers. The explorer strategy, however, delves into the more interactive and collaborative nature of social media. Hereby attempts are made “to create and maintain reciprocal relationships with stakeholders” (p.121) and the communication is thus open and two-way. Finally, an organization can see the social media marketing strategy either as centralized in, and controlled by, one department, or as fragmented in the network of the organization. In case of the latter, the social media activities are a responsibility for all the employees (p.122). Regardless of which approach a company chooses, however, Felix, et al. (2017) stress the importance of defining clear social media guidelines to enhance, for instance, the effectiveness of this particular marketing strategy (p.123). This concern should be kept in mind especially in startups, because strategies and processes are usually still rather inconsistent and unfixed.

The current academic literature discusses several contemporary issues regarding the purposes, challenges, benefits and risks of adopting social media in a firm's marketing strategy. These aspects and their implications for startups are detailed in the subsections below.

2.3.1 The roles of traditional and social media marketing

It is argued that organizations use social media mainly for purposes like “marketing, advertising, public relations, recruitment, research, product/service testing and review, idea generation, feedback, and occasionally, complaint handling” (Chung, Andreev, Benyoucef, Duane & O'Reilly, 2017, p.1405). Social media is usually preferred over the more traditional marketing approaches due to its innovative, cost-efficient, interactive, individualizing and rapid nature (Alalwan, et al., 2017, p.1183) and since it allows for targeting a niche audience (Khajeheian, 2013, p.131; Mays, 2017, p.276). Traditional marketing here “refers to conventional means of mass communication [which are usually] limited to a local impact” (Seth, 2018, p.7). Previously was discussed how startups can benefit most from the first type of branding in Bresciani and Eppler's (2010) fourfold

classification – that was the consistent need to put effort in maintaining and improving the status of the company via a combination of traditional and innovative branding activities. This is argued to have a positive effect on advertising due to continuous exposure (Sitta, et al., 2018, p.21) which in turn aids the advancement of the company's image. Although Edosowan, et al.(2011) argue that social media by itself can already enhance a constant exposure (p.85), firms usually use social media already together with other communication channels in their marketing strategy (Felix, et al., 2017, p.123; Foroudi, 2017, p.579). It can be argued, however, that companies are using traditional media ever more to direct their customers to their online presence (Mühl-Benninghaus, 2013, p.158). Nevertheless, social media marketing is not easy and often entrepreneurs still lack the required knowledge. "Knowing what they are doing, and having a well thought strategy is [thus] critical for [...] small businesses" (Jones, et al., 2015, p.626).

The tools used and the investments – both time and money wise – put into social media, differ per company (Chung, et al., 2017, p.1406) and are dependent on, for instance, the size of the organization and the industry in which it is situated (Felix, et al., 2017, p.119). In their study about social media marketing in luxury fashion brands, for example, Park, et al. (2018) found that on social media these brands ought to maintain a certain level of cognitive distance between themselves and their customers. This in order to maintain their core value perceptions – that is, their status as luxurious. Social media's inclusive, interactive, accessible, and wide-reaching nature (p.1), hereby seems to clash with the exclusive nature of luxurious brands. The level and way in which social media are used should therefore be deliberately considered and should be in line with the objectives of the organization.

2.3.2 The impact of cultural diversity

The choice of which social media platforms are used should also deliberately be considered since this affects the effectiveness regarding building and strengthening customer relationships. After all, Zhao, Shchekoturov and Shchekoturova (2017) state: "no two platforms are exactly the same even if they belong to the same category" (p.172). Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) determine four such categories of online social media platforms: collaborative projects, (micro)-blogs, content communities and social networking sites. Regarding their relevance for particular purposes, Alalwan, et al. (2017) argue, for instance, that in comparison with the social networking site Facebook, the micro-blog Twitter enables

a higher level of interactivity and up to date content. Hereby they state that “even though customers seem to be enthused to follow brands on Facebook, they are less interested in keeping contact with these brands as well as to re-share their content on their own pages” (p.1182). Nevertheless, both Facebook and Twitter are stated to offer more possibilities for communication with customers as compared with the content community YouTube (p.1182). However, in order to achieve the best outcome, each platform should be used in accordance with what it could offer. For this, it should also be considered whether the target group is willing to engage with the company, whether the target group can be reached via a particular platform, and how the published content is relevant for this particular target group (Sitta, et al., 2018, p.21). Zhao, et al. (2017), for example, state “that culture affects both the design and use of an [online social media] platform” (p.171). Besides examining which form and kind of content is fruitful for a particular platform, “the cultural characteristics of the countries from which the platforms originat[e]” (p.171), should be considered as well.

The strength of the relationship created via a particular social media is therefore also dependent on the cultural background of the consumer, and the specific need of the person targeted (Zhu & Chen, 2015, p.335). This has a particular influence when a marketing campaign is created for an international audience. While social media goes beyond the “restrictions in time, place and medium” (Kim & Ko, 2012, p.1480), it provides the opportunity to expand the reach to a global scale (Arnaboldi & Coget, 2016, p.48; Jones, et al., 2015, p.625; Kadam & Ayarekar, 2014, p.4; Kane, 2017, p.41; Nambisan, et al., 2018, p.365; Sánchez-Tabernero, Villanueva & Orihuela, 2013, p.162; Seth, 2018, p.9). For example, one no longer has to consider the costs of printing and shipping marketing materials to other parts in the world. Instead, with just one click, the message is sent around the globe. Due to the lack of resources and the pressing need to situate themselves in the market relatively fast after establishment, the global reach of social media could be beneficial for entrepreneurs. Yet, it should be considered that this globe consists of different cultures and people, and thus of different marketing needs. The specific characteristics of the target audience – for example “age, gender, educational background and class status” (Zhao, et al., 2017, p.172) – should thus be acknowledged too. In their study, Hudson, et al. (2016), for instance, found a difference between high and low uncertainty avoiding countries and the effect of social media marketing (p.30). Furthermore, Zhao, et al. (2017) note, “different users may use the same [online social media] platform in different ways and for different purposes” (p.183).

Regarding the specific case used for this study, it is both interesting and useful to shortly look into the usage of social media in Russia specifically, since the startup under investigation operates from that particular country. In 2013, Blinova argued that according to statistics, “Russia is one of the fastest growing social media markets in Europe and in the world. [...] Russians are embracing social and digital media in ways deeper and more impactful than other countries around the world” (p.415). Social media marketing could therefore be of particular significance for reaching audiences located in this country. Nevertheless, “Russians prefer Russian social media more than international ones, although the Russian representation on international web-sites is considerable” (p.415). Those using international social media platforms like Twitter or Facebook, “are generally of the wealthier, well-traveled, cosmopolitan variety, have foreign friends and tend to live in Moscow and St. Petersburg” (p.412). The Russian social media platform VKontakte – an equivalent of the American platform Facebook – enjoys particular popularity within the country (Zhao, et al., 2017, p.176), especially with the younger segment of society (Blinova, 2013, p.412). Thus, while Facebook is argued to be the biggest social media platform worldwide (Seth, 2018, p.4; Shiau, et al., 2018, p.53; Sitta, et al., 2018, p.18), it should be considered that this platform resonates less with a Russian target audience as compared with VKontakte.

2.3.3 The dilemmas of an open strategy

A certain degree of openness is intrinsic in social media (Nambisan, et al., 2018, p.357), and adopting social media thus inherently involves the initiation of an open strategy. This can have positive consequences for companies since it increases transparency of strategic issues, and a greater inclusion of both internal and external stakeholders regarding the strategy making process (Gegenhuber & Dobusch, 2017, p.337; Hautz, Seidl & Whittington, 2017, p.298). Transparency is hereby defined as the wider availability of authentic content, and inclusiveness refers to the involvement of more individuals which increases connectedness (Baptista, et al., 2017, p.333).

Enacting an open strategy is not always beneficial, and Hautz, et al. (2017) define five particular dilemmas related to open strategy. First of all, including more people in the process of making strategies can on one hand lead to an increase in knowledge which can be used for better improvements. On the other hand, however, “the involvement of wider audiences reduces the speed, flexibility and control over the decision-making process”

(p.301). Secondly, open strategy can simultaneously increase and decrease the audience's feeling of responsibility for the company's strategy. External audiences might have different reasons for interaction than the company, and the knowledge and skills of the employees might attract the interest of competitors (Kane, 2017, p.40-41). Thirdly, open strategy involves the dilemma of disclosure (Hautz, et al., 2017, p.302). On one hand, openness positively influences trust, reliability and collaboration. On the other hand, however, it can negatively affect the company's competitiveness by potentially revealing sensitive or secretive information. After all, due to the weakening of organizational boundaries all kinds of information flow easily from one place to the other (Hofacker & Belanche, 2016, p.75; Kane, 2017, p.41). Furthermore, the accessible information can be misinterpreted by stakeholders which can have contradictory consequences. Fourthly, the dilemma of empowerment can simultaneously grant and hinder both the companies and its audiences (Hautz, et al., 2017, p.303). Finally, "once organizations open up in some areas they might not have the possibility anymore to restrict openness if they want to" (p.303). Opening up can escalate quickly, to the extent that there is no more turning back. When engaging in social media, companies should therefore acknowledge the risks of losing their control (Felix, et al., 2017, p.123). As Row (2018) puts it: "failure can be one bad tweet away" (p.138).

In the end, startups should be careful with including social media in their marketing strategies. After all, Nambisan, et al. (2018) argue: "one of the most important decisions is what to reveal (open) and what to keep secret" (p.359). Although this accounts for all companies, it should especially be considered by entrepreneurs (p.362). Despite the fact that a great amount of knowledge is freely accessible and potentially makes up for the lack of certain knowledge in entrepreneurs, the strategic processes need to happen quickly in order for the company to survive. Startups are usually attractive because of their innovativeness, and in order to keep this advantage they ought to be careful with what they share. At the same time, they need to build a level of trust so that customers actually become willing to interact. Regardless of these dilemmas and their implications for new enterprises, social media and its open nature could have fruitful consequences for young enterprises as well.

2.3.4 Communicating and connecting

If utilized correctly social media would potentially lead to an improvement of the company's infrastructure (Gegenhuber & Dobusch, 2017, p.337; Kane, 2017, p.38), and thus also of its

performances (Nisar, et al., 2018, p.264). First of all, as mentioned above, social media increases the ability for communication. This, in turn, can result in, for instance, more market exposure, new business partnerships, less expenses for marketing, and eventually a growth in revenue (Constantinides, 2014, p.43). The creation of, sharing of, and interaction with information enabled by social media can occur both internally and externally of organizations. The adoption of social media features in organizations therefore connects both employees and customers.

On the level of employees, connecting a group of people with the organization increases the understanding that these people have of the company (Gegenhuber & Dobusch, 2017, p.338). As mentioned previously, this allows for an increasing amount of knowledge which is important for the success of a startup. After all, each person on the team brings his or her own unique experiences and expertise, and via social media these become accessible for everyone included in the organization. Consequently, complex issues can be addressed more easily and, if needed, dealt with (Nisar, et al., 2018, p.265). The sharing of knowledge hereby reduces potential risks (Nambisan, et al., 2018, p.356). Furthermore, it allows people to contribute to the business while they would previously not have been able to because, for instance, they lived too far away (Kane, 2017, p.41). Finally, if an entrepreneur allows for a more informal form of communication, creativity is more likely to be sparked (Gundry, et al., 2016, p.62-63). The internal inclusion enhanced by open strategy could hereby benefit internal innovation (Nambisan, et al., 2018, p.355). Improving the connection and communication between employees could lead to more innovative ideas or solutions, to better collaborations, to a higher loyalty and commitment (Arnaboldi & Coget, 2016, p.50) and thus to a better result (Kadam & Ayarekar, 2014, p.4) and a stronger stance against competition.

Additional to enhancing the internal infrastructure, using social media in the marketing strategy allows for an increased connection between the company's brand and its customers (Alalwan, et al., 2017, p.1182; Hofacker & Belanche, 2016, p.75; Jones, et al., 2015, p.624; Kim & Ko, 2012, p.1480; Sharma & Verma, 2018, p.22; Sitta, et al., 2018, p.18; Tiago & Veríssimo, 2014, p.703). At all times, being available for, and actively engaging, your customers have become the contemporary standards for brands (Sitta, et al., 2018, p.17; Sparrer, 2018). Gegenhuber and Dobusch (2017) distinguish between three forms of synergy between a company and its customers: "broadcasting (transparently communicating relevant information), dialoguing (asking users for opinions and engaging in conversation), and

including (involving external audiences in decision-making)” (p.338). Nevertheless, it is argued that rather than managing customers, companies should focus on a two-way communication system which revolves around collaboration, co-creation and active participation (Parasnis & Heller Baird, 2011, p.30). Horst, et al. (2018) argue that “branding the startup becomes essentially a process of “brand co-creation” with the audiences” (p.9). Therefore, a startup should seek to enhance customer engagement and encourage a “constructive dialogue in which the meaning of products, ideas, decisions, and brand identities is jointly constructed and re-constructed” (p.10). However, Pereira, Fatima Salgueiro & Mateus (2014) suggest “that consumers prefer to react to brand updates rather than start conversations with the brand” (p.697). Customer engagement refers to the social connection between a company and its brand on one hand, and the consumers on the other (Park, et al., 2018, p.2; Sitta, et al., 2018, p.19), and is in direct relation with a brand’s value. Hereby a brand preferably reaches a stage in which customers do more than following the company’s main page or sporadically liking the shared social media content. Consequently, at least some level of interaction with customers is expected from a startup if they wish to use social media in their marketing strategies (p.19).

Due to this increased relationship as well as the accumulation of information, more knowledge about the customers is acquired and the needs and desires of these customers can be reinforced and apprehended (Hassan, et al., 2015, p.264; Hudson, et al., 2016, p.28; Kane, 2017, p.43; Nambisan, et al., 2018, p.362; Seth, 2018, p.10; Sparrer, 2018). Customer engagement becomes especially important since the low costs of social media marketing has made the social media sphere rather messy with companies trying to sell their products and services (Sitta, et al., 2018, p.18). Therefore, customers have to be actively encouraged to interact with this particular company rather than another. Engagement on social media can take several forms like following, commenting, sharing, resharing, and liking (Hudson, et al., 2016, p.29). On one hand, these forms of interaction can become dangerous since the customers take the control over the conversation (Leeftang, Verhoef, Dahlström & Freundt, 2014, p.2; Horst, et al., 2018, p.15; Parasnis & Heller Baird, 2011, p.30). On the other hand, however, this direct engagement enables companies to constantly innovate and improve their products in accordance with their customers’ expectations (Hsieh & Wu, 2019, p.318; Sánchez-Tabernero, et al., 2013, p.163).

Initiating an open strategy can prevent or redress misunderstandings and prejudice (Kim & Ko, 2012, p.1480; Sharma & Verma, 2018, p.22) by increasing customers’

understanding of the company and the products or services it offers (Gegenhuber & Dobusch, 2017, p.338) and by increasing the company's understanding of its customers (Blundel, et al., 2018; Leeflang, et al., 2014, p.2). Consequently, positive feelings can be fostered and direct engagement is encouraged. Hereby a company generates awareness and interest (Hudson, et al., 2016, p.28), and it thus increases its "visible recognition" (Nisar, et al., 2018, p.271) as well as its competitiveness (Hidayanti, et al., 2018, p.20). For startups this is interesting since they have to situate themselves in the market very quickly, yet they are often perceived with a certain skepticism due to their newness.

In the end, with the increasing usage and importance of social media, related marketing strategies no longer focus on transactions and intrusive mass approaches, but on engaging customers, building a long-term relationship and inviting them for active participation – something that is nowadays also much expected by the customers themselves (Constantinides, 2014, p.42; Parasnis & Heller Baird, 2011, p.31). For a company this is beneficial since a customer's engagement in the company affects his or her intention to purchase the product or service on offer (Alalwan, et al., 2017, p.1183). Furthermore, the relationship ought to be maintained for a longer time since the value of the customer exceeds merely purchasing the product.

2.3.5 Spreading the word

In an active social media marketing strategy, customers are allowed to co-create or to provide customer generated content so that an active participation of the customers is encouraged. Previous customers can, for instance, review the company's product or service. This, in turn, can potentially have a big impact on attracting new customers (Constantinides, 2014, p.48) and on building a strong relationship with them (p.41) by improving the brand image. After all, Parasnis and Heller Baird (2011) argue, "consumers are increasingly using social media to gain recommendations, reviews and opinions from friends, family, experts and the collective social community" (p.34). This information is believed to have a stronger effect on immediate purchases. Due to their prestige, opinion leaders and influencers can also be very beneficial as brand advocates (Constantinides, 2014, p.47). "Followers not only want to know more about the celebrities, but also want to be more like them" (Zhu & Chen, 2015, p.341). If someone's idol is associated with your product, chances are thus bigger that that person wants to be associated with your product too.

Furthermore, Sitta, et al. (2018) argue that “the most popular reason for using social media is to discover what friends are doing” (p.19). Interactions with a brand or organization via social media, on the other hand, mainly happen for achieving discounts, or when the customer already knows the brand or wants to be associated with it (Laroche, et al., 2013, p.77). Whereas especially in case of the latter, the consumer already has a certain level of affinity with the company, “a recommendation from a friend or family member could make a difference” (Parasnis & Heller Baird, 2011, p.35) when this affinity does not yet exist. Hudson, et al. (2016) even state that “when people hear about a product or service from a friend, they become a customer at a 15% higher rate than when they find out about it through other means” (p.28). Reading a positive review written by a friend or an idol, can increase the customer’s interest in a product or service and thus his or her willingness to purchase or interact with it. The implications of raising this awareness have been stressed extensively above.

Due to the positive effect of customer to customer communication, the connection between the customers themselves is therefore also rather important for a social media marketing strategy. This phenomenon of the influence of the communications between the customers is defined as word-of-mouth (WOM). The previous customer hereby becomes the brand’s advocate and transforms the marketing narrative into a social one (Kozinets, Valck, Wojnicki & Wilner, 2010, p.83). Although traditionally this form of marketing was confined to the previous and the potential customers being in immediate physical reach to each other, the advance of social media has expanded this reach tremendously (Alalwan, et al., 2017, p.1181; Chen, Fay & Wang, 2011, p.86; Constantinides, 2014, p.43; Kozinets, et al., 2010, p.71; Seth, 2018, p.7; Sitta, et al., 2018, p.17). Whereas a social media platform like Facebook may not instantly lead to a growth in a company’s fanbase per se, it helps in engaging previous customers. This is important as well since not all the people are looking to directly purchase via social media (Sitta, et al., 2018, p.19). However, due to WOM the overall brand awareness amongst people will be increased (Park, et al., 2018, p.9), and Chen, et al. (2011) argue that online WOM “has a significant influence on purchase behavior” (p.85). A company’s social media activities may therefore indirectly enhance a greater fanbase after all (Sitta, et al., 2018, p.21). Moreover, entrepreneurs could benefit from this, because WOM via social media basically provides them with free advertising for a potentially mass audience.

Of course, while social media empowers customers to share their experiences, it also

brings challenges for companies. For example, WOM might not reach the right target group and it happens out of the control of the organization (Alalwan, et al., 2017, p.1183; Seth, 2018, p.16). The sharing of experiences via social media could therefore have a negative impact on a brand as well. It is likely that some customers have negative experiences, which will thus also be shared (Alalwan, et al., 2017, p.1182; Sánchez-Tabernero, et al., 2013, p.163). Consequently, social media could serve more as a complaint channel rather than as relationship enhancing (Hofacker & Belanche, 2016, p.73).

Nonetheless, these reviews also form a useful source for feedback which can show how certain aspects of the company – for example the corporate design elements – are perceived. Due to its vastness and reach, social media “facilitates the emergence of a wide variety of perspectives and values, both positive and negative” (Arnaboldi & Coget, 2016, p.49). This can provide clarity of the company’s processes, and thereby encourage consistency in the company (Rode & Vallaster, 2005, p.132). This contemplation of feedback is conceptualized as reflexivity (Baptista et al., 2017), and it is argued that “organization[s] with high reflexivity allow for high levels of agency and give individuals better ability to shape norms and structures of their own environment” (p.326). Adopting social media hereby changes the nature of organizational strategy since this strategy becomes a shared effort and co-created, rather than asserted from authorities (p.331). Previously in this paper was already stated how entrepreneurs are usually still inconsistent and unclear in their strategies and how feedback is crucial for startups in order to overcome this and to become more stable.

A consistent corporate identity, together with the transparency and open accessibility of social media platforms, allow for a certain level of trust both internally and externally (Baptista, et al., 2017, p.322; Nisar, et al., 2018, p.266; Rode & Vallaster, 2005, p.131). Therefore, “a company's efforts in an online community can enhance trust in the company” (Hudson, et al., 2016, p.29). Failing to be transparent nowadays could lead to companies being perceived as manipulative and dishonest (Parasnis & Heller Baird, 2011, p.33). Via social media, customers could namely easily check the trustworthiness of a company and find better alternatives or substitutes (Constantinides, 2014, p.43). As mentioned before, an open strategy increases people’s understanding of the organization and hereby it enhances a certain level of legitimacy (Gegenhuber & Dobusch, 2017, p.339). Establishing a certain level of trust and legitimacy is particularly important for new enterprises since they have to overcome their liability of newness (Gegenhuber & Dobusch, 2017, p.351) and since they

have to build a solid customer base rapidly, rather than lose it.

Trust forms the basis for transforming brand awareness into loyal customer relationships (Foroudi, 2017, p.579; Laroche, et al., 2013, p.76). According to Laroche, et al. (2013), “brand communities established on social media have positive effects on customer/product, customer/brand, customer/company and customer/other customers relationships, which in turn have positive effects on brand trust, and trust has positive effects on brand loyalty” (p.76). Engaging the customers after a purchase is done, is becoming increasingly important nowadays (Hofacker & Belanche, 2016, p.76). Hidayanti, et al. (2018) argue that customer loyalty ought to be increased, since then “customers are willing to conduct repeated purchasing, invite others to buy the product, and inform others about the good quality of the product bought” (p.21). For startups, all these aspects are crucial since they help in building a positive image of the product and thus of the organization and in attracting new customers.

2.4 RECAP AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ESPORTS SCENE

Conclusively, startups should enhance customer loyalty fast in as many people as possible. It has been shown how, according to previous literature, this process happens, and what could be potential perks and pitfalls. This means that startups are in a difficult position since they have to situate themselves in the market shortly after they are established, yet they usually lack the sufficient resources and are perceived with skepticism towards their newness. In order to survive, they should extensively endeavor in creating a clear and consistent corporate identity and image so that they will be positively received as a superior brand. Furthermore, entrepreneurs are believed to be able to build a strong brand by taking advantage of creative branding activities rather than investing in traditional advertising (Bresciani & Eppler, 2010, p.9; Juntunen, 2012, p.231). The Internet in general, and social media platforms in particular, could hereby be suitable tools for startups. “Strong brands convey the feeling of familiarity and trust, reduce risk, and serve for the basis for dialogue and engagement between individuals on one hand, and customers and producers on the other” (Abimbola & Vallaster, 2007, p.342).

Essentially, the open nature of social media could aid in meeting all these criteria. Of course, a new enterprise should deliberately decide which platforms it will use, which audience it targets, and which information to share. Furthermore, it should be considered

that marketing starts happening out of the control of the entrepreneur. Although digital WOM can be seen as a form of free and wide-reaching advertising, it might not reach the right target, and it might be of a negative nature. Nevertheless, the negative feedback could help in improving products and services, and the wide reach increases customer awareness of the brand and its competitiveness. The two-way form of communication aids in mutual understanding, co-creation, engagement and building trust. Finally, including more people in the process provides a greater amount of knowledge, which could eventually lead to internal innovation. In the end, then, previous academic literature illustrates how startups could benefit immensely from utilizing social media in their marketing strategies, yet they have to think their strategies well through.

Nevertheless, the creation of startups in the relatively young, yet vastly growing eSport scene in general, and their branding activities via digital media in particular, are underexamined by academia. Indeed, some blog and news-website articles have coined insights of marketing strategies in the eSports scene. For example, Hultgren (2019) argues that to market your company in the cybersport industry, the branding strategy has to focus on the local market; be authentic; align with the values of the audience; include the right partnerships; be open for feedback from the audience; enhance the sense of community; and be inclusive and flexible. Anic (2018) illustrates how eSports influencer marketing (including content marketing), team sponsorship and event sponsorship, belong to the main opportunities for marketing in the eSports scene. The audience, he shows, consists predominantly of male millennials, yet “just like fans of any other traditional sports, gamers are not identical in their habits and interests.” Therefore, both Anic (2018) and Hultgren (2019) conclude that digital media ought to have priority in an eSports marketing strategy. However, do the aspects articulated in these articles also count if the company itself originates from the eSports industry and does not have an established external fanbase? Indeed, Anic (2018) states that the eSports market is very diverse and scattered, and that, in order to be effective, a marketing strategy has to be well-thought through. By examining a specific case as context, the rest of this paper is dedicated to the current research regarding the usage of social media for branding purposes in the cybersport sphere.

3. METHODOLOGY

Word count methodology: 5518

The current study regarding the social media usage of startups in the eSports industry for the purpose of branding, is based on a qualitative methodology and, due to the lack in previous academic research, it is exploratory in nature. Because the research is based on a specific case, it does not attempt to generalize. Instead, it attempts to give meaning to the particular startup being studied and to investigate individual perceptions regarding the topic (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). Overall, this provides more insights in “the interaction between a phenomenon and its context” (p.554). The research is conducted by way of systematic combining, in which is constantly moved between the empirical case and the theoretical framework (p.555). The study therefore strongly relies on the evolving theoretical core as outlined in the previous chapter. Although this theory aids as guideline in the research, it has developed when data was collected and the empirical case was being analyzed.

Data for the current study was gathered via conducting in-depth interviews with people from the company being researched. Furthermore, data was gathered via conducting in-depth interviews with people knowledgeable about, and professionalized in, social media marketing, and starting up a new business, in the eSports industry. The data gathering period lasted from the end of March 2019 until the middle of May 2019. Subsequently, the data has been examined via thematic analysis in order to answer the study’s guiding research question. To ensure the quality of this research (Flick, 2007), this chapter will first elaborate on the specific context that is chosen for analysis. Then the decisions regarding, and usage of, in-depth interviews in the current study will be clarified. Thirdly, the operationalization process as well as the process of data analysis as done in the research, will be described. The chapter will conclude with a section which highlights the validity and reliability of the research.

3.1 CONTEXT

The organizational context that is chosen to be analyzed in the current research is a Russian startup in the eSports industry. In September 2018, the two founders – Vladlen Dvoretzkiy and Faik “Shorty” Aliev – who had both been working in the eSports for several years already – started a project to train aspiring semipro-coaches and -gamers. When the registrations for the “first wave” opened, a few hundred people hoped to join this free

project. Because all the training was done by the two founders, who appeared as “head-coaches”, the project was ought to be kept rather small. Only seven people got selected to participate in the program dedicated to coaches. Later on, when they finished their training, these seven coaches were themselves meant to become the “head-coaches” in the project. Consequently, many more customers could be taken in, and the project could thus expand in scale. These coaches were therefore more included in the development process of what was to become a business. In November 2018, the name *Future Perfect* was proposed for the project, and a “second wave” of players and coaches entered. However, due to the lack in organization, this wave was less of a success, and it was eventually integrated in the “first wave”. Nevertheless, this encouraged the founders to start thinking more of the business aspects in order to finally establish an organization.

In December 2018, Future Perfect was officially registered in Moscow, Russia, and the startup company was thus officially founded. Moreover, the organization acquired a final version of what was to be their first logo (the image can be found in Appendix A). In the following time, the firm established profile pages on several social media platforms – VKontakte, Facebook, and Twitter. Nevertheless, because at that time Future Perfect mainly targeted a Russian audience, the usage of the latter two social media platforms was short-lived. Since VKontakte can be seen as the major social media platform in Russia, the usage of this particular platform became more successful. Via the organization’s page on VKontakte, the current customers and potential future clients were kept up-to-date with the firm’s activities, articles about gamer-relevant topics written by people from the company were published, and important games were streamed – meaning that they are broadcasted live online. To better structure and organize, to enhance the usage of, and to increase the benefits from, the social media, Future Perfect hired a social media manager in March 2019.

In the meantime, the founders and other people involved in Future Perfect developed more ideas and projects. In March 2019, for example, the organization monetized their services when they opened the registrations for the “third wave”. From that point onwards, clients would have to pay for the courses the firm offered, which made the company profitable. Secondly, besides only offering educational programs, the Russian startup developed another project in which they would operate as agent. During the summer of 2019 the startup is planning on helping two first-division, Russian *League of Legends (LOL)* teams in, for example, gathering players and organizing accommodation. Thirdly, although Future Perfect is still operating from Moscow, and the main target still remains Russia, the

organization is planning on operating on a more global scale. So far this has resulted in a collaboration with the Greek *League of Legends* team *WLGaming* (*We Love Gaming*; *WLG*) during the European Masters tournament in March and April 2019. Furthermore, from the end of May 2019 onwards, they actively started looking into the possibilities of opening a firm in the Netherlands in order to expand their services and educational programs to European countries. Finally, Future Perfect initially only focused on the multiplayer online battle arena game *League of Legends* (*LOL*). In April 2019, they expanded to the battle royale-shooter *Apex Legends*. This team proved to be less successful than was hoped for and after a month this project was therefore put to a halt. Attempts to also expand into the team-based first-person shooter *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* (*CS: GO*), initially failed. Nevertheless, new attempts have been made in May 2019.

Because the company is small and recently established, but does not yet have a well-established brand, this specific case allows for analyzing the branding activities, social media usage and related developments from the beginning of the company's existence onwards. In the end, through manifesting and abstracting from the local practices, interpretations and ideas around social media marketing in this case, the data gathered for this research, will help in answering the guiding research question as to how startups in the eSports industry use social media for branding.

3.2 IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

For the current study, the research method of in-depth interviewing is chosen since it allows for understanding certain issues in much more depth – for example, branding, the state of the eSports industry, and the motivations of the startup (Hermanwicz, 2002). Overall, a total of eleven interviews have been conducted with seven people. Three people have been interviewed multiple times in order to 1) track the developments of ideas and of the company, and 2) be able to move back and forth between the empirical data and the theoretical framework. Since the latter was developed during the data gathering, new questions could arise after the first interview. These were thus asked in a follow-up interview. Further details about these interviews can be found in Table 1. As can be seen, nine interviews have been held with people from Future Perfect itself, and two have been held with people knowledgeable about, and professionalized in, social media marketing, and creating a startup, in the cybersport industry. Interviewing the people from Future Perfect enhances the understanding of the particular case being studied, and enables relating this case

study to the theoretical framework of this research. Interviewing people external of the company sheds light on the complications and opportunities of startups in the cybersport industry, and it clarifies the implications and effects of social media usage for the purpose of creating a successful brand in this particular scene. Furthermore, it allows for comparing the activities of Future Perfect with the state of the industry, which gives a deeper and richer understanding of the topic being researched. Before clarifying the structure, recording and transcribing of the interviews, the details about the interviewees as well as their relevance for the current study will now be discussed.

Position and Category of the Interviewee	Number of Interviews	Duration of the Interview	Date of the Interview
Internal			
- Owner	3	1.43.31	26/03/2019
		56.42	23/04/2019
		45.49	26/05/2019
- Co-owner	1	51.45	20/05/2019
- CEO	1	53.05	25/04/2019
- Social media manager	2	57.21	26/04/2019
		28.41	28/05/2019
- Designer	2	48.18	25/04/2019
		37.06	27/05/2019
External			
- Social media manager	1	46.21	27/04/2019
- eSports entrepreneur	1	56.52	16/05/2019
Total	11	Approx. 9 hours	

Table 1: Details of the interviewdata

An important focus in the interview data has been on the founder, because previous academic literature stresses the large impact founders have on the way in which a startup develops (Abimbola & Vallaster, 2007, p.343; Juntunen, 2012, p.244; Rode & Vallaster, 2005, p.124; Werthes, et al., 2017, p.290). Hence, three interviews have been conducted with Vladlen Dvoretzkiy – the owner and one of the founders of Future Perfect. As mentioned in the previous subchapter, he started with Future Perfect in September 2018. Before this, he had already been working in the eSports scene for about three years as a cyberathlete, and as a coach for *League of Legends* in the Russian, the Greek and the Benelux eSports scenes. Future Perfect is the first enterprise he created, and has by now become his full-time occupation. The interviews for the current research with Dvoretzkiy

were conducted in English and were held on March 26, April 23 and May 26 - thus with an interval of one month each time. The first interview was of a more general and exploratory nature in order to get to know the interviewee, and to understand the company, its aim and philosophy, its business strategy, its branding activities, and its digital media usage. This interview lasted therefore longer than is conventional in studies similar to the current research. The two other interviews conducted, mainly focused on changes and developments in Future Perfect's philosophy, business strategy, branding activities and digital media usage. Furthermore, these two interviews helped in examining issues and uncertainties which have arisen during the research period. The topic lists and interview questions used for the first, second and third interviews with Vladlen Dvoretzkiy can be found in Appendix C, Appendix D, and Appendix E, respectively.

One interview has been conducted with the co-owner and one of the founders of Future Perfect: Faik "Shorty" Aliev. Like Vladlen Dvoretzkiy, Future Perfect is the first startup in which "Shorty" took part. Since 2017 he had been working in the Russian eSports scene as a cyberathlete, as an analyst, and as a coach for *League of Legends*. At the time of the interview he worked as a caster for Russian *League of Legends* tournaments. In order to aid his success, he started using social media for branding himself. The interview for the current research was conducted in English and was initially held on May 16. However, due to technological reasons, the recording of this interview went wrong. Therefore, this interview has been recreated on May 20, using the same questions as used in the initial interview as well as the notes taken during this interview. Although both the initial interview and the recreation were of similar length, the content of the latter might differ from what has been said in the original interview. Nevertheless, only the recreated interview has been transcribed and was thus used in the current study. Because of his experience with self-branding in the eSports scene, the interview focused on branding, social media usage, creating a fanbase and engaging the audience in the cybersport industry. The topic list and interview questions used for the interview with Faik "Shorty" Aliev can be found in Appendix F.

Two interviews have been conducted with the social media manager of Future Perfect: Anatoly Shabanov. Besides working for Future Perfect, he is marketing director and social media manager for one of the first-division, *League of Legends* teams in Russia. Furthermore, he had previously been an assistant marketing director for a restaurant. Apart from being knowledgeable of social media marketing in the eSports scene, he has therefore

also experience with marketing in other industries. Knowing the co-owner of Future Perfect beforehand, he was hired by the startup organization in March 2019. The interviews for the current research with Shabanov were held on April 26 and May 28. Because of a language barrier between the interviewee and the interviewer, Vladlen Dvoretzkiy was present in the interviews as translator upon request of the interviewee (Resch & Enzenhofer, 2018; Roulston & Choi, 2018). The questions were asked in English by the interviewer and translated by Dvoretzkiy into Russian. Shabanov responded in Russian and Dvoretzkiy translated these answers into English. Only the English spoken parts of these interviews have been transcribed and were thus used in the current study. This way of translation is chosen so that the interview could happen in a more natural way, and so that all topics were covered and not addressed twice during the interview. The first interview concerned general information about the interviewee, and questions regarding social media marketing in the eSports industry in general, and marketing via social media in Future Perfect in particular. The second interview focused on changes and developments in the startup's social media marketing strategy. The topic lists and interview questions used for the first and second interviews with Anatoly Shabanov can be found in Appendix G, and Appendix H, respectively.

Two interviews have also been conducted with the designer of Future Perfect: "Kiwi"¹. Previously she has worked as comic artist for Riot Games – the company developing and publishing the online game *League of Legends*. Furthermore, she worked as main designer for an organization making designs for eSports organizations and cyberathletes. During her work for the latter, she got in touch with Dvoretzkiy since she made a design for his personal eSports social media. In the time that Future Perfect was developed, she was looking for a new job and she therefore contacted Dvoretzkiy and became Future Perfect's designer. In the startup, she is responsible for the visual elements of the social media presence. The interviews for the current research with "Kiwi" were held on April 25 and May 27, and were conducted in a similar way as those with the social media manager Anatoly Shabanov. Due to the language barrier between the interviewee and the interviewer, Vladlen Dvoretzkiy assisted again as translator upon request of the interviewee (Resch & Enzenhofer, 2018; Roulston & Choi, 2018). The questions were asked in English

¹Due to personal reasons the interviewee chose to remain anonymous. Therefore, she will be referred to by her gamer's name "Kiwi" throughout the paper.

by the interviewer and translated by Dvoretzkiy into Russian. “Kiwi” responded in Russian and Dvoretzkiy translated these answers into English. For the same reasons as with the interviews with Anatoly Shabanov, only the English spoken parts of the interviews with “Kiwi” have been transcribed and were thus used in the current study. The first interview concerned general information about the interviewee, and questions regarding design elements in the eSports industry in general, and design elements in the startup in particular. The second interview focused on changes and developments in Future Perfect’s social media marketing strategy. The topic lists and interview questions used for the first and second interviews with “Kiwi” can be found in Appendix I, and Appendix J, respectively.

One interview has been conducted with the CEO of Future Perfect: Dmitry. Previously he worked as a manager for a bigger company and as a manager, freelancer, programmer and translator for a startup from a friend. Although this startup was dedicated to gaming, the interviewee did – prior to Future Perfect – not have real experience in the eSports industry. He entered in Future Perfect’s project in September 2018 as one of the seven coaches of the “first wave”. Due to his enthusiasm and dedication to the project, he took on himself more tasks already in the early stages of the development of Future Perfect. The interview for the current research with Dmitry was conducted on April 25. Upon request of the interviewee, Vladlen Dvoretzkiy was present as translator (Resch & Enzenhofer, 2018; Roulston & Choi, 2018). However, the majority of the interview was conducted in English and only on several rare occasions, Dmitry required a clarification in Russian, or provided his answer in Russian. For the same reasons as with the interviews with Anatoly Shabanov and “Kiwi”, only the English spoken parts of the interview with Dmitry have been transcribed and were thus used in the current study. The interview concerned general information about the interviewee, and questions regarding working for the startup and Future Perfect’s social media usage. The topic list and interview questions used for the interview with Dmitry can be found in Appendix K.

Regarding the interviews with people external to the company used as case study, one interview has been conducted with Damien Rapoye. Although he has been active in the eSports since 2005, he is nowadays mainly concerned with marketing in a cybersport and online gaming company organizing, amongst other things, events and tournaments in the Benelux. Furthermore, as from 2017 he is co-owner of one of the bigger Belgian eSports teams – Sector One. Since Rapoye joined Sector One, the team has been rebranded and has grown to be a small company. He is mainly concerned with the marketing, sales and

financial aspects of the business and has basically always worked either for himself or in a startup. The interview for the current research with Rapoye was conducted in Dutch and was held on May 16. Unlike the interviews with Anatoly Shabanov, “Kiwi” and Dmitry, a language barrier did not exist since the interviewer is knowledgeable of the Dutch language (Resch & Enzenhofer, 2018). The interview has been transcribed in Dutch and excerpts used in this paper have been translated into English by the researcher. Overall, the interview concerned general information about the interviewee, as well as issues related to startups and social media marketing in the eSports industry. The topic list and interview questions used for the interview with Damien Rapoye can be found in Appendix L.

Finally, one interview has been conducted with Giannis Mollas. He is co-founder of the Greek eSports organization WLGaming, and has therefore experience in creating a startup in the cybersport industry. With WLGaming, he got involved in the eSports scene, and he gained experience in social media management and marketing. Although his business initially started as a general gaming website, it has now grown to one of the bigger eSports organizations in Greece and Cyprus. Mollas’ tasks in WLGaming include mainly its gaming section, social media, marketing, activations and ads. Meanwhile, he gathered more experience as eSports marketing manager by working for one of the biggest eSports arenas in Greece. The interview for the current research with Mollas has been conducted in English and was held on April 27. It concerned general information about the interviewee, and included questions regarding creating a startup in the cybersport scene, social media marketing in the eSports industry, and his experience in working with, and perception of the social media marketing activities of, Future Perfect. The topic list and interview questions used for the interview with Giannis Mollas can be found in Appendix M.

All interviews have been conducted in a semi-structured way (Roulston & Choi, 2018). Based on the developing theoretical framework, a list with questions was separately made for each interview. Some parts of some of these lists are similar when interviewees were expected to be knowledgeable about the same issue or concept. These lists formed the basis of the interviews; however, their sequences were altered depending on the situation (Roulston & Choi, 2018).

The interviews have been executed face-to-face, via Skype or via the online voice-channel Discord (Opdenakker, 2006), and have been audio-recorded respectively via the voice recorder of an iPhone, via Skype, or via the video and live streaming recording software OBS 21.1.0 (Open Broadcaster Software). Although they are less conventional in

academic research, both Discord and OBS 21.1.0 are used since these are more common ways of communication in the gaming and eSports scenes – and thus in the industry under investigation. In the end, the recordings of these eleven in-depth interviews have been transcribed verbatim and have then been used as data in further analysis. Excerpts of the interviews used in this paper have been edited for readability and grammatical correctness (Roulston, 2014). For clarification, words like ‘ehm’ and ‘yeah’ as well as the repetition of words have been replaced, or words are occasionally added to the excerpt, by use of square brackets.

3.3 OPERATIONALIZATION AND DATA ANALYSIS

This particular case is chosen as context for the current research since it was relatively easy to gain access to the startup, and spend time with them. Even before the research, I was interested in the eSports industry, and hence I had developed good connections with both founders of Future Perfect. I have thus been able to witness their activities since their initial idea of the project was posed in September 2018, and I was intrigued to better understand how they would develop over time. Furthermore, as clarified in the first subchapter of this methodology section, it proves to be a good case with regard to the research question since the company is small and recently established, and since the attempts for establishing a brand can thus be tracked over time.

The theoretical framework guiding the current research is developed via systematic combining. The theoretical core as outlined in the previous chapter, has thus evolved prior, during and after the collection and analysis of the data gathered from the interviews (Dubois & Gadde, 2002, p.555). Since – as far as is known by the researcher – no studies have been conducted regarding the branding activities of startups in the eSports industry via social media, the method of selective combining allows to develop a theoretical framework which is more apt in relation to the data and thus in relation to the research question guiding the current study. The interview questions used in this study are based on this evolving framework. Furthermore, they have been created in such a way that the analysis of the conducted interviews sheds light on the process of brand creation via social media from the perception of the people of the startup itself, as well as from external experts. Table 2 exemplifies the operationalization process of the interview with the eSports professional Damien Rapoye.

Concept	Focus within phenomenon	Example questions
Startups in the eSports	Specifics of the eSports scene	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - According to you, what are the differences between a company in the eSports industry and a company in any other industry? - What do you believe is crucial for a startup in the eSports scene? - What are the challenges and risks a startup in the eSports could encounter? How can be dealt with this? - Since the industry is still relatively young, yet developing fast, what is the role of competition?
	Branding strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How important is the design and the visual elements for a startup in the eSports scene? How do these affect the way in which the company is perceived? - What is the role of internal communication in a startup in the eSports scene?
Social media marketing in the eSports scene	Managing social media marketing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What do you believe is the best strategy for marketing a startup in the eSports scene via social media? What are crucial elements? What are things you should absolutely not do? - What is the role of traditional forms of advertising in the eSports? - Do you believe that marketing via social media differs between the eSports scene and other industries? Why (not)? How? - What is the importance of marketing via social media for the success of a company in the eSports scene?
	Purposes of social media for companies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To what extent does an eSports audience differ as target group from audiences in other industries? - What is the role of specific social media platforms in a social media strategy for an eSports company? - What is the role of feedback and co-creation in startups in the eSports industry? - How do you attempt to keep the social media interaction in your control?

Table 2: Interview questions within concepts and phenomenon

The interviews were then conducted as explained in the previous subchapter, and have been critically transcribed. Subsequently, the transcriptions of all the conducted interviews were analyzed by a thematic analysis. This research method was chosen since it allows “for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2008, p.79). It “involves the searching across a data set – be that a number of interviews or focus groups, or a range of texts – to find repeated patterns of meaning” (p.86). Moreover, this research method enables interpretation of the data regarding the significance of the found themes and the theoretical implications (p.84).

The first step included a trial coding in which the data of two and a half interviews was fragmented and each fragment was coded according to the main recurring second order theme. 28 Themes occurred and these have been sorted to make the themes mutually exclusive. After this process 27 second order themes, which could be divided in two main themes, remained. Afterwards, all 11 interviews have been coded according to these second order themes. Then repetitions and importance of, and similarities, differences, and overall relations between, the codes have been analyzed with regard to the way in which startups in the eSports industry use social media for branding purposes. Seven second order themes proved irrelevant for the data, and an additional two second order themes proved insignificant in relation with the research question guiding the current study. Once again, these 18 categories have been examined with regard to mutual exclusivity. In the end, 12 remaining subjects are seen as main results in the study and will therefore be elaborated upon in the next chapter. Some exemplifying first-order observations, the 18 second-order relevant themes used in the analysis, and the two main themes from the research, can be found in Table 2.

First-order observation	Second-order themes	Main Themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - There is [no] big difference between a big and small [company] - Every member of a team need[s] to work, if someone [...] stops, a full startup stops 	Startups ²	Startups in the eSports industry
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - This is basically [a] new generation of people who are onVK almost all the time - Every discipline is a different target group 	The audience and target group ²	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - You have some kind of competition [...] but it's not really huge - You have to be very creative so you can stand out 	The state of competition ²	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To find investment, sponsors [...] you need good connections - A certain level of credibility is something you get with a network 	The role of network ²	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - They are basically your source of income 	The role of a fanbase ²	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - You need to create as much content as you can and the content must be as [...] interesting as possible - The design and the logo, they do make a big difference in bringing the new clients 	Attracting new clients in a startup ²	Branding via social media in
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The thing is that we don't have time for a break 	The challenges of using social media for branding ²	

²In the eSports industry

- The bad thing is the anonymity		a startup in the eSports scene
- It's directly related because we use our design in social media	The role of design and visual elements ³	
- With the new design the people might be more interested in sharing the content of our organization in social media		
- Everyone should feel that we are doing the good job	The role of professionalism ³	
- [we] try to show our expertise		
- Some people will be negative because they want the consistency, yes, but mostly people will appreciate the effort and will accept [it]	The role of consistency ³	
- The best thing is when a person is sharing it in a friendly conversation	The role of WOM ³	
- Anything that they say is also branding for everyone for who they say it to		
- We want to create unique content	The role of content ³	
- Try to keep the demand high and the [...] offer restricted		
- We want to try to engage our fans together with our influencers	The role of influencers ³	
- I'd say that this is how it works in the social media, you kind of [gain] access to the [...] fan resources of [...] other people		
- Overall, it's good [...] to have social media everywhere	The role of specific platforms ³	
- Every platform does [the] same thing basically		
- Some feedback opens our eyes	The role of feedback ³	
- More and more people are giving constructive criticism		
- I believe [they] are useless right now	The role of other media forms in the marketing strategy of a startup in the eSports industry	
- It's not bad, but our priority should be the digital marketing		
- There are two big negatives. One of them is anonymity of the public [...] and second one was that we [...] can't control the quality of [the] services we provide in full	The negative aspects of using social media for branding in a startup in the eSports industry	
- There is always room for perfection	Social media marketing as a continuously ongoing process	
- It could be much better, but considering the resources that we had, money-wise and human resources, we did the maximum we could		

Table 3: The initial codes, main themes and final second order themes as obtained via thematic analysis

³ In the social media marketing strategy of startups in the eSports industry

3.4 VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY

To validate the findings of this study, the research process, theoretical stance, findings and interpretations of this study have been made transparent, and have been reflected upon comprehensively, in order to assure reliability (Flick, 2007; Resch & Enzenhofer, 2018; Silverman, 2011, p.360). Secondly, the research has been done “in a systematic and rigorous manner” (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006, p.26) by carefully recording, transcribing and coding the data from the interviews. Data has been derived from interviews and analysis has been conducted via thematic analysis. The interviews have been conducted with different people from the startup – the owner, the co-owner, the social media manager, the designer and the CEO – and with two experts from the industry, in order to acquire multiple perspectives on the subject, to understand it more in-depth and to better contextualize it (p.24). In three cases, multiple interviews have been conducted with the same person so that developments over time could be tracked, and so that newly emerged issues, or arisen questions could be covered. Choosing interviewees happened as a continuous process, and was dependent on both the development of the theoretical framework, previous empirical findings (Dubois & Gadde, 2002, p.559), and the availability of the interviewees. The results have been carefully selected from all empirical observations. Finally, since this research is based on a case study, no attempts will be made to generalize the results. Nevertheless, highly detailed descriptions of the situation and methods of the research (Dubois & Gadde, 2002, p.559; Moisander & Valtonen, 2006, p.28) have been provided in this chapter, in order to allow the results to be transferred to another context or situation (p.27).

Nevertheless, validity concerns could arise regarding the fact that some of the interviews have not been conducted in English and were thus subject to translations (Resch & Enzenhofer, 2018). As Resch and Enzenhofer (2018) have stated, however, an interview conducted by both the researcher and a translator, is a good alternative for semi-structured, or expert interviews – as opposed to narrative or biographic interviews. It is unconditionally acknowledged that the interviews conducted with Anatoly Shabanov, “Kiwi” and Damien Rapoye, and parts of the interview conducted with Dmitry, are based on translations. Regardless of the language barrier, it was deliberately chosen to include these people in the research due to the relevance of their knowledge. If they had been excluded, crucial information would have been inaccessible. The interview with Rapoye has been translated by the researcher, and this translation is thus part of the interpretation of the researcher herself. The other interviews, however, are translated by the owner of Future Perfect, Vladlen Dvoretzkiy. It is therefore stressed that he, too, took part in the interpretation of

these interviews. Before the interviews he had been clearly and unconditionally instructed of his task, and despite the fact that he is the owner of the company under investigation, he did not have any aims nor purposes in participating as translator, except for aiding the research. Because Dvoretzkiy has also participated as interviewee and thus took already part in the research, his background and aims have been stated above.

This research does not carry ethical implications since during the interviews no sensitive questions were asked, nor are the interviewees vulnerable subjects. The interviews have been conducted in a respectful manner, recordings have been done with consent of the interviewees and responses have been treated confidentially.

4. RESULTS

Word count results: 7954

The thematic analysis of the interviews regarding the social media usage of startups in the eSports industry for the purpose of branding, has revealed two main themes: the specific current state of doing business and creating startups in the eSports industry, and the usage of social media for branding and marketing in the cybersport scene. Overall, the former is not directly related to the research question guiding the current study. However, it is needed in order to understand and clarify the latter. First, the state of the industry will be elaborated upon in subchapter 1. This subchapter includes two subsections: the importance of connections in the eSports industry, and the audience in the eSports industry. The second part of this chapter, containing subchapter 2 and 3, starts by stating the importance of social media in the cybersports, and relates this to the role of other media in this specific industry. Then, consecutively, the basics of a social media marketing strategy in the eSports scene, the social media marketing strategy in Future Perfect, the role of consistency, the functions of influencers and particular platforms, the significance of professionalism and feedback, and the role of visual elements, will be elaborated upon. This chapter will therefore provide the insights gained from the interviews, regarding the way in which startups in the eSports industry use social media for branding.

4.1 STARTUPS IN THE ESPORTS INDUSTRY

One of the first things to be considered regarding officially working in the eSports industry is that it is still very much related to gaming. In the first interview, the owner of Future Perfect, Vladlen Dvoretzkiy, mentioned that this complicates matters since “most of the people in the world are still skeptical whether it’s [...] a proficient job, whether one should go into it completely.” Likewise, the social media manager Giannis Mollas stresses the fact that because of this, “it was [...] difficult to start [...] the company.”

The interviews conducted for the current research indicate that in the eSports there are only very small differences between a startup and a bigger and more well-established company. On one hand, Future Perfect’s designer “Kiwi” “doesn’t think there is a big difference between a big and [a] small [company]. Just startups use a lot of advertisements.” On the other hand, Giannis Mollas is of the opinion that

both of them, they need to create adds, they need to create content, they need to engage their fans, they need to create brand loyalty. [...] Both of them, they have a similar [...] target. Probably the startup, they need to spend more money to [...] create all this stuff, all these things. But in the end, both of them, they need [...] a good social media strategy.

Both Future Perfect's social media manager and the two founders argue that the state of competition between eSports organizations is not that big. Nevertheless, "you have to be very creative so you can stand out and also the quality of your content is very important" (Faik "Shorty" Aliev). As long as you achieve that, however, there is a lot of room for developing a company.

One difference between startups and well-established companies in the cybersport industry, is that a new enterprise can still afford mistakes (Damien Rapoye). Contrarily, in a bigger company, more people are included in the processes which makes it less flexible to deal with errors. This is exemplified by "Kiwi" who reflects upon her experiences of working for one of the biggest companies in the gaming and cybersport industries, "[I] had strict responsibilities, everything was written and told to [me] before [I] got to work. [...] While in Future Perfect [I] manage [...] everything [my]self." This allows her to respond more easily to the circumstances she faces. Regarding this, the CEO of Future Perfect states that in a startup "you need to be more active, you need to be more ambitious [...], you're not a worker who does only one thing, day by day. Every day you have different [...] problems that [you] need to solve." After all, the CEO states that "every member of a team needs to work. [...] If someone stops [...] a full startup stops" (Dmitry). This illustrates how the startup is fueled by the people working for it and a good team therefore seems crucial for the success of the new enterprise.

The thematic analysis conveys that a good team is aided, and therefore foregone in significance, by a good leader and good organization. As Future Perfect's co-owner Faik "Shorty" Aliev puts it: "I think the most crucial thing is a clear idea of what you want to do and [...] a clear idea of how you're going to develop your brand." If management is lacking, "it's very difficult [...] for the whole team [...] to work together" ("Kiwi", first interview). Furthermore, Dmitry stresses the importance of having

a leader who knows how to communicate with people. Because when a leader of a startup [does] not know [...] how to communicate, [...] he can't find any allies [...]

and when you do a startup you need to find a lot of people. [...] If a leader knows how to communicate, he will find [a good] team.

The CEO argues that this is especially important for a startup in the cybersport scene in Russia, since “the eSports in Russia is very young.” This makes it difficult to find the sufficient sponsors. However, the interview with Giannis Mollas shows that the difficulty of finding investors is not confined solely to the Russian scene. The Greek social media manager believes that finding sponsors is “the most important thing for the startup [...], but the overall problem about this [is that in the] eSports, you can’t find the revenue so easy.” He suggests to create a unique strategy to acquire those revenue streams.

4.1.1 The importance of connections in the eSports industry

Besides a unique strategy, which is more general for a startup in any industry, the interviews in the current study hint at the relevance of having sufficient connections within the cybersport industry. First of all, this is indicated by the relations between the people interviewed from the company. Namely both the designer “Kiwi” and the social media manager Anatoly Shabanov joined Future Perfect because they knew either of the owners from previous experiences. Likewise, the partnership between Giannis Mollas’ WLGaming and Future Perfect was aided by the fact that Mollas and Vladlen Dvoretzkiy were already connected.

Secondly, the thematic analysis reveals that a company can acquire a certain level of credibility via his or her network. This, in turn, aids in finding sponsors. Damien Rapoye, for example, argues that, when pitching your company to potential investors, “the door is already a bit more ajar” if you are known for having achieved something in the industry. The need to have a network is “something general for any niche market, like the eSports” (Damien Rapoye). Furthermore, including acknowledged professionals in your business, provides you with “the credentials to gain respect in the community” (Vladlen Dvoretzkiy, third interview). Dvoretzkiy therefore advises to “be in good relations with as many people as you can in the community, because you never know which contact will be necessary for you in the nearest future, or in [the] future in general.”

Thirdly, the analysis conveys that “in the eSports, [...] the brand of a person is very important” (Faik “Shorty” Aliev). Accordingly, both founders of Future Perfect emphasize the significance of having connections for obtaining the awareness of the audience.

“Shorty”, for example, mentions that “if you have a connection [with an already established media person], you can [...] involve him in your service or product, [and] then it’s much easier for you to get the attention.” Moreover, through collaborations with big organizations “the content will be [...] spread into [the] main community which has more followers and [...] in general it has a reach of 1 million people” (Vladlen Dvoretzkiy, third interview).

4.1.2 The audience in the eSports industry

The attention a startup in the eSports is trying to obtain is of course that of the cybersport audience. From the interviews it became clear that the eSports audience is very diverse and can be divided according to different aspects. Like sports consists of many different activities, eSports distinguishes several games. The audience can therefore be divided in which games the people play or find interesting. According to Damien Rapoye, “the segmentation within the eSports is so diverse, that you can actually divide them almost instantly.” If a company knows what it wants to achieve, it can “chose its target group based on one or several games.” The marketing strategy of a company should therefore not target the eSports as a whole, but specify between the fans of different games.

Furthermore, the audience mainly consists of young adults, students and middle-aged people. Consequently, Rapoye believes, the general eSports fan is more educated, critical and reactive than, for example, “the classic sports fan.” The eSports audience should therefore “not be underestimated.” This is also caused by the fact that they are more apt in the digital environment. The eSports audience in Russia specifically is characterized by

a new generation of people who are on VK[ontakte] almost all the time, and they are very active on social media. These people, [...] unlike the generation before who, are only using social media some time per day, [...] are always in search for new content and the difference between social media [...] marketing in eSports and any other sphere is that this audience wants more and more content all the time, especially interactive content (Anatoly Shabanov, first interview).

Similarly, the co-owner of Future Perfect argues that because “the majority of [the] demographic are people who spend a lot [...] of time on the internet, [...] it makes them kind of specific.” After all, “there is a certain influence that the internet has on you in the way that you grow up as a human being” (Faik “Shorty” Aliev). Conclusively, then, the particularities of the cybersport audience require a specific way of communication, and thus

a specific way of marketing as well. As for branding via social media, it can be regarded as a “big advantage [...] that with eSports, we are in a growing market [...] with a young target audience which is also very active on social media” (Damien Rapoye). The next subchapter will therefore elaborate on how the interviewees of this research stressed the crucial role of social media in branding an eSports company.

4.2 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BRANDING VIA SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE ESPORTS SCENE

Almost all the interviewees approached for the current research hint at the importance of social media for marketing a company in the cybersport industry. The owner of Future Perfect indicates that for his company “social media is the [...] main source of income. Through social media we attract people to our services and that’s the main thing for us” (Vladlen Dvoretzkiy). The co-owner notes that in general “growing your brand in [the] eSports, is basically growing your brand through the social media.” It is explained that

without the social media marketing there can be no success in the eSports, it’s like the main thing you need to do. [...] Since the eSports industry is mostly centered around the internet, social media marketing is the only tool to grow your brand. I mean maybe not the only, but like the most important one and [...] through successful marketing in social media, [...] you can grow a lot faster as a company [...]. Social media is the center of attention in the internet world for any person (Faik “Shorty” Aliev).

Damien Rapoye agrees on this by presuming that “without social media marketing, no eSports team would be where it is right now. After all, it’s the way in which the audience is targeted in the eSports.” In one interview it was even stated that “you need social media. Without social media you probably are going to lose [...] a lot of sales” (Giannis Mollas). Future Perfect’s social media manager agrees with this since, nowadays, “if you’re not on the internet, you’re nowhere, you basically don’t exist” (Anatoly Shabanov). The CEO Dmitry explains this by stating that “without social media [...] you can’t receive clients, you can’t receive any fans [...]. So, without social media, you can’t survive.” In short, the thematic analysis therefore reveals how in the eSports industry “it’s impossible” (Giannis Mollas) for customers to get to know a company, if that company does not have a social media presence. After all, it is suggested, if your audience is online and you are providing an

online product or service, you ought to promote your brand online as well.

Social media aids in attracting eSports audiences via social media. It has a wide reach since it allows for content to be liked, shared or retweeted. In the first interview, Future Perfect's social media manager responded that "if any person makes a comment or likes the post, that means all his friends will see the post in the feed." Besides liking, sharing and retweeting, Anatoly Shabanov is of the opinion that

the best thing is when a person is sharing [content] in a friendly conversation [...] saying something like 'I [recently watched] a clip on [the] Future Perfect channel' [...]. As long as he is talking about it with his friends, that means we have a client who we can sell something to all the time.

The case study therefore suggests that social media not only allows for marketing from brand to customer, but also amongst the customers themselves.

Besides social media, the thematic analysis uncovers how a website is becoming increasingly important for the startup under analysis (Anatoly Shabanov, second interview; Vladlen Dvoretzkiy, third interview). The owner explains that "we started the project from zero and we didn't necessarily need" a website. Over time Future Perfect's VKontakte page developed to such an extent that it suffices to replace a website for the Russian audience. The fact that the startup wants to expand to Europe then becomes problematic since VKontakte is mainly used as a social media platform in Russia, and the company developed their page in the Russian language. A website, then,

is necessary to show people in Europe that we are an official organization, that we exist. [...] Without it in Europe you can't really show anything because our Twitter is not developed, our Facebook is not developed. [...] we want to transfer this big project to Europe and not start from zero. If we wanted to start from zero we could do [that] as well, but it would take us another six months (Vladlen Dvoretzkiy, third interview).

This indicates that a website is not necessarily needed for a startup if it adopts social media from the beginning of its existence. To adopt a social media platform without any other form of reference at a later point in time is considered tricky.

4.2.1 The role of other media in the eSports scene

Regarding the usage of media other than social media for branding in the eSports scene, the thematic analysis reveals that in general “it’s not bad, but our priority should be on digital marketing” (Giannis Mollas). It is suggested that this is partly caused by the usually high costs of using the traditional media – like television – for advertising, as well: “For eSports to go and work with television would be too expensive, but it’s free to work with streaming platforms” (Anatoly Shabanov, first interview). Eventually, the cybersport scene has come with its own – cheaper – solution for the more traditional television: streaming. Furthermore, Damien Rapoye explains that “the eSports actually originates from the digital. So, the basis will always be digital. However, the bigger you grow, the more you will implement traditional marketing techniques.” For startups then, the digital media should get the main focus in the branding strategy. As for the company under investigation in this research, the social media manager Anatoly Shabanov remarks that “there is no point in using traditional forms of advertisements right now because we have only stuff on [the] internet. [...] That’s our main source of audience.” In the first interview, Vladlen Dvoretzkiy even questioned “how can we make a marketing [strategy] for the eSports in the streets?”

4.3 THE SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING STRATEGY IN A STARTUP IN THE ESPORTS INDUSTRY

So far, this chapter has outlined the findings regarding startups in the cybersport scene, the role of connections, the specifics of the eSports audience, the importance of branding via social media in this particular scene, and the position of other media forms. This final subchapter will present the results drawn from the thematic analysis regarding specific elements of a social media marketing strategy for a startup in the cybersport scene.

One of the first things to be noted are the basics of a social media strategy in the eSports industry. Overall, the analysis shows that “the content is [...] the priority for a company or an eSports team” (Giannis Mollas). Moreover, the interviews suggest that this content should be continuously created to meet the high demand, yet it should be appealing enough to stand out in the high amount that is being offered. On one hand, then, it can be said that

we’re living in a world where there is a lot of content – like content is everywhere.
The social media groups that lack content are usually falling off very quickly,

because [...] generally, people look at their phone 24/7 [...] and they always scroll for new content (Vladlen Dvoretzkiy, first interview).

On the other hand, however, Future Perfect's co-owner Faik "Shorty" Aliev believes that,

since there is a lot of content [...] on the internet, you have to attract the attention very quickly and it has to motivate people to [...] communicate back. [...] It has to be very catchy in the very beginning and it has to end with [...] something that engages the audiences to communicate back.

In order to stand out in a stream of constant content, the Greek social media manager Mollas, therefore keeps stressing the importance of "creat[ing] unique content."

Furthermore, the thematic analysis conveys that, since social media needs to be attractive, yet it needs to be utilized continuously for a good marketing strategy, there is "[no] time for a break" (Giannis Mollas). Instead, the Greek social media manager is of the opinion that "every day you need to upload something, [...] to keep up with other organizations and to have content every day for the fans." Damien Rapoye suggests to find a balance regarding the continuity of using social media. In his company, he says, "we actually have two lines in our social media strategy." On one hand, they have a "consistency line" which they use on a daily basis. This includes "the content that you want to bring. It might not be the most interesting or most [...] successful content, but it is the content you want to bring nevertheless." On the other hand, Rapoye's company publishes content "that is more engaging and more triggering, and which we actually schedule on very specific hype [...] moments during the week." These posts are of a more interactive nature and could thus aid in marketing the firm. Nevertheless, the findings show that it should be considered that "if we constantly offer the same high demanding, interactive content, people will get fed up with it, plus we could also not remain relevant every day" (Damien Rapoye). The experts in eSports entrepreneurship therefore suggests to "try to keep the demand high and the offer [...] limited. Thus, create a kind of exclusivity around your content or the quality of your content" if you know that this content is more valuable. The findings therefore uncover the believe that while continuously publishing content, a company should put a bit extra effort in its social media marketing strategy in order to benefit from the high demand moment.

4.3.1 Social media marketing in Future Perfect

The analysis reveals that the element in Damien Rapoye's strategy in which exclusive content is published at specific points in time, seems to be in line with the way in which Future Perfect utilizes its social media for marketing purposes. The fact that their marketing is done via social media is because "this is where we exist, it's not like we have a shop, [...] it's not like we can walk into the shop and try[...] to get all the clients" (Anatoly Shabanov, first interview). A month later, Future Perfect's social media manager praises hereby the reach of social media in "that everyone is using social media right now." This is also illustrated by the fact that Dmitry joined the startup initially as customer. Upon the question of how he got familiar with the project, the CEO replies that "one moment I saw a post by [the owners] that they [...] want to make some education project and [that] they're looking for players and coaches." Via social media, the startup thus indeed has a wide reach.

Secondly, the thematic analysis reveals how the social media marketing strategy of the startup under analysis prepared their audiences for the point in which they would start selling their service:

Right before the project of coaching players and coaches, we had two weeks of marketing campaign of [...] telling to people what [the] eSports is; whether they want to develop themselves in game; how they develop themselves in game; what do you need – and [...] with every new article we would say [...] that soon we will have a third wave of education. If you want then just keep yourself updated. And then, [...] once we launch, you will be the first one to be there (Vladlen Dvoretzkiy, first interview).

This quote illustrates that, like mentioned above, the content plays an important role in the social media marketing strategy of a startup in the eSports industry. Because the campaign of Future Perfect was to market an educational program, the company under investigation mainly focused on educational content. This means that as for the type of content, it does not "matter [...] what it is, like an article or a video, it [should just be] something that people should watch to get better at the game they're playing. So,[essentially] it's more about the reviews, tips and stuff like that" (Faik "Shorty" Aliev). As the social media manager Anatoly Shabanov indicated, the main goal in the campaign was to "mak[e] content, mak[e] it interesting, interactive. People, after reading our content should be [...] interested in commenting and maybe even sharing." The thematic analysis uncovers that for startups in the eSports scene, this does not have to be very complicated in the initial stage of

establishing the company. After all, for Giannis Mollas, too, “it started [with] the simple things.”

Thirdly, the findings indicate that after the marketing campaign was done and the third wave had started, this intense social media usage of Future Perfect decreased again. Specifically,

in the last two weeks we really slowed down [in] our social media usage. We used to have a lot [...] of articles. [...] But right now, we kinda slowed down with this media usage, because this media usage was mainly for [...] a marketing campaign (Vladlen Dvoretzkiy, second interview).

As reason for utilizing the social media pages less frequently the owner continues that

when we already have the third wave going, then we would [miss] out on a lot of content, because the content is not endless. You can’t keep making up articles about gaming because the topics we take are very specific.

Future Perfect’s social media manager Anatoly Shabanov voices in the first interview, that this “is normal for startups where you work the first two months [...] nonstop and then you slow down for quite a bit. [...] Everyone knows that before the fourth wave we’ll need to do marketing and we’ll work harder.” This illustrates how the social media marketing campaigns are mainly focused around the so-called “specific hype [...] moments” (Damien Rapoye).

Finally, the analysis of the interview data conveys that the social media marketing strategy of the new cybersport enterprise evolves and becomes more sophisticated over time. In the second interview Anatoly Shabanov explains that the marketing campaign of the fourth wave was similar to the one from the third wave. However, it was slightly more complex since they attempted to include some more interactive and engaging materials. First of all, they announced on the Russian social media platform VKontakte that they would organize an online “tournament for 240 people to attract more audience for our courses.” The effect of this particular tournament and the implications it could have for future marketing campaigns are described by stating that

from this small tournament, that lasted seven hours, we got plus 240 people. Let’s say [that] out of these 240 people, hundred were new. So, we got hundred new followers from this particular tournament. Imagine what we can get from a full-

blown league that lasts a month – or two (Vladlen Dvoretzkiy, third interview).

Besides hosting a tournament, they added webinars to their social media content. These are meant as a “preview of what we will provide during the fourth wave” (Vladlen Dvoretzkiy, third interview). They could therefore be compared with the articles published for the campaign for the third wave. Due to their visual nature, however, they could be seen as more interactive and engaging. Finally, the startup under analysis started publishing a daily digest on their VKontakte page in which news and updates from the eSports scene are covered. The reason for starting this digest is that

there is a lot of things happening in League of Legends, and in [the] community [...] in general, and a lot of things are very interesting. But some people just can’t catch up to everything, because [...] it takes a lot of effort to know[...] what is happening in the world all the time. And this summary of everything is probably the most useful thing you can find (Vladlen Dvoretzkiy, third interview).

Furthermore, the owner believes that these posts aid in “attract[ing] even more audience[s] or [in keeping] the audience that we already have interested.”

4.3.2 The role of consistency

The developing social media marketing campaign in the company benefitted from a more continuous and consistent approach to the strategy. In an interview relatively at the beginning of the research period, Dmitry explains that in Future Perfect “everyone make[s] content for [the] social media. So, we have one guy [...] who divides which content he’d like to see in our social media and everyone [...] do[es] something for this.” The CEO hereby indicates that because the team consists of a variety of professionals, each can create a different kind of content. Furthermore, he believes that by working on the social media together, the team gets more united. The thematic analysis showed, however, that over time, the startup started adjusting its strategy. After an incident in which one of the people posted the wrong content in the wrong way, Future Perfect changed its strategy so that “only one person [is] leading our social media and not five or six” (Vladlen Dvoretzkiy, third interview). In the end this illustrates that, for a new cybersport enterprise it is best “not [to] allow different people [to] write on your social media” (Vladlen Dvoretzkiy, third interview).

According to the findings, the importance of properly utilizing social media for branding purposes, lies in the fact that a certain level of consistency aids in the increase of the amount of people that will be attracted to the company. This can be exemplified by the statement that “social media ensures that we can achieve the numbers that we ought to have. It is thus important that there is a common theme” (Damien Rapoye). Future Perfect encountered this increase in follower base themselves, since

before we had [a] social media manager, we would post on social media once [...] a week – or well twice [...] a week – and we would just update the audience with the results of our coaching sessions with achievements in different leagues. But now we are making very professional content. For the last three weeks, ever since we hired a social media manager, we have content more than three posts a day [...]. And ever since we hired the social media manager and we have this amount of posts – we always created content – we have more than 500 new followers (Vladlen Dvoretzkiy, first interview).

This phenomenon is also explained by the Greek social media manager, Giannis Mollas, in that “social media, [...] it’s really difficult. [...] It’s about content, what you need to upload, how to talk with your fans, and all this stuff. So, not [everyone] understands this [...] and they don’t know how it works.” Therefore, also he is solely managing the social media presence of his organization. The thematic analysis of the interview data therefore shows that having only one person in charge of the social media helps in keeping a consistent strategy. This, in turn, leads to a growth of the company’s follower base – and potentially customer base.

4.3.3 The functions of influencers and platforms

The growth of a company’s online follower base is not only connected with having a consistent social media strategy, but it is also dependent on using the right platform, and it can be affected by using social media influencers.

Regarding social media platforms, the analysis shows that they should be taken separately, since the target group varies per platform (Damien Rapoye). This is despite the fact that “all of them together share the same purpose. They’re [...] working on keeping and engaging the audience, and selling stuff to the audience when we need to” (Anatoly Shabanov, first interview). First of all, the social media platforms differ in form of delivery

and thus also in content: “what we can do eight times a day on Twitter, we can’t do on Facebook, nor on Instagram” (Damien Rapoye). Despite the fact that the essence of content might be the same, it should vary in accordance with the platform on which it is published. This can also be seen in the social media strategy of Future Perfect. Whereas the startup uses its VKontakte page to publish, for example, articles, it uses YouTube and other streaming platforms like Twitch for publishing videos. Secondly, the regions in which a platform is popular, as well as the region in which your target audience resides, should be considered. For instance, when explaining the social media strategy of WLGaming, Giannis Mollas mentions that he uses Instagram and Facebook to target his Greek audiences. By using the English language for their Twitter page, this platform is used for reaching an international audience. The analysis of the interview data shows that this strategy is used in Future Perfect as well: whereas the Russian content on VKontakte (the Russian variant of Facebook) targets the Russian audiences, the English content on Twitter should supposedly reach the international audiences. “Overall, it’s good to have [...] social media everywhere,” Giannis Mollas believes, “but I think, first of all, you need to focus on [...] the biggest one” in the main region you hope to target.

Regarding co-creation and the inclusion of influencers in the social media marketing strategy, the thematic analysis reveals their contradictory role in the eSports industry. First of all, the interviewees perceive co-creation with a certain level of hesitation since in this phenomenon, external people are allowed into the process. The distrust can be illustrated with the argument that “if you want to keep control over your brand [...] this is something you should actually avoid – at least to a certain extent” (Damien Rapoye). Secondly, the usage of external influencers is perceived with some skepticism, because the brand can become dependent upon them. Influencers in the cybersport industry can include a wide variety of people: “Eventually, every [professional] gamer [...] is actually already an influencer, either for his own brand or for his team brand. [...] Thus, I would say that a gamer is actually the most important influencer a team can have” (Damien Rapoye). Besides gamers also famous streamers could receive a status as influencer. Overall, these influencers “could increase your numbers and bigger numbers just means that you will sell more.” Nevertheless, they “are always a bit dangerous since [...] they can be bigger than your brand and exercise much more control over your brand” (Damien Rapoye). The Belgian eSports professional therefore advises to “create your own influencers internally.” Giannis Mollas claims something similar by stressing the usage of his own teams as influencers. Since a company like Future Perfect does not have a fixed team, however, and since the professional

players are still being coached in the educational program, it is more difficult to promote these internal influencers. Instead, as elaborated upon in subchapter 1.1, the “brands” of the people working for the startup as well as connections with other big opinionmakers in the industry, are utilized for expanding the reach as well.

4.3.4 Professionalism and feedback

Besides a more consistent social media strategy, and the right choices regarding social media platforms and influencers, the thematic analysis shows how maintaining a certain level of professionalism in social media, also helps in the marketing of the company. A professional attitude, for instance, is mentioned to have a positive effect on the level of loyalty and trust of the audiences (Giannis Mollas). Upon the question of how this professional position can be achieved, Anatoly Shabanov responds that “first of all, we shouldn’t contradict ourselves in social media. Secondly, [...] we should avoid conflicts and third [...] we try to adapt [our language and] make it easier and use emojis” (first interview). Furthermore, he advises to “try to help solve problems of people, so when they ask questions, [...] don’t ignore them.” In the interview with Mollas, the respective interviewee referred to similar elements. Both of Future Perfect’s founders also assert the importance of keeping your promises. For example, “if you say that you’re making a series of posts [...] then you can’t make just one, call it number one and never make another one, [...] it shows that you are basically not professional” (Vladlen Dvoretzkiy, third interview). After all, Faik “Shorty” Aliev specifies, “this is how the trust is built.” Furthermore, the analysis of the interview data conveys that a high level of professionalism is of special importance for the particular company under investigation: “in our case we are providing the highest quality education and [we are trying] to show our expertise [...] in every post we make” (Vladlen Dvoretzkiy, third interview). In the end, the social media manager Anatoly Shabanov states, it all comes down to the fact that “everyone should feel that we are doing [a] good job.” The thematic analysis therefore indicates that professionalism could lead to more loyal customers.

Furthermore, the analysis shows the importance of loyal customers in the cybersport scene in general. Future Perfect’s co-owner Faik “Shorty” Aliev, for example, explains that

they create the basis of your brand. [...] so basically loyal fans [...] allow[...] you to be more creative in your approaches, because those are the people who will stay with you no matter what, who [...] want you to be better. [...] They [usually have] the

most constructive feedback and you can actually develop through their reaction [...] – like the more loyal fans you have, the more successful your marketing campaign could be.

Whereas feedback could come from a great variety of people, the reviews of the majority of people is trivial. Regarding irrelevant feedback, it is conveyed that the

eSports is a thing that is based on the internet so you have a lot of feedback and my [motto is that] you have to read it all, but you don't have to take it all, [...] because [the] internet is so easily accessible by a lot of people. There is a lot of feedback that is useless. I don't mean negative feedback. It's not really criticism, it's more [...] when people are just disappointed in some way. They don't like what you have done and they just say that it's bad, but they don't help you to make it better. So, you have to be able to find in the sea of like negative feedback, something useful [...] (Faik "Shorty" Aliev).

Moreover, the analysis of the interview data reveals that in the eSports some people even go as far as "making fake accounts to write comments" (Vladlen Dvoretzkiy, first interview). According to the social media manager Anatoly Shabanov, this ability to be anonymous is one of the biggest negative sides of social media in general, and of social media marketing in particular. In the first interview, Shabanov mentions that "we don't know who the people are, and they can say whatever they want and we just have to deal with it." He holds the idea that the only way to cope with these "anonymous comments is that we just need to be rational [...], because we don't know what happened in their life; how [...] they feel." Coming back to the previous paragraph, then, the interviewee suggests that the only way to deal with negative feedback is by being, and remaining, professional.

In general, feedback can help in getting to know the demands from the audience better. Faik "Shorty" Aliev, for instance, recognizes the fact that

feedback is very important, because that is how you get better. [...] Especially considering that in the social media marketing in the eSports, the idea is [that] you're doing it for [...] viewers. [...] they are your target audience so the idea is to make them happy and with constructive feedback [...] you get better faster.

Furthermore, both Anatoly Shabanov (first interview) and Vladlen Dvoretzkiy (first interview) consider the fact that when people leave positive feedback on your social media

pages, you are more likely to attract new customers. Nevertheless, it should be highlighted that “you need to have feedback from people with experience [in the] eSports community” (Giannis Mollas). If the critics are not knowledgeable of the field they provide feedback about, these comments are likely to be less reliable and thus less relevant.

Finally, the analysis of the data uncovered that for a company like Future Perfect, feedback is of particular importance. Namely, “as an education project [...] we need to know what is good education in our project and what is boring; what is bad” (Dmitry). The owner, Vladlen Dvoretzkiy, is also glad with feedback. Upon a question about the relevance of criticism for him, he replies that “some feedback opens our eyes [for] what we could do, what we should do – some feedback just brings new ideas” (first interview). Furthermore, the thematic analysis conveys how, as time passes for the startup,

more and more people are giving constructive criticism [...] to what we are doing, to the lectures, [...] to the coaches themselves. And we are solving it pretty quickly, everything. So, for example, [...] one of the students complained that the lectures are low-quality videos. So, we decided to stream them from a different platform (Vladlen Dvoretzkiy, second interview).

Of course, loyal customers are not made overnight. It takes time, but as a startup matures, it can receive more and more constructive feedback via social media. This, in turn, helps in making more successful business and marketing strategies.

4.3.5 *Presentation matters*

The final important aspect which appeared from the thematic analysis of the interview data regarding the social media marketing strategy in a startup in the eSports industry, is the significance of design and visual elements. In short, it could be stated that “you need a very good design; everything should look very nice” (Anatoly Shabanov, second interview). The reason for this is that in social media

the design and the logo [...] make a big difference in bringing the new clients. [...]. Like we have a saying in Russian that you meet a person by its looks. [...] people come to us [...] because they see that the logo is nice; that everything is kind [of] interesting for [the] eyes, and that’s why they [...] press follow on [the] follow button. [...] in social media, [...] you can just follow because it looks nice (“Kiwi”,

first interview).

Especially for the cybersport scene visual and design elements matter. This can be exemplified by the statement that

the demographic that we have [...] as our target audience, [...] they [...] prefer the [...] visual perception [...]. We are talking about computer games, [in which] the graphic design is very important. [...] The appearance is very important of any content (Faik “Shorty” Aliev).

In continuation of this, Future Perfect’s co-owner holds the opinion that videos are the most relevant kind of content for social media marketing in the eSports industry. After all, he believes, “in today’s society, the majority of [the] people prefers to watch something to get info, instead of [to] read.”

Secondly, the thematic analysis indicated that the visual aspects of a brand should on one hand be defined by the industry in which it is situated – in this case the eSports scene – but that, on the other hand, it is still subject to personal preferences. The designer “Kiwi” believes that certain forms and colors are established per industry and that thus one has to use these accordingly. “If any organization uses a different color in a design, then it can negatively affect the audience, [because] there will be confusion and misunderstanding” (first interview). In the eSports in general,

squares and triangles are better, because they express more characteristics that belong to [the] eSports [...]. So [a] square, for example, is about safety and protection. [A] triangle is about aggression and creativity. And both of them are more related to [the] eSports than [a] circle (“Kiwi”, first interview).

Furthermore, “the main colors are black, white, blue and [...] orange.” Nevertheless, the interview data conveyed that a brand is seen as something personal and “it’s something that differs from one person to the other [...] you prefer blue, I prefer red, the other prefers green” (Damien Rapoye). Also “Kiwi” states that “a designer can use any color depending on what she wants to convey” (first interview). Thus, in designing the visuals, there seems to be room for a personal twist, despite the fact that the visuals should still be in line with what is expected from the industry in which the company is situated.

Thirdly, the analysis reveals that, ideally, the design should be able to independently communicate the essence of a company. Therefore, Damien Rapoye is of the opinion that

the symbolic meaning is most important: “Sometimes the symbolic meaning grows with the brand, [...] and it evolves. [...] But in the end, it has to be eye-catching, it has to be recognizable” also without the name of the company stated next to it. In the first interview, Future Perfect’s designer “Kiwi” assumes that this is the difference between big and small organizations. According to her, “big [firms] want to use [the] symbols, logo [and] name in such a way that [...] people recognize it later on. [...] Small-organizations, on the other hand, don’t necessarily benefit as much from [a] well-established logo and name.” The thematic analysis uncovers that the initial logo of Future Perfect “is not necessarily conveying any information” (“Kiwi” first interview). As point of reference a copy of the initial logo is included in Appendix A. However, the owner Vladlen Dvoretzkiy indicates that he is “a bit too skeptical about [changing] it, because I really like the logo myself [...]. I don’t really see the point [in] making a new one” (first interview). This indicates both the strong influence of the founder on the company, as well as the lack of specific knowledge about certain practices – in this case the effect of a suitable and self-containing design. Nevertheless, the social media manager Anatoly Shabanov highly recommended that “rebranding is necessary” (second interview), and it was thus decided to do so. As point of reference a copy of the logo after the rebranding as well as examples of its different usages, are included in Appendix B. Whereas the previous design had dark colors, which work rejectingly, the new design has “lighter ones [which make it] easier to attract people” (“Kiwi”, second interview). The audience is also attempted to be attracted by using pictures in the design. These “mascots are easier to associate with the organization and [the] public will have an easier time to associate themselves with the organization, so they will remember the brand.” These pictures will thus help in conveying the symbolic meanings of the startup. This can be exemplified by the idea that “the fire will [...] symbolize the enthusiasm and compassion” (“Kiwi”, second interview). This shows that, when the startup is growing and maturing, the visual elements are being reconsidered with regard to their effectiveness and self-containing ability.

Finally, the interview data suggests that the visual elements of the new cybersport enterprise should be consistent, yet, to a certain extent, flexible. As main reason for rebranding, Shabanov explains that “last time, we didn’t think through the whole design. We were adding something every time, but now we want to have everything from the beginning” (second interview). In this case, the rebranding could aid in having a more consistent image and presentation in the social media. As described in subchapter 3.2, a greater consistency could eventually lead to better marketing. On the other hand, “the new design is going to be

more graphic, there will be more elements, more colors, and in general it will be more flexible” (“Kiwi”, second interview). This latter aspect is important since it makes the logo “very adaptable to any other area we want to work in.” This means that the startup is not confined to one single field, but can potentially change or expand its scope. For every post “we’re looking to [...] change our graphics in some way, so [that] it doesn’t repeat itself all the time” (“Kiwi”, second interview). Upon the question of why they choose to do so, the designer answered: “Because people get bored.” A flexible design therefore also aids the engagement of the audiences. Although there will “be consistent elements of the design in posts, [...] it is a normal branding policy that [...] you adapt [...] the graphics to the content.” This indicates that when growing and maturing, the eSports startup becomes more experienced in its strategies and attempts to increase both consistency and customer engagement.

Overall, the thematic analysis uncovered that social media marketing in the eSports scene, is a continuously ongoing and developing process. This is highlighted in statements by the majority of the interviewees and comes across as a common theme throughout the interviews. It is mentioned, for example, that “there is no maximum here” (Dmitry), and that “there is always room for perfection” (“Kiwi”, first interview). Furthermore, both Damien Rapoye and Faik “Shorty” Aliev indicate the fact that “social media marketing is mostly [...] an experimental thing, so you try things out, [...] you see the results, and then you modify something if needed” (Faik “Shorty” Aliev). However, the limiting factor for the social media marketing of the startup is also being recognized, since it “could be much better, but considering the resources that we had – moneywise and [regarding] human resources – we did the maximum we could” (Anatoly Shabanov, second interview). This means that, like the majority of the new enterprises in any other industry, startups in the eSports industry, too, are limited by the availability of resources.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Word count Discussion: 3605

Park, et al. (2018) have stated that the level and the way in which social media is used should be deliberately considered and it should be in line with the objectives of the organization adopting it. Furthermore, the usage is dependent on the industry in which the company is trying to situate itself and the audience it is trying to target. The previous chapter elaborated upon the findings of this research concerning the cybersport industry. However, what do these results tell us in regard with the way in which startups in the eSports industry use social media for developing their brand?

Three core ideas occurred from the analysis and reflection of the findings section: 1) social media is crucial for the branding of any company in the cybersport scene, 2) whereas co-creation or the inclusion of external people in the processes of the company are discouraged, the personal network of the stakeholders, and adopting and maintaining a professional attitude in the social media presence, are highly important for creating loyal customers in the eSports industry, and 3) the eSports industry has a specific audience which makes that in the social media marketing strategy a) content should be prioritized, and b) the design elements are of considerable importance as well. In the remaining part of this chapter, these three main findings, and their relation to previous academic literature as reviewed in the second chapter, will be discussed separately. The chapter will conclude with practical and managerial implications; limitations and suggestions for future research; and the international component which is strongly integrated in the current study.

5.1 THE CRUCIAL ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE ESPORTS INDUSTRY

The findings from the current study show that there is barely a difference between a startup in the eSports industry and a well-established company. Nevertheless, previous literature has stated (e.g. Bresciani & Eppler, 2010; Hassan, et al., 2015; Hsieh & Wu, 2019; Jones, et al., 2015; Juntunen, 2012) that as for branding, new companies have different needs. Indeed, these different needs partly result from a lack of sufficient resources and knowledge. As the results show, acquiring sufficient resources in the eSports is particularly complicated due to the skepticism with which the industry is still perceived, and due to the fact that it is difficult to make enough revenue. Because of its “passive” (Constantinides, 2014, p.45) or “reactive” (Felix, et al., 2017, p.119) nature which revolves around low cost and high efficiency,

different scholars have stated that using social media for branding is thus particularly interesting for people attempting to create a startup. Nevertheless, as the case study shows social media has to be utilized correctly in order to be effective. When Future Perfect launched its social media pages, these had seemingly little effect. The Russian startup therefore hired a social media manager relatively quick after its establishment, and invested in advertising certain posts. This shows that, if you want to make the most out of it, adopting social media does not eliminate all the costs for branding. It is true that it is more cost-efficient because a potentially global audience can be reached with just one click (e.g. Kadam & Ayarekar, 2014, p.4; Kane, 2017, p.41; Nambisan, et al., 2018, p.365), but the findings show that social media still comes with a price tag.

Despite the price, the findings of the current study suggest that social media is in fact crucial for a branding strategy of a company in the cybersport scene. One reason for this is that social media is ideal for targeting niche audiences (Khajeheian, 2013, p.131; Mays, 2017, p.276). Additionally, the findings show that social media is very much preferred as marketing venue because it is the place where the eSports audiences reside. After all, Tiago and Veríssimo (2014, p.704) have argued, when the customers engage on social media, the company should do so as well. Moreover, however, the online world is where the majority of the services and products provided in the cybersport industry, take place. Since social media exists in the online spheres as well, it is thus the ultimate marketing venue. Now, this particular finding in the current study might be the result of the fact that the particular case studied, is a Russian startup. After all, Blinova (2013) has argued that Russians are generally very active on social media. However, the two interviews with non-Russian people who operated externally of Future Perfect – Damien Rapoye and Giannis Mollas – also stated the crucial role of using social media in the marketing strategy of any eSports organization.

In fact, some interviewees even suggested that there is no real point in using traditional media in the cybersport scene. This seems to counter the argument by Bresciani and Eppler (2010) that for new enterprises it is best to combine social and traditional media in their marketing strategy – that is the first branding strategy characteristic for startups. One of the reasons for this is that a combination ensures a more constant exposure to the branding strategies than if only traditional, or only innovative, media are used (Felix, et al., 2017, p.123; Foroudi, 2017, p.579; Sitta, et al., 2018, p.21). The two scholars also pose another type of marketing strategy in which only innovative media (like social media) are used because the industry does not require much branding efforts. However, as the findings

of the current study suggest, a company in the eSports scene indeed needs quite a lot of branding in order to beat competition and to stand out for the audience. Thus, using solely innovative media because the industry, product or idea does not require much branding, (Felix, et al., 2017, p.123; Foroudi, 2017, p.579; Sitta, et al., 2018, p.21) might prove too simple. Instead, based on my analysis, a fifth branding strategy may be added, which is about solely using innovative media because the industry does not require the usage of traditional media. After all, the cybersport industry mainly takes place online, and also its audiences mainly reside online. In the end, there is thus still constant exposure. In fact, this specific aspect of the industry under analysis seems in line with the arguments by Kadam and Ayarekar (2014), Kim and Ko (2012) and Tiago and Veríssimo (2014) that not utilizing social media in the branding strategy, leads to the company missing the opportunity to reach potential customers.

The objective of a company's social media presence, Jones, et al. (2015, p.614) have argued, should be to direct the customers to the firm's website. Together with Constantinides (2014, p.43) and Foroudi, et al. (2017, p.578), the scholars believe that a website is more unique and ensures the company's control over the content and the way in which it is delivered. The specific case examined in the current research shows that in the early stages of a startup in the eSports industry, a well-developed and well-preserved social media page suffices. However, the social media platform chosen and the language used, should be adjusted to the particular region targeted. Future Perfect has therefore focused on the Russian VKontakte, while its Facebook and Twitter pages remained underdeveloped. Now that the new enterprise wants to expand to other countries they lack something to show the status and expertise they have been working on for the past months. Developing the platforms predominantly used in the regions they want to expand to, would take up too much time. When the startup matures and the processes become more complex, having a website is thus becoming increasingly important in the culturally diverse and transnational scene. Moreover, this situation counters the argument by many scholars that with utilizing social media, a potentially global audience can be reached (Arnaboldi & Coget, 2016, p.48; Jones, et al., 2015, p.625; Kadam & Ayarekar, 2014, p.4; Kane, 2017, p.41; Nambisan, et al., 2018, p.365; Sánchez-Tabernero, et al., 2013, p.162; Seth, 2018, p.9). Due to differences in regions, audiences, languages and preferences, the results show that social media per se does not allow for expanding to a global scale. Instead, Future Perfect needs a website to do so.

Indeed, the findings show that the processes of branding via social media in a startup

in the eSports industry are becoming more complex over time. Besides wanting to target multiple different markets, the branding strategy of Future Perfect started relatively simple with publishing articles during the campaign for the third wave. In the marketing campaign of the fourth wave however, the company under investigation used more interactive and engaging content like webinars and tournaments, to attract new audiences. Whereas Future Perfect's initial marketing strategy seems to revolve around Felix, et al.'s (2017, p.121) "defender approach" – that is, one-way communication – over time this strategy became combined with the more open, interactive and collaborative "explorer approach", in order to better enhance engagement. Finally, it is stressed that a good team which is well-connected, is crucial for the success of the startup. After all, a trustworthy image and loyal and committed customers are dependent on the consistency and careful maintenance of the network of corporate processes, interactions, behavior and communication (Foroudi, et al., 2017, p.580; Gegenhuber & Dobusch, 2017, p.338; Juntunen, 2012, P.231; Rode & Vallaster, 2005, p.124).

5.2 POSITIONING YOURSELF VIA YOUR CONNECTIONS AND PROFESSIONALISM

The second conclusion taken from the current study regarding the way in which startups in the eSports industry use social media for branding, is that this strategy mainly revolves around the people working in the startup in order to innovate and to build a certain level of trust and loyalty. On one hand, in previous literature the importance of co-creation for new enterprises was stressed, since it is cheap, yet it offers multiple perspectives which could aid improvement and innovation (e.g. Hsieh & Wu, 2019, p.318; Parasnis & Heller Baird, 2011, p.30). On the other hand, however, the results show that co-creation is something you should rather not do – at least not in the cybersport scene – and by some interviewees it is even believed to be dangerous. The findings in the current study show that in the eSports industry, having customers take control is something that is not desired. This is in line with the concerns of some scholars that an open strategy leaves customers with the control over the conversation (Leeflang, et al., 2014, p.2; Horst, et al., 2018, p.15; Parasnis & Heller Baird, 2011, p.30).

Besides leaving customers out of the creation processes, the findings suggest that including influencers, opinionmakers and brand advocates also has its implications. In the eSports scene, these people are usually professional gamers or streamers with huge fanbases.

However, it is argued by some interviewees that a company can better focus on using the network and fanbase of someone internal of the company rather than external. The results suggest that it is better to use the personal brands of the people working for the company, and to use their networks and connections to create a fanbase and to eventually attract new customers. After all, previous literature has stated that if someone's friend or idol associates him- or herself with a certain company, this person is much more likely to interact with the firm as well (Constantinides, 2014, p.47; Parasnis & Heller Baird, 2011, p.34; Sitta, et al., 2018, p.19; Zhu & Chen, 2015, p.341). Moreover, the current study suggests that the personal network of the entrepreneurs is crucial for establishing a new company in the eSports industry in the first place. After all, with connections comes a certain level of trust, acknowledgement and credibility. Without these one is basically not recognized in the scene which will heavily complicate the creation of a new company.

Regardless of excluding co-creation or actively using external people in the branding processes, the case examined in the current research hints at the fact that startups in the eSports scene benefit a lot from WOM advertising and feedback. Via the open nature of social media platforms, a potentially mass audience is reached and the brand awareness is increased. According to previous literature, a company can improve its products or services in accordance with customer feedback (Arnaboldi & Coget, 2016, p.49; Baptista et al., 2017; Rode & Vallaster, 2005, p.132). The openness of social media platforms raises the awareness of a company of its customers and vice versa (Blundel, et al., 2018; Gegenhuber & Dobusch, 2017, p.338; Kim & Ko, 2012, p.1480; Leeflang, et al., 2014, p.2). The interviewees from Future Perfect indeed indicated that feedback from customers aided in improving their services and clarifying certain processes. Nevertheless, the case study also showed that by far not all feedback in the cybersport scene can be seen as relevant. Only over time, when the startup matures and acquires more loyal customers, they started receiving more constructive feedback which helped them in developing and improving. The case study hereby illustrates the importance of a loyal audience for a company. Besides stimulating repeated purchases and aiding in building a positive brand image and thus in attracting new customers (Hidayanti, et al., 2018, p.21; Hofacker & Belanche, 2016, p.76; Pucci, 2017, p.276), loyal customers in the eSports scene are believed to form the basis for a brand since they want to help the company grow and thus give more constructive feedback.

Finally, the specific case study used in this research suggests that maintaining control over the content, and building relationships of trust and loyalty in the eSports industry are

positively affected by a consistent and continuous social media presence, and a professional attitude of the company. Multiple interviewees have indicated that it is best to leave only one person in the company in charge of the social media strategy. This allows for a more consistent and continuous process, which is argued to be crucial for building relationships of trust and commitment with the customers (Baptista, et al., 2017, p.322; Nisar, et al., 2018, p.266; Rode & Vallaster, 2005, p.131). As mentioned before, a continuous social media usage is of particular importance in the cybersport scene, since the eSports audience expects content 24/7. The results illustrate how a professional attitude can be achieved by not contradicting yourself, avoiding conflicts, speaking in proper and understandable language, not ignoring people, and sticking to your promises. Having only one person in charge of the social media presence aids in this. Rather than happening in a fragmented way, an eSports company should focus on utilizing social media in a centralized manner (Felix, et al., 2017, p.122). Furthermore, only one negative aspect of social media was recurring in the interviews: the potential anonymity of the audience. Nevertheless, the interviewees believed that also this could be solved by establishing and maintaining a professional attitude.

5.3 PRIORITIZING CONTENT AND THE VISUAL

The third and final conclusion derived from the current study is that for startups in the eSports, the priority in a social media marketing strategy is the content. This is suggested to be related to the specifics of the eSports audiences who basically expect new content constantly. The type and form of the content being published is dependent on which platforms are used to deliver it. Previous academic literature has argued that social media platforms should be used in accordance with their specific features and with the cultural background of the audiences that it helps targeting (e.g. Sitta, et al., 2018, p.21; Zhao, et al., 2017, p.171; Zhu & Chen, 2015, p.335). Furthermore, it was stated that their usage is dependent on the company itself and of the industry in which the firm operates (Chung, et al., 2017, p.1406; Felix, et al., 2017, p.119).

The startup under analysis indeed shows that social media platforms are used differently and that the cultural background of the audiences are considered. Whereas Future Perfect uses VKontakte for targeting the Russian audience, for example, Facebook and Twitter aim to target the international market. Similarly, the Greek social media manager Giannis Mollas uses Facebook and Instagram for the Greek audiences and Twitter for the international market. The way in which a platform is used is thus dependent on the audience

that is attempted to be reached via that platform. Furthermore, whereas a platform like VKontakte is used to publish articles, a platform like YouTube is used for the sharing of videos and streams. The findings concerning YouTube are interesting, since previous academic literature has debated that this particular social media platform is less useful for marketing and branding (Alalwan, et al., 2017, p.1182). Contrarily, in the eSports, YouTube seems to prove valuable since it better allows for the publishing and sharing of videos and streams – the kind of content that the interviewees mentioned to be most important and engaging for the cybersport audience.

Finally, another way of engaging the cybersport audience in the eSports industry is by using visual elements in the social media. The results show that in the cybersport scene, visual and design elements are of big importance in attracting new audiences. After all, some interviewees stress, both social media and the games industry are highly visual, and people are attracted by the way things look, and the quality of the graphics used. Nevertheless, previous academic literature regarding social media marketing in startups barely touches upon the role of visual elements in branding a new enterprise via social media. Indeed, it was stated that the corporate design is one of the main elements of a corporate brand (Rode & Vallaster, 2005) and that it is often perceived as that what makes a company distinguishable from its competitors and thus recognizable (Foroudi, et al., 2017, p.578; Juntunen, 2012, p.232). Furthermore, the scholars suggest that it should be considered deliberately and it should be suitable for the brand, and that it is thus often still subject to change. This is illustrated by the rebranding process of Future Perfect, since this shows that, indeed, the visual elements are being reconsidered in order to make it more suitable.

5.4 PRACTICAL AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

As this paper has shown, social media is crucial for branding a company in the eSports scene since the industry revolves around the online spheres. Like Anic (2018) and Hultgren (2019) have argued, branding via social media in the cybersport industry should indeed revolve around the local market, the community, the values of the audience, the right partnerships, feedback, authenticity, inclusion and flexibility. More specifically, the current study shows how relationships of loyalty and commitment should be built with customers in order to acquire constructive feedback, and to thus grow and thrive. These relationships can be enhanced via a professional attitude and by situating oneself sufficiently in the network of the cybersport industry. Finally, the findings of the current study show that building the

brand of an eSports company is positively affected by focusing the social media marketing strategy on interactive and engaging content as well as the visual elements and presentation. These conclusions could serve as guidelines for startups in the eSports scene. Furthermore, they could aid in avoiding mistakes in brand-building, and in developing better social media marketing strategies in the cybersport industry.

5.5 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This paper is limited in that it does not compare the social media branding strategy of a startup in the eSports industry with that of a bigger company. Regarding this, relevant literature is missing as well. It could therefore not be stated that the results are exclusively restricted to startups in the particular scene under analysis. Indeed, one of the findings was how startups develop themselves and their social media branding strategy, but no claims can be made regarding the generalization of this. Furthermore, the specific case being analyzed originated in Russia. Indeed, Blinova (2013) argued that the population of this specific country is particularly active on social media. Again, since relevant literature is missing, the current paper is limited in that it cannot be made clear to what extent the outcomes of the study are influenced by the location of the company, and to what extent they are valid within the eSports industry as a whole. The current research forms a good foundation for future comparative studies. Future research could therefore expand the scope of the current research by investigating startups in other countries, as well as more established companies in the cybersport industry. Finally, future research could investigate the long-term effectiveness of a social media strategy as outlined in the current paper for the success of a startup in the eSports industry, by extending the research period.

5.6 INTERNATIONAL ORIENTATION

Finally, as has become clear throughout the paper, the current research has a strong integrated international component. Indeed, the eSports industry is an interesting subject for research since it mainly takes place in the border-crossing, and thus transnational, online sphere. Questions could hereby be raised whether the eSports scene is confined to the regional or the local in the first place. Nevertheless, the analysis of the Russian startup reveals that cultural diversity and preferences still bear heavily on the effect of the internet. This means that, in order to effectively reach a global audience, social media marketing

strategies have to be locally adjusted. Furthermore, whereas the eSports scene in Russia is still in its infancy, the Korean industry, for instance, is much more developed. Results from a study of the social media marketing strategies in a more developed scene might differ tremendously. Comparison studies are therefore needed in order to shed light on this international, or supposedly transnational, phenomenon.

In the end, this paper illustrates how the eSports industry as well as social media branding, result in extraordinary branding strategies for startups. The specifics of the vastly growing and increasingly relevant scene, in combination with contemporary forms of marketing are therefore interesting and significant topics for research.

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APPENDIX A: INITIAL LOGO OF FUTURE PERFECT



APPENDIX B: LOGO OF FUTURE PERFECT AFTER THE REBRANDING AND EXAMPLES OF ITS DIFFERENT USAGES



APPENDIX C: TOPIC LIST AND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

VLADLEN DVORETSKIY, INTERVIEW 1

You and Future Perfect

- What is your company about?
 - What is the aim of your company?
 - Where did the idea come from?
 - Could you describe the eSport scene?
- How would you describe your workday?
- How do you structure your work?

Entrepreneurship

- Could you describe what the concept entrepreneurship means to you?
 - What would be the main characteristics of an entrepreneur in your opinion?
- How do you consider yourself an entrepreneur?
 - How would you describe yourself?
 - How did you become an entrepreneur?
 - Is it something you decided upon?
 - What is the most important aspect of being an entrepreneur for you?
- Did you plan on starting this company for a longer time already?
 - Have you done something similar before?
- Does your background affect your entrepreneurial activity?
 - If yes, why so?
 - If no, why not?
- Why are you doing it? What drove you to start the company? What is driving you now to continue it?
 - E.g. making a living, becoming rich, passion...
- Could you describe which problems you encountered?
- How do you hope to solve these problems?

Business strategy

- Does your company have a clear strategy or business model/plan? (online AND offline)
 - If yes, could you explain it?
 - Do you put time aside to develop this strategy?

- How is the strategy integrated in your work/the way in which you work?
 - If no, why not?
- Could you describe the goal of the company?
- Could you describe the main values and philosophy of your business?
 - Why and where do they come from?
- How do you/does your team develop new ideas?
- Do you follow rules or routines in working with employees?
 - What and why?

Branding

- How do you understand the concept of branding?
- How important is branding for entrepreneurs in your opinion?
 - Which aspects of branding (if any) do you think are crucial for entrepreneurs? Why do you think this?
- Could you describe how you attempt to create a brand?
 - What are they reasons for certain design choices?
- Could you describe the image you attempt to create for your company?
- How is decided upon the visual elements of your company?
 - What was the process? Who was involved in the process?
 - Why did you choose these particular symbols, colors, etc.?
 - Have the visual elements changed or would you like to change them?
- Are you (planning on) using any traditional marketing strategies?
 - E.g. TV commercials, magazine advertisements
 - Why (not)?
- Could you describe the importance of your own personal network for the development of your brand?
 - What do you think is the importance of WOM advertising?
- What do you think is the power of social media for branding?
- Do you think it is difficult to create a strong brand image via social media?
- What do you think your company requires to create a strong brand image?

Digital media

- Which digital media platforms does your company use?
 - Could you describe why you choose these specifically?
 - What is their significance to you and your company?

- Which are most valuable for you and your company? Why?
 - Why do you not use other digital media platforms?
- What is the relevance of being active on social media for you and your company?
 - What is the purpose of social media in your company's strategy?
 - Do you think it is possible to create a brand without using social media nowadays?
- Could you describe what kind of content you share?
 - What kind of content would be most relevant for you and your company according to you?
- How much time do you think you spend on your digital media?
- Could you describe the importance of your follower base on these platforms for you and your company?
 - How do you attempt to keep these followers?
 - How do you attempt to attract new followers?
- Do you advertise any of your posts?
 - If yes, why, on which platforms, how, and how often?
 - If no, why not?
- What are the challenges that come with the usage of social media platforms for you and your company?
- What are the opportunities that social media provides your company with? Which challenges does it help solving/did it solve?
 - Are you making the most out of this?
 - If yes, how?
 - If no, why not?
 - What would you like to improve?

Feedback and engagement

- Could you describe your audiences?
 - What is their role in your (digital media) strategy?
- Could you describe how you communicate with your customers?
- Could you describe how you attempt to create credibility?
- Could you describe the importance of engaging with your audiences and employees via social media platforms?
 - Could you describe how you attempt to engage with your audiences?
 - Do you attempt to interact with your employees and audiences?

- Why (not) and how?
- Could you describe the relevance of feedback perceived from the social media platforms for you and your company?
 - How do you deal with this feedback? Why?
 - How do you react to negative comments? Why?
 - Can you give an example?
 - Does feedback change anything in your company, products or strategy?
 - If so, can you give an example?
 - Do you have other people who provide you with feedback?
 - In what form do they give feedback?
 - How important is this feedback?
 - Could you exemplify?
 - And in relation to the feedback you get from social media?
- Could you describe which platform is most successful for you and your company?
 - Why do you think this is the case?

Vk

- Could you describe what makes VK so special for you?
- For what purpose are you active on VK?
- Could you describe what kind of content you publish on VK?
 - Does this differ from what you post on other social media platforms? Why (not)?
 - What is the preparation process of your posts on VK?
 - How often do you upload content?
 - Is one person responsible for all platforms/one platform?
 - Why (not)?
- What are the advantages of VK for you and your company?
 - What are the disadvantages?
- Could you describe the opportunities that VK provides your company with?
 - Are you using all these opportunities?
 - What can you improve?
- Do you work with, or are you planning on working with, social media collaborators?
 - Why (not)?
- Where do you see yourself and your company in the future?

APPENDIX D: TOPIC LIST AND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

VLADLEN DVORETSKIY, INTERVIEW 2

Before we discussed how you experience being an entrepreneur, we discussed your company's business strategy, your branding strategies, your digital media usage, how you attempt to create customer engagement, how you respond to feedback and about the particular importance of VK.

- How have the past weeks been for you in this sense?
 - Did anything change?
 - Where these changes good or bad?
 - What are the consequences?
- What stayed the same? Why?
- Where are you heading now?
- Is there anything else from the previous interview that you want to elaborate upon?

Alright, meanwhile I did some more research on theory and there are some aspects which I found in the literature which I want to discuss with you right now

WOM and personal network

In the previous interview you mentioned that because of an improved and an increased social media usage, your fanbase was growing a lot. A different way of increasing a fanbase could be via your own personal network, or via word-of-mouth advertising

- Do you think either of these plays a role in the changes in your fanbase?
 - Why do you think that is (not) the case?
- What do you think are the pros and cons about this?
 - Wider reach, free, no control, negative reviews...
- How do you attempt to reach the right target?

Social media

Literature has made a very black and white separation: on one hand a company could use social media just as low cost, but high-quality information source to get to know the needs and experiences of the customers, as well as the state of competition in the market. On the other hand, companies can use social media for direct communication and marketing, as well as enhancing customer commitment via the personalization of the customer's experience.

- Based on this, how would you describe your company's social media usage?
- How do you want your company to use the social media?

Literature also makes the distinction between using social media as means of one-way communication to promote a product to the consumers, or as a two-way and more interactive and collaborative means

- Based on this, how would you describe your company's social media usage?
- How do you want your company to use the social media?
- What are the problems you encounter because you are using social media?
- Do you think these problems are general for social media marketing or more for you specifically? Why is this the case?

Social media involves a certain level of **openness, transparency and inclusion**

- How do you perceive these things in relation to your company?
 - Did you consider them?
 - Do you attempt to use it and in what way?
 - How do you think they could benefit your company or your branding?
 - How do you think they can hinder your company or your branding?
 - More knowledge
 - Slowing down the process
 - The question of responsibility
 - The question of what to share and what not to (*this was already a bit discussed in the previous interview, but do you look at it differently now or has it changed?*)
 - Giving power to your employees (*this was also already elaborated upon in the previous interview*)
 - Giving power to your customers, less control by your company
 - How do you ensure that the openness, transparency and inclusion does not get out of hand?
- Do you believe that social media influences how your company understands your customers and how your customers understand your company?

Loyalty and trust

- How important is it for your company to create loyal employees?
 - If they are of importance, how do you attempt to make them loyal?
 - If creating loyalty is not/less important, why is this the case?
- How important is it for your company to create loyal customers?
 - If they are of importance, how do you attempt to make them loyal?
 - If creating loyalty is not/less important, why is this the case?
- What role does trust play in your organization?
 - How do you attempt to create trust?

- Do you have anything to add, or is there something you'd still like to elaborate on?

APPENDIX E: TOPIC LIST AND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

VLADLEN DVORETSKIY, INTERVIEW 3

We talked with each other a month ago

- Could you tell me something about the current developments?
- What are the developments in social media usage?
- How do you think this influences the way in which your brand is perceived?
- In the end, how do you believe that social media helped in marketing your brand?
 - What are the pros and cons?
- Do you believe that what you're doing now is sufficient?
 - What is good in your current strategy?
 - What could still be improved?
 - If you could do it all over again, what would you do differently?
 - Why?
- What have you learned about using social media for branding in the eSports industry?
- Overall, what do you now believe is most important for branding a startup in the eSports scene?
- What are things you should avoid?
- How do you see the future?
- What is for you the importance of using social media for branding?
- What are in your opinion the effects of using social media for branding in the eSports scene?

- Do you have any final comments or questions?

Things we discussed last time:*How do startups in the eSports industry use social media for branding?*

Company's business strategy

Your branding strategies

Your digital media usage

How you attempt to create customer engagement

How you respond to feedback

The particular importance of VK

WOM

Personal network

Social media

Openness, transparency and inclusion

Loyalty and trust

APPENDIX F: TOPIC LIST AND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

FAIK “SHORTY” ALIEV

About you

- What are your experiences with startups?
- What are your experiences with eSports?
- What are your experiences with social media?

Future Perfect

- Could you tell me how Future Perfect changed over time?
 - How did the marketing strategy and social media usage change?
- What is your role within the company?
- What drove you to join Vlad in starting the company?

Branding in the eSports

- What do you believe is the best strategy for marketing in the eSports scene?
 - What are crucial elements?
 - What are things you should absolutely not do?
 - Does this differ from other industries? Why (not)? How?
- What is the role of social media in the eSports industry?
 - And what is crucial for branding via social media?
 - Would this differ from a more well-established company?
 - Would this differ from other industries?
- Would marketing via social media in the eSports industry be different if it was done for a startup?
- What are the problems of using social media in the eSports industry?
 - How do they occur?
 - How can they be solved?
- What are the challenges that come with the usage of social media platforms in the eSports?
- What are the opportunities that social media provides your company with?
 - Which challenges does it help solving/did it solve?
- What guides you in taking certain decisions regarding your social media usage?
- What is the state of competition in the eSports scene?

- How do you deal with this?
- What is the role of one's own personal connections for establishing a brand (a person or a company) in the eSports industry?
- What is the role of visuals in the eSports industry?
- How can social media marketing lead to the success of a brand in the eSports scene?

Creating a fanbase and engaging audiences

- To what extent does an eSports audience differ as target group from audiences in other industries?
- What kind of content would be most relevant to create in the eSports scene?
 - What kind of content would be most relevant to create for a company like Future Perfect?
- How important is a follower base on social media in the eSports?
 - How do you attempt to keep these followers?
 - How do you attempt to attract new followers?
- What is the role of engaging your audiences in the eSports industry?
 - Do you believe this becomes more/less important if the company is a startup?
- What is, according to you, a good way to engage the audiences and the employees in the eSports scene?
- What is the role of openness, transparency and inclusion in the eSports scene?
- How do you attempt to create loyalty and trust via the social media?
- What is the importance of feedback and co-creation in the eSports industry?
 - How do you deal with this?
- How do you attempt to keep the social media interaction in your control?
- How can engaging your audiences lead to the success of a brand in the eSports scene?
- Do you have anything to add, or is there something you'd still like to elaborate on?

APPENDIX G: TOPIC LIST AND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

ANATOLY SHABANOV, INTERVIEW 1

About you

- What are your previous experiences with working as a social media manager?
- What are your previous experiences with eSports?
- Do you have previous experiences with startups? Did you ever work for one before?
Did you start one?
- How did you get in touch with Future Perfect?
- What is your role within the company?
- How is your experience with them so far?
- How do you perceive the way in which they work?

Social media marketing in the eSports scene

- Do you believe that marketing in the eSports differs from marketing in different industries?
 - Why (not)? How?
- Do you believe that marketing via social media differs between the eSports scene and other industries?
 - Why (not)? How?
- What is the importance of marketing via social media, for the success of a company in the eSports scene?
- What do you believe is the best strategy for marketing via social media?
 - What are crucial elements?
- Do you consider using traditional forms of advertising for the eSports?
 - Why (not)? What role could they play?
- Do you believe that social media helps the company in improving its performance?
 - Why (not)? How?
- Could you describe the marketing strategy of FP?
 - One-way/two-way, product promotion/interaction
 - Do you use a different social media strategy in the startup (FP) in comparison with how you used it in a more well-established organization (e.g. TeamJust)?

- Do you think social media helps in connecting the people within the organization better?
 - How does their feedback and possibility for co-creation shape the company?
- Do you think social media helps in bringing the company closer to its customers?
 - How does engaging them affect the company?
 - How does their feedback and possibility for co-creation shape the company?
- What is the role of specific platforms in a social media strategy?
 - E.g. VK, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter...
 - What are the advantages of these platforms for the company?
 - What are the disadvantages?
 - What are the opportunities they provide you with?
 - Are you making use of all these opportunities?
 - What could be improved?
 - Do some platforms hinder your marketing strategy in any way?
 - How do you deal with this?
- Do you work with, or are you planning on working with, social media influencers or collaborators?
 - Why (not)? How?

Working for a startup

- Do you believe that working for a startup differs from working for a more well-established company?
 - Why (not)? How?
- What is the importance of marketing via social media, for the success of a startup?
- What do you believe is crucial for a startup specifically for branding?
 - And what is crucial for branding via social media?
 - How do you think this influences the way in which the company and its brand are perceived?
 - Do you think this would differ in a more well-established company?
- What is the role of consistency and clarity within the company?
 - Do you believe these are sufficient?
 - Could the consistency and clarity be improved? If so, how?
 - How do you think this affects how the company is perceived?
- How do you attempt to create loyalty and trust via the social media?

- How do you attempt to increase engagement of both the team and the customers?
 - Why?
- How do you attempt to keep the social media interaction in your control?
- Do you think your company is making the most out of its social media usage right now? (FP's performance from now onwards)
 - What do you think could be improved in FP's social media usage?
 - What do you think could be improved in FP's social media usage for marketing purposes?

- Do you have anything to add, or is there something you'd still like to elaborate on?

APPENDIX H: TOPIC LIST AND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

ANATOLY SHABANOV, INTERVIEW 2

We talked with each other a month ago

- What are the current developments in social media usage?
 - Content
 - Influencers
 - Platforms
 - Professionalism
 - Attracting new clients, keeping old
 - consistency
 - Internal communication
 - design
- How do you think this influences the way in which the brand is perceived?
- In the end, how do you believe that social media helped in marketing the brand?
 - What are the pros and cons?
- Do you believe that what you're doing now is sufficient?
 - What is good in your current strategy?
 - What could still be improved?
 - If you could do it all over again, what would you do differently? Why?
- What have you learned about using social media for branding in the eSports industry?
- Overall, what do you now believe is most important for branding a startup in the eSports scene?
 - What are things you should avoid?
- What is for you the importance of using social media for branding?
- What are in your opinion the effects of using social media for branding in the eSports scene?
- What is according to you the best way of attracting and keeping clients via social media in the eSports industry?
- Do you have any final comments or questions?

Things we discussed last time:*How do startups in the eSports industry use social media*

for branding?

Social media marketing in the eSports scene

Working for a startup

APPENDIX I: TOPIC LIST AND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

“KIWI”, INTERVIEW 1

About you

- What are your previous experiences with working as designer?
- What are your previous experiences with eSports?
- Do you have previous experiences with startups? Did you ever work for one before?
Did you start one?
- How did you get in touch with Future Perfect?
- What is your role within the company?
- How is your experience with them so far?
- How do you perceive the way in which they work?
- How do you perceive the effectiveness of the way in which they communicate?

Working for a startup

- Do you believe that working for a startup differs from working for a more well-established company?
 - Why (not)? How?
- What do you believe is crucial for a startup?
 - Do you think that it differs between a startup and a more well-established company?
 - Why (not)? How?
 - How does this affect the way in which the company is perceived?
- Do you believe there is a difference between how a startup (FP) uses social media, and how a more well-established organization uses social media?

Design

- Do you think the visual elements of a company are important for branding?
 - Why (not)? How?
- Which visual elements do you think are important for a startup in the eSports scene?
 - Do you think that it differs between a startup and a more well-established company?
 - Why (not)? How?
 - How does this affect the way in which the company is perceived?

- Can you describe the process of developing the visual elements?
 - What is the role of certain colors, symbols, etcetera?
 - What is the role of co-creation?
 - What is the role of feedback from the team?
 - What is the role of feedback from the audiences?
- Do you believe the current visual elements represent what the company stands for?
 - Why (not)? How?
- Do you believe they make the company distinguishable from competitors?
 - Why (not)? How?
- Do you believe the current visual elements are effective?
 - Could they be more effective? How?
 - Are you planning on changing the visual elements?
 - Why (not)? How?
- How do you attempt to create designs that are consistent and clear for the audiences?
 - Do you believe this is sufficient?
 - Could the consistency and clarity be improved? If so, how?
 - How do you think this affects how the company is perceived?
- Do you think that the visual elements help in bringing the company closer to its customers?
 - How does engaging them affect the company?
 - How does their feedback and possibility for co-creation shape the company?

Social media strategy in Future Perfect

- Do you think the company is making the most out of its social media usage right now?
 - What do you think could be improved in FP's social media usage?
 - What do you think could be improved in FP's social media usage for marketing purposes?
- Do you have anything to add, or is there something you'd still like to elaborate on?

APPENDIX J: TOPIC LIST AND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

“KIWI”, INTERVIEW 2

We talked with each other a month ago

- Could you tell me something about the current developments in the design?
- How do you think this influences the way in which the brand is perceived?
- How do you think the design elements helped in marketing the brand via social media?
- Do you believe that the new visual elements better represent what the company stands for?
 - Why (not)? How?
- How would you explain the usage of social media for branding in the eSports industry?
 - What do you believe are crucial aspects?
 - What are things you should not do?
- Overall, what do you now believe is most important for branding a startup in the eSports scene?
 - What are things you should avoid?
- What are in your opinion the effects of using social media for branding in the eSports scene?

- Do you have any final comments or questions?

Things we discussed last time:*How do startups in the eSports industry use social media for branding?*

Working for a startup

Design

APPENDIX K: TOPIC LIST AND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

DMITRY

About you

- What are your previous experiences with working for a company?
- What are your previous experiences with eSports?
- Do you have previous experiences with startups? Did you ever work for one before?
Did you start one?
- How did you get in touch with Future Perfect?
- What is your role within the company?
- How is your experience with them so far?
- How do you perceive the way in which they work?

Working for a startup

- Do you believe that working for a startup differs from working for a more well-established company?
 - Why (not)? How?
- What do you believe is crucial for a startup?
 - In eSports?
- What is the general form of behavior within the company? (if there is any)
 - Do you think that it differs between a startup and a more well-established company?
 - Why (not)? How?
 - How do you think this influences the way in which the brand is perceived?
- How does communication take place within the company?
 - Do you think that it differs between a startup and a more well-established company?
 - Why (not)? How?
 - How does this affect the way in which the company is perceived?
- What is the role of consistency and clarity within the company?
 - Do you believe these are sufficient?
 - Could the consistency and clarity be improved? If so, how?
 - How do you think this affects how the company is perceived?

Digital media usage

- Do you believe there is a difference between how a startup (FP) uses social media, and how a more well-established organization (e.g. ROX) uses social media?
- Do you believe that adopting social media in a startup affects the company internally?
 - Internal communication?
 - The spreading of information?
 - The availability and usage of knowledge?
 - A multiplicity of perspectives?
 - The atmosphere in the team?
 - The feeling of responsibility of the team members?
 - The speed and fluency in which processes take place?
 - The division of control over certain processes? (e.g. the processes take place on a lesser authoritative level; Vlad has less control over the company, and the team and audiences more...)
 - The possibility of achieving feedback?
- Do you think social media helps in connecting the people in the team better?
- Do you think social media helps in bringing the company closer to its customers?
 - How does engaging them affect the company?
 - How does their feedback and possibility for co-creation shape the company?
- Do you believe that social media helps the company to innovate internally?
 - Why (not)? How?
- Since you were with the company basically from the beginning, how do you believe the usage of social media in FP has changed? (Comparison from November until now)
 - What has improved?
 - What did get worse?
- Do you think your company is making the most out of its social media usage right now? (FP's performance from now onwards)
 - What do you think could be improved in FP's social media usage?
 - What do you think could be improved in FP's social media usage for marketing purposes?
- Do you have anything to add, or is there something you'd still like to elaborate on?

APPENDIX L: TOPIC LIST AND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

DAMIEN RAPOYE

About you

- Could you tell me something about yourself?
 - Background, current work...
 - What are your experiences with startups?
 - What are your experiences with eSports?
 - What are your experiences with social media?

Startups in eSports

- According to you, what are the differences between a startup and a more well-established company?
- According to you, what are the differences between a company in the eSports industry and a company in any other industry?
- What do you believe is crucial for a startup in the eSports scene?
- What are the resources needed for establishing a successful business in the eSports?
 - How do you acquire them?
 - What could be challenging?
- What are the challenges and risks a startup in the eSports could encounter?
 - How can be dealt with this?
- Since the industry is still relatively young, yet developing fast, what is the role of competition?
- Are there any aspects that are easier for a startup in the eSports as compared with startups in other industries? Why (not)?
- What guides you in taking certain decisions regarding the startup?
- What is the importance of your personal connections for establishing a company in the eSports?
- How important is the design and the visual elements for a startup in the eSports scene? How do these affect the way in which the company is perceived?
 - Do you think that this differs from a more well-established company?
 - Why (not)? How?
 - Do you think that the importance and their elements differ between a business in the eSports and one in any other industry?

- Why (not)? How?
- What is the role of internal communication in a startup in the eSports scene?
- What is the role of external communication in a startup in the eSports scene?
- To what extent does an eSports audience differ as target group from audiences in other industries?
- What is the role of loyalty and trust in the eSports scene?
 - How can a startup in the eSports industry attempt to create loyalty and trust?

Social media marketing in the eSports scene

- What is the importance of marketing via social media in the eSports industry?
 - What is of particular importance for the success of a startup in the eSports industry?
 - What are the advantages, disadvantages, opportunities and limitations for the company?
 - How does this differ from startups in other industries?
- What do you believe is the best strategy for marketing a startup in the eSports scene via social media?
 - What are crucial elements?
 - What are things you should absolutely not do?
- What is the role of traditional forms of advertising in the eSports?
- What is the role of using influencers in the social media marketing strategy in the eSports?
- What is the role of specific social media platforms in a social media strategy for an eSports company?
 - E.g. VK, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter...
 - What are the advantages, disadvantages, opportunities and limitations of these platforms for the company?
- What is the role of feedback and co-creation in startups in the eSports industry?
- How do you attempt to keep the social media interaction in your control?

- Do you have anything to add, or is there something you'd still like to elaborate on?

APPENDIX M: TOPIC LIST AND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

GIANNIS MOLLAS

About you

- What is the work you do for WLG? What is your role within that organization?
- What are your previous experiences with eSports?
- What are your previous experiences with working as a social media manager?
- Do you have previous experiences with startups? Did you ever work for one? Did you start one?

Social media marketing in the eSports scene

- Could you describe the marketing strategy you use for WLG?
- Do you believe that marketing in the eSports differs from marketing in different industries?
 - Why (not)? How?
- Do you believe that marketing via social media differs between the eSports scene and other industries?
 - Why (not)? How?
- Do you believe that marketing an eSports team differs from marketing a company like Future Perfect?
- What is the importance of marketing via social media, for the success of a company in the eSports scene?
- What do you believe is the best strategy for marketing via social media?
 - What are crucial elements?
- Do you think using traditional forms of advertising could be relevant for the eSports?
 - Why (not)? What role could they play?
- Do you believe that social media helps an eSports company in improving its performance?
 - Why (not)? How?
- Do you think social media helps in connecting the people within an eSports company better?
 - How does their feedback and possibility for co-creation shape the eSports? And how does it shape the company?

- Do you think social media helps in connecting an eSports company with its customers better?
 - How does their feedback and possibility for co-creation shape the eSports? And how does it shape the company?
- What is in your opinion a good way to engage the audience and the employees in the eSports scene?
- To what extent does an eSports audience differ as target group from audiences in other industries?
- What is the role of consistency and clarity within an eSports company?
 - How do you think this affects how the company is perceived?
- How can social media help to create loyalty and trust in the eSports company?
- What is the role of specific platforms in a social media strategy in the eSports?
 - E.g. VK, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter...
- What are the opportunities and advantages of social media marketing in the eSports?
- What are the disadvantages of social media marketing in the eSports and how could it limit the scene?
 - How could you deal with this?

Your experience with Future Perfect

- How is your experience with Future Perfect so far?
- How do you perceive the way in which they work?
- Do you believe that the social media strategy for a startup differs from the strategy of a more well-established company?
 - Why (not)? How?
- What do you believe is crucial for a startup in the eSports specifically for branding?
 - And what is crucial for branding via social media?
 - Would this differ from a more well-established company?
- Do you have anything to add, or is there something you'd still like to elaborate on?