

# **Exploring Esports Fandom on Social Media: A Qualitative Research on Social Media Use and *LoL* World Championship Spectatorship**



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## ABSTRACT

With the emergence of esports, an increasing number of millennials and gen-Z are captivated by this burgeoning form of media content. Among the various esports tournaments, the *League of Legends* World Championship has gained unparalleled spectatorship since 2011, surpassing its counterparts in terms of viewership and securing its top-rank position globally until now. Furthermore, the peak viewership continuously soars steadily in the last two years. To understand the reasons behind its widespread popularity, this study investigates the social media usage of *League of Legends* esports spectators, and explores the following research question: *How do the LoL World Championship spectators construct their digital fandom identity through social media usage?*

The study adopts a qualitative approach, employing the uses and gratifications theory as a theoretical framework to study the motivations underlying the spectatorship of the *League of Legends* World Championship and the utilisation of social media platforms. Additionally, this research utilises the digital fandom theory to analyse the digital fan identity within the esports context. In order to achieve this, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted to collect rich and nuanced data. The sample comprised 12 participants between the age of 20 and 27, representing diverse nationalities, including China, Finland, Netherlands, Poland, and South Africa. Participants were asked about their motivations and personal experiences with media consumption for *League of Legends* esports on various digital platforms. Existing research guided the development of the topic list, analysis and interpretation of the findings.

The findings suggest that the spectators were active *League of Legends* gamers. Furthermore, the results confirm that all those media platforms have interwoven with fans' *socialisation opportunities* to watch the *LoL* tournament and relate to their social media use for esports and game content. Moreover, *knowledge acquisition* emerges as the primary motivation driving spectators' engagement with esports consumption and utilisation of digital media platforms. Additionally, the study reveals that although esports audiences share the same internal needs for media use, the different social-cultural backgrounds of interviewees from China and the West have resulted in different preferences for the functions of the media platforms.

The findings of this study contribute to the current literature on digital fandom within the realm of esports. Specifically, this study confirms the significance of digital media interfaces for esports spectators, and suggests that future studies on the consuming motivation of esports spectatorship should take into account users' overall digital media use as a whole and social-cultural influence.

**KEYWORDS:** the *LoL* World Championship, spectatorship, esports, social media use, streaming platforms

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## 1. Introduction

*League of Legends (LoL)* is a multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) video game developed and published by the American video game company Riot Games in 2009. This game is the most-played PC game worldwide (Riot Games, 2023a). The company founded its esports tournament — the first *LoL* World Championship in 2011, and the first Grand Final for *LoL* was watched by 1.69 million spectators online (John Funk Legacy, 2011). This tournament became the most popular esports tournament by viewership globally, and the peak online viewing reached 5 million in 2022 (Esport Charts, 2022). Noah Smith, a journalist from *The Washington Post*, wrote in a report about the *LoL* World Championship: “There is no faster-growing sport than esports, and there is no bigger esports tournament than the *League of Legends* World Championship” (2019). With the official recognition as a professional sport in countries such as South Korea (Mozur, 2014), China (Upton, 2019), and the US (Tassi, 2013), the players of the *LoL* World Championship are becoming professionals. Every year, more than 100 teams worldwide compete for the final winner of the game. Moreover, the competition could access by more than 30 television stations and digital platforms globally (Riot Games, 2023a).

The *LoL* video game and the *LoL* World Championship have recently attracted academic studies. Among many studies, the players drew the key attention of the researchers. According to Brühlmann et al. (2020), there are three primary motivations for players to play the *LoL*: individual achievement, social interaction and immersion. More achievement-oriented players tend to play more competitively and frequently. On the contrary, gamers seeking socialisation are likelier to play for fun. The research by Li et al. (2020) found that top *LoL* players had better executive control and performance than non-expert players. Mateo-Orcajada et al. (2022) analyse the psychological state of professional players, and discover that a high level of confidence and positive motivation can result in better performance in competitions. Kim et al. (2017) measure the factors that affect team performance and indicate that collective intelligence could lead to team success.

However, As the most successful esports tournament with the highest online viewership worldwide, the audiences of the *LoL* World Championship still lack academic studies. Esports spectators have gained attention in recent years due to the popularity of esports among millennials and gen-Z (Tristão, 2022). As a new widespread phenomenon worldwide, the researchers are mainly focusing on the motivations of general esports spectators related to esports fandom (Choi, 2019; Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017; Pu et al., 2022; Qian et al., 2019, 2020), and the relationship of fans with esports consumption (Anderson et

al., 2021; Tang et al., 2022). Anderson et al. indicate that the number of esports fans is more associated with specific tournaments (2021). Therefore, this study wants to explore the spectatorship of the *LoL* World Championship. According to Newzoo (2022), 50% of esports audiences are under the age of 35, and their daily media consumption has ensured their enthusiasm for esports on social media to connect with tournament organisations, professional players, non-professional players, and other fans. Jennings suggested that 100% of esports spectators use social media (2017). Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, Reddit and Twitch have become significant fanbases for gamers and esports spectators to engage with (Game Marketing Genie, 2022). As a result, this study wants to explore the spectatorship of the *LoL* World Championship and social media use on fandom identity.

### **1.1 Relevance**

The finding of this research reveals the *LoL* World Championship fandom identity construction on digital media. The result of this study adds value to the existing literature on the audiences of esports. Since the audiences of the *LoL* World Championship are still a new topic, relatively few academic studies have focused on esports spectators' social media use yet, and the existing studies about esports fandom mainly adopting sports audiences' motivations focus on general spectatorship (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017; Choi, 2019; Qian et al., 2020; Pu et al., 2022). Additionally, studies on esports spectatorship have generally applied a quantitative approach. However, studies adopting the qualitative method on esports spectators indicate that esports viewers possess digital characteristics on viewership. Therefore, conducting a qualitative study on the fandom of the *LoL* World Championship on social media allows for more exploration on their media consumptions, and the results may expect different outcomes due to technological development.

In addition to filling up the academic gap, this study is also applicable to society. The *LoL* World Championship has the highest viewership compared to other esports tournaments (Esports Charts, 2022). This study reveals the success of this esports tournament. It indicates how and why *LoL* fans use social media, which will help other game publishers, tournament organisations and game marketing specialists to understand how to engage better with their potential consumers on social media. Traditional sports researchers and organisations would also like to know how to engage with the younger generation for sports-related interests on social media. Both video game companies, as well as esports and sports organisers, will

benefit from this knowledge. Moreover, this study contributes to digital fandom studies, and esports fans would also want to learn about their contributions and influence on social media for the *LoL* community.

Hence, to create a foundation for further study into esports fandom on social media use, this study will provide an exploratory base by answering the following research question: *How do the LoL World Championship spectators construct their digital fandom identity through social media usage?*

Brown et al.'s research explored the relationship between spectatorship and social media use, concentrating on esports consumption (2018). However, This research wants to know the motivations behind watching the *LoL* World Championship, the use of social media for esports viewers, and their fandom identity construction through media use. Therefore, the sub-questions are:

*Sub 1: What motivates spectators to watch the LoL World Championship?*

*Sub 2: What motivates spectators of the LoL World Championship to share/create game-related content on social media use?*

*Sub 3: How do these experiences construct spectators' digital fandom identities?*

## **1.2 Overview of the thesis structure**

To present the findings of this study, which seeks to address the research questions mentioned above, this Master's thesis will be structured into five sections. The introduction chapter introduces the research questions and gives the context of this study. The following chapter reviews the previous knowledge and presents the key concepts and empirical studies to provide the academic foundation of the theoretical framework for this research. A third chapter detailed explains the methodology employed to conduct this study. Then, the next chapter presents three main themes obtained from interviews with spectators of the *LoL* World Championship. Finally, the thesis ends with a conclusion chapter of key findings, implications, limitations, and future suggestions.



## **2. Literature Review**

The previous literature has offered the essential conceptual framework which this research built upon. To answer the research question, the uses and gratifications theory (UGT) is defined as the paradigm framework at the beginning. In researching how the *LoL* World Championship spectators use social media for digital fandom identity construction, the starting point of esports was video game competitions (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017). Therefore, video game culture, esports and esports spectatorship are explained first. Next, fandom identity is further explored as a theoretical concept in this study. Based on the existing literature, a discussion part of esports spectatorship is present at the end, which leads to the research gap for this study.

### **2.1 Uses and gratifications paradigm**

As a user-centred approach, the UGT has been considered one of the most extensive frameworks to explore audiences' media behaviours (Ruggiero, 2000) and has been widely used in traditional and digital media (Shao, 2009; Sundar & Limperos, 2013) in both quantitative and qualitative approach (Ruggiero, 2000).

UGT focus on audiences' choices of media types and what people do with them based on their need (Shao, 2009). In the UGT framework, media products have limited roles, and the audiences are assumed as active. This can be understood as instead of media products looking for audiences in the market, and the audiences are the ones to select their favourite media purposively among many choices (Sundar & Limperos, 2013). UGT considers users are the ones who make rational choices with full awareness of their own psychological needs when choosing and using the media (Ruggiero, 2000). Researchers adopted UGT to investigate audiences' personal media usage and consumption when mass media surrounded us in media and communication studies (Barker, 2021). Moreover, UGT helps researchers understand individuals' social and psychological motivations behind media consumption (Katz et al., 1973).

Katz et al. (1973) have provided five needs categories to consume media: cognitive needs, affective needs, personal integrative needs, social integrative needs, and escapism needs (Tan, 1985). Cognitive needs refer to people satisfying their curiosity by gaining new knowledge on media; Affective needs relate to personal emotions and feelings, such as joy and excitement when using the media; Personal integrative needs can be underhanded as people reinforce their own identity through media consumption; Social integrative needs

related to social interaction with other people by consuming same media content; Escapism needs mean people escape from reality to avoid stress, problem or boredom by using the media to experience instantaneous happiness (Tan, 1985).

McQuail (2010) suggested that the general needs for mass media are based on four categories: information, individual identity, integration and social interaction and entertainment (Shao, 2009). Information refers to obtaining knowledge, facts, and news from the world from media; Individual identity related to exploring their interests, values and beliefs in the media content, which can reflect their self-image; Integration and social interaction concerning people consuming media to share and connect within the communities; Entertainment is about to enjoy and have fun by media (Shao, 2009).

Both models are widely used in media studies and have emphasised the essential motivations of media consumption. However, the choice of the models is based on the research context. In Katz et al.'s model (1973), media consumption can reinforce one's personal identity (Tan, 1985, p. 236). However, in McQuail's model (2010), the need for individual identity is related to self-expression and exploration through one's interests, values and beliefs (Shao, 2009). This study is about esports fandom identity and social media use, which are related to individual interests and self-expression. Besides, fans are more likely to participate in the activities to be entertained (Booth, 2010). Hence, McQuail's model is adopted in this study as the paradigm.

### ***2.1.1 Uses and gratifications theory in game studies***

According to Sherry et al. (2012), people have different motivations for consuming different types of media. Although the earliest researchers used UGT mainly for television studies, game researchers have adopted UGT in digital games since the 1980s (Sherry et al., 2012). By adopting UGT as the theoretical framework, Selnow (1984) first identifies the benefits such as companionship and potential risks such as addiction to video game play among young teenager players. In addition, Sundar and Limperos (2013) indicate that digital technology has challenged audiences' gratification when media have developed to another level: the different functions of new media products gratify users' needs with the new technological features.

Researchers applied UGT to identify the individual needs of players for playing electronic games. Sherry, Lucas, Greenberg and Lachlan (2012) explore the uses and gratifications of video games among players. They surveyed college students and found the

relationships between video game preferences and motivations. The study revealed the need for entertainment and social interaction motivates gamers to play more frequently, while players who play video games for education and relaxation need tend to play less.

In some studies, researchers used UGT as a framework to explain why specific genres had been played by audiences. Scharnow, Festl, Vogelgesang and Quandt (2015) examined the relationship between the uses and gratifications of German gamers and their preference for game genres. The results show that exploration gratifications could predict adventure gameplay for players, while fantasy gratifications have a strong relationship to role-play games. Social gratifications are relevant to gamers who play sports and music games. Meanwhile, gamers' age, gender and education level play a significant role in choosing a game genre. Younger gamers prefer action and sports games, while older players favour puzzle and strategy games. Compared to males, female players tend to play more simulation and social games than action and sports games.

Although many gamers play the same genre, their different gratifications lead to different play tactics. Bonny and Castaneda (2022) conducted survey research among MOBA players, and the results show that players motivated by achievement are more prefer competitive and strategic gameplay, and they tend to enjoy playing with more experienced players to improve their game skills, while gamers motivated by socialisation are prefer less competitive and casual play, which related to social interaction when playing the game.

Since esports started to gain popularity at the global economic level (Marelić & Vukušić, 2019), many researchers also using UGT to explore the motivations of esports spectatorship.

It is to be noticed that most researchers employed a quantitative approach when applying the UGT framework in game studies. However, the UGT framework could help researchers to reveal more detailed and hidden gratifications of its users in a qualitative approach. According to Vaterlaus and Winter (2021), adopting a qualitative approach in UGT research can allow a thick description of how the media could meet the need of the users, and explain how the gratifications represent a new media platform. As a result, this study employed a qualitative method in the UGT framework to explore esports spectatorship.

## **2.2 Video game, esports and esports spectatorship**

Despite the popularity of video game play as entertainment for all different ages and genders across geographic distances globally, video game has been unaccepted by

mainstream culture for a long time (Shaw, 2010). The arriving esports tournaments have challenged the negative impression of video game play, and new careers, such as professional esports players, are recognised by national sports competitions worldwide (ISFE Esports, 2021, p. 5). The spectatorship of esports tournaments has largely expanded in numbers over the world through streaming platforms and the internet (Tristão, 2022).

### **2.2.1 Video game culture in media studies**

Bogost (2007) considers video game culture comes from how players interact with video games, and the meanings produced through gameplay experiences rather than the technical characteristics of games themselves. Furthermore, Shaw (2010) presents a similar idea that researchers should “look at video games in culture rather than games as culture” (p. 416).

Compared to traditional media products such as music and movies, video game is a novel cultural form and has been labelled “problematic” somehow (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2016, p.158). According to Shaw (2010), the video game culture has been viewed as a sub-culture to the mainstream culture in academic studies and undervalued by the mainstream press despite millions of players entertained by video games for hours per day worldwide. Jane McGonigal (2011) describes this massive migration from reality to the virtual gaming world as a phenomenon in her book *Reality is Broken*, that gamification would transform our understanding of life from offline to online, and this trend is inevitable.

According to Mäyrä (2014), culture is related to cultivation, and the cultural value of video games depends on different perspectives (such as politics and economics) and interpretations from its audiences’ experiences. Cultural anthropological studies have shown that games have been connected to human history long ago. Roberts, Arth and Bush (1959) examined the roles of games in different societies and discovered the connection between games and culture. According to the researchers, games are more than entertainment in our history and were used to shape our cultural practices, such as reinforcing social norms, and promoting social interaction and individual relationships. The authors emphasise the importance of studying games to obtain an insight towards the values, beliefs and behaviours of various cultures.

Meanwhile, some sociologists found similarities in social life between video games and real life. Zhang and Kaufman (2017) explore the massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) on players’ socio-emotional well-being, and they find that for

some players, the skills for playing MMORPGs have a potentially positive impact on their offline social skills, including communications and leadership with other people. Moreover, according to Wiederhold (2021), social video games can lead to children's social and emotional development, such as empathy, teamwork and problem-solving in life when children have developed healthy gaming habits with the positive involvement of parents.

However, research on video games as a social phenomenon and cultural product still falls behind the technological development of video games (Mäyrä, 2014). Video game culture has slowly changed with the popularity of smartphones and social media use among younger generations. Video games have become the main entertainment activities, and gamers' demographic features are much broader than at any other time (Engelstätter & Ward, 2022). Social media platforms have integrated with networked games and social games and provide more channels for gamers to engage with (Engelstätter & Ward, 2022). In addition, streaming platforms such as Twitch and YouTube allow people to watch others play, which makes video games more easily to access on more media forms.

### ***2.2.2 Esports on rising***

Esports emerged and were suitable for massive viewership due to the more advanced computer hardware, visual displays and networks becoming popular and affordable in the 1990s in the US (Larch, 2023). Though esports gained popularity on digital platforms, esports still has limited recognition among people who are outside the gaming communities (Johansson, 2021).

Academic research on esports has been through rapid growth since 2002 (Reitman et al., 2020). The research has covered various subjects, including economics, sports, information application, sociology, regulations, cognitive science and media studies related to esports (Reitman et al., 2020). Based on the focus of this paper, the esports research of media studies is mainly assessed in this part. The earliest media studies on esports argue that digital technologies have blurred the boundary between the physical and virtual worlds. According to Wagner (2006), the players of competitive video gaming share many similarities with traditional sports in terms of physical and psychological demands. This unique subject has offered scientists opportunities to understand the impact of digital technology on human performance and behaviour.

As a new media form, Hutchins (2008) discusses that esports' emergence reaches out to more audiences and has challenged the traditional form of sports and entertainment,

forming a new fan and player culture. Later, the popularities of game live-streaming platforms gained the attention of scholars. Kaytoue, Silva, Cerf, Meira, and Raïssi (2012) analysed the impact of video game live streamings on the game industry. They discovered Twitch is very popular among young male audiences and forms new entertainment with frequent interaction between game streamers and audiences. Hamilton, Garretson, and Kerne (2014) gained similar research results with participant observation on Twitch, and their findings reveal that Twitch has represented the new form of participatory media for fan community buildings in the context of games. In addition, Burroughs and Rama (2015) suggest that esports influence the media industry through streaming platforms, and this new entertainment has disrupted traditional media consumption and formed the unique participatory culture that fuels the growth of esports and online gaming. Furthermore, the economic value of esports is hard to ignore due to global audiences, and esports consumers have drawn interest in studies. Weiss and Schiele (2013) suggest that esports is becoming very important in the game industry, and understanding the needs and motivations of esports consumers is vital for success in business.

### ***2.2.3 Esports spectatorship***

According to Marelić and Vukušić (2019), esports spectatorship refers to a new form of entertainment, and the esports industry is connected closely to fan consumption, representing a unique social interaction and community in relationship with esports audience engagement.

In the study of esports audiences, researchers consider esports as “one of the most enjoyable sports” and compare esports spectators with traditional sports such as baseball and basketball spectators (Jin, 2020). Brown, Billings, Murphy and Puesan (2018) conducted survey research in the US to explore the relationship between esports fandom and traditional sports fandom, and their results show that individuals who identified as esports fans are more likely to identify themselves as traditional sports fans. However, according to Hutchins (2008), esports fans tend to be younger, more diverse and more scattered geographically than traditional sports fans due to its technological development.

Fandom is a unique characteristic of esports spectatorship. Cheung and Huang (2011) argue that the difference in audiences in relationship with media consumption is esports fandom culture. Choi (2019) indicates that fan identification is one of the three driving points for esports consumption (the other two are addiction and passion). Anderson et al.’s survey

research (2021) discovered that esports consumers demonstrate their passionate support while engaging with esports content. They have identified different consumption patterns based on the different levels of engagement: those with a higher level of engagement are more likely to engage with esports events and gameplay.

Distinct from earlier studies, Orme interviewed esports audiences who are non-players of video games (Orme, 2022). The results find that non-players interest in esports spectators was affected by socialisation, entertainment and skill learning, which could also be found in players' motivation to watch esports (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017; Qian et al., 2019).

UTG has been applied when studying esports spectators' motivations. Weiss (2011) has adopted UTG to identify the needs of consumers who participated in esports. This study employed mixed methods, and the interviews reveal that consumers are motivated by factors such as competition, challenge, social interaction, entertainment and escapism. However, the quantitative analysis approves that competition, challenge, and escapism positively affect esports spectatorship.

Meanwhile, researchers have hybrid traditional sports motivations with the UGT framework to study viewers' psychological needs to watch general esports on the streaming platform. Hamari and Sjöblom (2017) found that motivations such as escapism, knowledge acquisition, novelty and enjoyment of aggression had been associated with esports spectating. Qian et al.(2019) further developed the motivation scale of esports spectatorship (MSES); knowledge acquisition and socialisation opportunities are significant for esports spectatorship.

#### *a) Digital technology: The distinct features of esports spectatorship*

The studies by Anderson et al. (2021), Qian et al. (2020) and Pu et al. (2022) indicate that esports spectatorship has distinctive features based on the internet context and technological development. Anderson et al. (2021) have conducted survey research on American university students. Though the researchers used sports motivation scales in this research, the results revealed that live stream chats at any time, especially when the viewers' favourite teams are playing, is one important characteristic for social interaction and could increase esports spectatorship.

Another two research on esports spectatorship adopted mixed methods of both quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews suggested some specific results. Qian et al. (2020) have found out some factors such as “chat room, streamer traits, stream quality, and virtual rewards” are not original from traditional sports spectator motivations, and these

elements possibly affect esports viewers' "cognitive and behavioural outcomes" (p. 845). Furthermore, Pu et al. (2022) have found that socialising with the esports community and engaging in-game atmosphere is essential for esports fans.

The results of these studies considered esports spectatorship has some different new elements based on the technological features of esports watching. In addition, the viewers are gratified by the video game competition and the process of using digital media. According to Mäyrä (2014), gaming studies should include technological development as one distinctive feature. Furthermore, Hamari and Sjöblom (2017) consider the computer interface and digital interaction have determined the characteristics of esports. Therefore, based on the previous study, this research aimed to explore more on spectators' digital media utilization in the context of esports.

### **2.3 Fan identity and fandom**

Stuart Hall's identity theory can help us to understand how people construct and experience their identities in complex contemporary fandom communities. According to Hall (2015), identity is a dynamic process and is subject to change based on personal experiences in social and cultural interaction. Identity forms identification, which involves identifying within a particular cultural context or a social group. According to Tajfel (1978), individuals categorise themselves and others into social groups by psychological attachment to their social lives based on various factors. In addition, identity is not a homogeneous form; it is presented in a person as multiple identities mixed and overlapped (Hall, 2015).

"Fandom" represent intergroup relations of individuals and a specific community. This could provide individuals with a form of social identity, such as a sense of belonging, collective interests and shared beliefs, which could help individuals to distinguish themselves from others and find exclusivity and connection to a particular culture. Jenkins (2012) suggests that "fandom" is a form of participatory culture, and this process is constantly transformed and negotiated by the fans' engagement. When the mainstream cultural representations in the mass media could not represent alternative fan communities, fans voluntarily assembled together to create their text, reflecting their own experiences and perspectives to circulate in their communities. In participation in fandom, fans construct their identity through the sense of self and belonging to the communities.

Fandom culture has gained popularity globally through the internet and digital media use since the 1990s (Booth, 2010). Booth (2010) considers that digital fandom study reveals



the complex relationship between digital media, new technological applications, and communities. According to Pearson (2010), technology development breeds online fandom with a new relationship between producing organisations and consuming individuals. Furthermore, Bennett (2014) indicates that digital media have transformed fans' engagement with media platforms, texts and each other beyond the limitation of time and space. Moreover, Bennett (2014) argues that the extensive digital networks of individuals and communications intensify online culture and fan practices. The relationship between people and technology is dynamic and interactive in the transmedia landscape as new cultural products, lifestyles and social activities are created through online communications.

In addition, Bennett (2014) has explored four elements of digital fandom from the constructivist perspective: communication refers to fans' digital interaction, which includes social media, online forums, and messaging apps, while creativity represents fans' productivity and creative ability related to fan fiction, fan art, fan videos, and cosplay based on the original media products to circulate inside fans' communities (Jenkins, 2012). Furthermore, Bennett indicates that knowledge settles in the centre of fandom culture (Croteau & Hoynes, 2019; Jenkins, 2012), and organisational and civic power allow fans to engage in civic activities through social media platforms (Bennett, 2014; Croteau & Hoynes, 2019). According to Bennett (2014), digital fandom demonstrates a dynamic and multifaceted digital landscape, with the complex relationship of media texts, fans, and technology development. In the following sections, we explore three fan identities with a close link to esports spectatorship and consumption: media, game and sports fans.

### ***2.3.1 Media fan identity***

In media fandom studies, media fan refers to the attachment of individuals towards a certain type of media consumption, such as television programs, movies, novels, comics, and video games (Booth, 2010; Groene & Hettinger, 2016; Lozano Delmar et al., 2020; Pande, 2018). According to Croteau and Hoynes (2019), user-generated content and online fan communities represent digital audiences' participatory culture. Croteau and Hoynes (2019) have summarised four characteristics of media fans that echo the findings of other researchers: information sharing, communication needs, collective organization for social activism and media content production.

Information sharing indicates that the depth of background knowledge of certain media products distinguishes fans from ordinary audiences (Bennett, 2014; Croteau &

Hoynes, 2019; Jenkins, 2012), while communication needs are boosted by the connections and integrations resulting from the sociality of fandom. Similarly, Vinney, Dill-Shackleford and Plante (2019) indicate that media fan identity must include individual and social dimensions. On the one hand, isolated media fans explore personal meaning in the media content individually. On the other hand, interactive media fans engage with other members of the fan communities to develop stronger connections and social support.

Croteau and Hoynes (2019) indicate fandoms' collective organisation for social activism, where many often organise activities to promote, save and change specific media products and/or support social causes (Jenkins et al., 2016); and media content production, distributed through digital platforms to reach more fans with the same interests, as characteristics of media fans. These are further evidenced in works that suggest several components constructed to media fan identity, including psychological attachment to media, social identification with a fan community, and creative engagement with the media object (Lozano Delmar et al., 2020; Tsay-Vogel & Sanders, 2017). According to Lozano Delmar, Plaza and Martín (2020), media consumption habits, socialisation experiences, cultural background, personal beliefs, emotional experiences, and digital technologies could contribute to the factors of media fan identity.

### ***2.3.2 Game fans: we play, and we do more***

Fans in the game studies have been considered game players (Shaw, 2010), and early game studies scholars paid attention to player culture more than fandom culture (Newman, 2008; Swalwell et al., 2017). According to Mäyrä (2016), video game play has a social character, and online gaming communities are significant for video game fans to communicate, support, and learn new skills digitally. Video game fans highly participate in digital platforms due to video games' interactive digital play nature. This distinct mediated feature allows fans greater freedom in creativity (Mäyrä, 2016).

Although game fans differ from other media fans in some aspects, the elements of digital fandom (Bennett, 2014) and media fans (Croteau & Hoynes, 2019) show themselves among game fans in video game communities. Wirman (2009) discusses the activity of game playing itself as textual productivity for game fans. Gamers express themselves and reinterpret their game experiences through a technological interface within the game design while playing (Lima, 2017; Wirman & Jones, 2022). At the same time, other media fans need to produce their own mediated products, such as fan fiction and videos outside of original

media consumption activities, although these are also practices within game fandoms (Bennett, 2014; Jenkins, 2012; Taylor, 2018).

Wirman (2009) suggests that online forums are the central communities in which video gamers interact with each other. A study by Saldanha, Silva and Ferreira (2023) indicates that game communities combine traditional and contemporary communities, connecting people voluntarily with shared values, and bridging the digital world and offline reality with diverse backgrounds. Game fans seek information about the gameplay in the game communities and other skills related to the game content. Blight (2016) conducted survey research on Twitch and found that one of the gratifications for video game fans to integrate with Twitch streamers is learning the game strategies. Another study conducted by Pearce (2009) on the online game community finds out that people use the gaming platform not only to entertain themselves but also to construct a “learning community” (p. 13). Players play roles and socialise on the media platforms, and they creatively learn skills from each other to produce more creative content for the community, which constructs their own online culture.

Lenhart et al. have researched video games and civic engagement (2008), and found out social integrations within video games affect teenagers to participate in offline civic activities, and video game communities provide opportunities to American adolescents for further civic engagement. According to Lin and Sun (2022), video games played an important role in Anti-Extradition Movement in Hong Kong in 2019. They find video games, such as Minecraft, Pokémon Go, and Animal Crossing, were adopted by protesters to create digital spaces for their activism. Their findings suggest that game mechanics could be used to serve future social movements. Above all, gamers are individuals with diverse backgrounds, interests and experiences, and they have shaped their identities through digital media interactions with games, platforms and communities (Mäyrä, 2014).

### ***2.3.3 Sports fan identity***

In the research of esports viewership, researchers hybrid traditional sports spectatorship motivations to study esports audiences (Anderson et al., 2021; Choi, 2019; Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017; Pu et al., 2022; Qian et al., 2020). As a result, sports fan identity is elaborated here to understand esports fandom better.

In the context of sports, Lock and Funk (2016) discuss that by identifying themselves with a specific sports team, sports fans can identify their uniqueness and find a sense of

belonging with other team supporters. Sports fandom identifies people in two aspects, one is social identity, and the other is personal identity (Shuv-Ami & Toder Alon, 2023). Social identity refers to an individual's personal relationship bond with others due to the performance of their favourite team and/or athlete. Sports fans often utilise this shared identity to engage in activities with other fans, such as attending a game with friends and wearing the same apparel to support the team. Personal identity refers to how this fandom identity influences their sense of self. The team's performance is essential to their overall mood, such that they feel proud when the team wins and frustrated when the team loses.

Team loyalty is one crucial feature for sports fans (Shuv-Ami & Toder Alon, 2023). The upbringing context, geographic proximity, team success, social identity and personality are the factors that affect fans' loyalties to the sports team. With higher team loyalty, sports fans will positively support their favourite team, such as attending the game and cheering for victories. On the contrary, sports fans with a lower level of team loyalty will behave more negatively when the team performs poorly in the games. Moreover, the negative behaviours include criticising the team and cheering for the opponent team.

Based on the literature, media fan identity has some specific features because of the dynamic feature of media types and engagement with digital media usage. In comparison, sports fan identity construction is still strongly related to traditional sports-watching activities. As a result, it is interesting to know how esports fans view themselves, especially the fans of the most popular esports tournament, the *LoL* World Championship. On the one hand, esports spectators are growing in the digital media era with new technological experiences in daily media consumption. On the other hand, esports spectators are original video game fans (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017). It is hard to be entertained by esports without an interest in video games.

#### **2.4 Debate: Are esports audiences equal to sports audiences?**

Researchers found that esports activities share some similarities with traditional sports activities, such as players' mental and physical abilities (Wagner, 2006). Furthermore, in the studies of esports audiences, researchers compared esports spectators with sports spectators (Brown et al., 2018; Hutchins, 2008; Jin, 2020).

However, the existence of esports is entirely different from sports competition. Esports tournaments were originally developed from video games, which are the intellectual property of game publishers according to the law (Brickell, 2017). According to Cranmer et

al. (2021), the differences between esports and traditional sports vary in target audiences, business models, content developments and players' healthy conditions. This thesis explores esports spectatorship. As a result, some differences between esports and traditional sports audiences are discussed in this part.

The most distinctive feature between esports and traditional sports is the application of digital technology. According to Hamari and Sjöblom (2017), esports is a competitive game between teams, and the difference between esports and sports is the use of technology interfaces. This digital characteristic could also find in esports spectatorship. Esports get popular among people who grew up in the information age and have become an exceptional worldwide phenomenon due to internet usage (Saiz-Alvarez et al., 2021).

According to Wise and Kohe (2020), geographic locations significantly impact traditional sports consumption, including fan engagement and spectator attendance of sports events. However, esports streaming platforms have challenged location preferences, and esports tournaments worldwide information can be easily accessed through the internet. Woodcock and Johnson (2019) argue that Twitch has a global audience base; live streamers on Twitch could be seen as social media influencers, and their content could be reached internationally, which provides opportunities for global brand marketing. According to Lehnert et al. (2022), platforms such as Twitch, YouTube Gaming, and Facebook Gaming play an essential role in promoting esports to a broader audience base flexibly and contribute to esports market growth worldwide.

Researchers conducted survey research when studying the motivations for comparing watching sports and esports viewership (Lee & Schoenstedt, 2011; Pizzo et al., 2018). They found that spectators consume esports for entertainment and social interaction, while viewers watch traditional sports mainly for affiliation, achievement of attachment, and team loyalty. Moreover, Pizzo et al. (2018) discovered that esports fans are likelier to participate in online communities.

In addition, studies show that esports audiences have higher educational levels due to the complexity of video games than traditional sports. According to a study comparing the game complexity between traditional sports (football) and esports titles (*League of Legends*), the authors have found esports titles are much more complex in terms of games' rules (NFL/Football:3 versus LCS/*LoL*:6) and require higher reading levels for viewers (NFL/Football: 9th-10th grade versus LCS/*LoL*: college) (Campbell et al., 2021, p. 44). Campbell et al. conducted an online survey on users' experiences and viewers' understanding of esports tournaments (*Overwatch* and *LoL*) (*Overwatch* is a first-person shooter video game

by Blizzard Entertainment) and traditional sports (baseball and football). The results show that baseball is the easiest to understand for audiences, football is less complex than *Overwatch*, and *LoL* is rated the most complex and the hardest to understand (p. 46). Hence, the unique characteristics of esports audiences, such as younger, game-related, highly diverse worldwide and tech-savvy, require esports businesses to develop marketing strategies based on digital context for economic success (Lehnert et al., 2022).

### **3. Methodology**

To answer the research question, “How do the *LoL* World Championship spectators construct their digital fandom identity through social media usage?”, this chapter presents the methodological approaches and clarifies the implementation of the research design, sampling, data collection, operationalisation concepts, data analysis, validity and reliability, and ethics of this study.

#### **3.1 Justification of the method**

This research proposes a qualitative exploration of how *LoL* World Championship spectators use social media to make meaning of their digital fandom identities and understand the driving forces behind their esports’ spectatorship and social media participation in game-related content. Macey, Abarbanel and Hamari (2021) have suggested that esports consumption represents a new media consumption with the characteristics of traditional media and digital platforms. According to Vaterlaus and Winter (2021), adopting the qualitative approach could reveal detailed gratifications of users for their new media preferences, which is fit for this research.

As in the exploratory research, Babbie (2017) indicates that applying the qualitative method could discover the constructed meanings of a specific social phenomenon. According to Boeije (2010), qualitative research is suitable for discovering hidden meanings, and the type of data needed here is descriptive data for discovering concepts, personal perspectives, and individual experiences. Brennen (2017) discusses that individuals produce meanings and construct their social reality through communication in a particular cultural context.

In this research, UGT was applied as a theoretical paradigm. Some existing studies on esports spectatorship on streaming platforms adopted UGT quantitatively (Brown et al., 2018; Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017; Qian et al., 2019). However, exploring esports spectators’ motivations for esports content consumption on digital media, including streaming platforms and social media platforms, is much more complex than the previous study. According to Vaterlaus and Winter (2021), using UGT with a qualitative approach could help the researcher identify the gratifications for new media platform usage. Furthermore, this research wants to focus on individual experiences and motivations for esports/game content consumption on multiple platforms, which needs a more specific understanding of viewers’ motivations. As a result, employing a qualitative approach is the most appropriate method for this study, allowing the researcher to gain in-depth insights and a more nuanced

understanding of gamers' individual gratifications to engage with digital media, uncover the contextualised data and conduct the comprehensive analysis of their motivations.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews are adopted as data collection as they collect in-depth data from the target sample. Johnson (2001) indicates that in-depth interviews could help researchers obtain thicker information and knowledge in academic studies, especially when the data concerns individual experience and perspective. According to Hermanowicz (2002), in-depth interviews provide an opportunity to get close to people and understand their experiences in the worlds surrounding them. Researchers could reveal how people perceive themselves through conversation, and it is the appropriate method to look for identity construction.

Moreover, semi-structured interviews are a flexible approach (Babbie, 2017), which will obtain suitable answers for research questions, explore more depth in data, and adjust the questions based on the theoretical framework if needed. The interview questions are open-ended questions listed in the interview guide (see Appendix 2), and the structure allows the researcher to ask follow-up questions based on the different experiences of each interviewee. This allows the researcher to get deeper insights with more organic conversations (Brennen, 2017). The semi-structured interview guide is suitable for this research as data collection. The researcher could adjust the questions flexibly as the conversations might end up unexpectedly in different directions.

Thematic analysis was applied as data analysis in this research. Thematic analysis is often used in qualitative research to identify the main themes to answer research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These methods systematically ensure data analysis once the data has been collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews. In addition, thematic analysis is also a flexible approach toward a large amount of data and guarantees the key categories in data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### **3.2 Sampling**

The sampling method is presented in this section to explain what and how the data was selected in this research. The sampling process is essential in conducting the research and ensuring the validity and reliability of the research results.

The population of this research is *LoL* World Championship spectators who use social media. The population is not limited to a particular geographic position due to digital fandom's technological and global nature. Transnational fan communities have actively



formed online across national borders and powerfully influenced global culture (Lee, 2016). According to Newzoo (Tristão, 2022), 50% of esports audiences are under the age of 35 globally. In this research, *LoL* World Championship spectators who used social media between ages 18 to 35 are considered the units of analysis. In addition, the sampling criteria are set as follows to select a suitable sample group from the extensive population include: they must meet the criteria of watching the broadcast of the 2022 *LoL* World Championship Final last year and the 2023 *LoL* regional Spring Split, including European region (LEC), Chinese region (LPL), South Korean region (LCK), American region (LCS) or others for at least once a month and lasting at least 30 minutes (the average full game duration is 33 minutes) during February and March 2023 through streaming platforms; use social media to share/create esports/game-related content weekly in their interest.

According to Boddy (2016), the sampling size is determined by data saturation in qualitative research design. There is no universal rule for researchers to determine the appropriate sampling size in a qualitative approach. For the scope of a master thesis and time limitation, the sample size for this study was set at 12 informants of any gender. Theoretical saturation is considered as soon as no more new information emerges from interviews (Boddy, 2016).

Due to the feasibility of the research, the sampling strategy is purposive sampling combined with snowball sampling. According to Babbie (2017), purposive sampling is a nonprobability-sampling method based on specific criteria and is commonly used in qualitative studies. Purposive sampling has two advantages for this study. First, purposive sampling could allow the researcher to target participants with specific experiences, such as watching the *LoL* World Championship and using social media to share/create game-related content, ensuring the informants could answer questions related to this research. Second, purposive sampling could guarantee the diversity of the sampling, providing different perspectives and experiences of individuals (Campbell et al., 2020). In this research, the researcher wanted to analyse the digital fandom of game fans, and the purposive sampling method allowed the researcher to select informants with more international backgrounds, which would be representative of the population.

Moreover, snowball sampling is the most used and functional sampling strategy when researchers obtain specific knowledge and access to a new social group (Noy, 2008). In this case, because of the time limitation, some participants were selected through purposive sampling, and some were through snowball sampling.

### 3.3 Data collection

The researcher recruited the interviewees in three different ways. Some informants were recruited from the local student association Erasmus Esports; some informants were recruited through the researcher's networks; others were recruited through social media.

Erasmus Esports is a student esports association in the city of Rotterdam (Erasmus Esports, 2023) with more than a hundred members of various nationalities currently studying in Rotterdam and are interested in video game play. The researcher joined the association and asked the eligible students for interviews during the weekly meetings between March and April. Though most informants are from Erasmus University Rotterdam, the international students' proportion is high in the institution.

The researcher asked friends for help through Whatsapp and WeChat, and three informants who matched the criteria responded. Moreover, the other three participants who were interested in the topic were recruited from the Chinese social media Douban.

Additionally, there was no expectation of gender distribution of males and females when the researcher started looking for informants. However, after the recruitment, the distribution of participants' genders was balanced, which ensured the limitation of gender bias in this research (see Appendix 1).

Because of the researcher's background, the interviews were conducted in two languages, English and Chinese. To ensure complete research transparency, the researcher emailed interviewees about the research purposes when contacting target informants. After the interviewees' agreement, an informed-consent form was sent to them before the interviews were arranged.

The semi-structured interviews, of about 45 minutes to an hour, are comprised of questions based on the theoretical framework (see Appendix 2). The interviews will start with an introduction as thanks and an explanation of the research programme, followed by a three minutes game for interviewees to play. The game included knowledge of the *LoL* game and the *LoL* World Championship (see Appendix 3), which was designed for *LoL* gamers and *LoL* World Championship spectators. The game helped the researcher to build rapport with interviewees. The icebreaker questions immediately followed up related to *LoL* gameplay, and the main questions were asked when the trust was built (Hermanowicz, 2002).

The interviews took place in two different ways regard to the participants' geographical location. One is offline interviews in Rotterdam and Utrecht, where the place was convenient for both interviewer and interviewees. The other was online interviews, mainly with three Chinese who were not in the Netherlands. A Chinese app — WeChat, was

used for it. The researcher also took field notes during the interviews. The interviews were recorded by phone and computer and transcribed by the online transcript software Otter.ai (English) and Xunfei (Chinese) and further revised manually to fix inconsistencies and other potential mishaps.

There were eight interviews conducted in English and five in the Chinese language, and for the convenience of analysis and writing the reports, the researcher translated the Chinese interviews into English.

### 3.4 Operationalisation

This section presents the guiding concepts from the research question. According to Babbie (2017), operationalisation is essential for developing concepts from theory, and preparing for data analysis in the study. The study aimed to explore the motivation of *LoL* World Championship spectators using social media and constructing their fan identities. The literature review has provided an overview of related concepts to answer the research question. As a result, *the basic needs for media consumption* (McQuail, 1983, 2010; Shao, 2009) were included in the framework. Furthermore, the *motivation of esports spectatorship* (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017; Qian et al., 2019) was adopted to understand better the reasons behind spectating the *LoL* World Championship to analyse fans' engagement with watching esports. In addition, four characteristics of *digital fandom* (Bennett, 2014; Croteau & Hoynes, 2019) were applied to the topic lists (see Table 1).

Table 1: Operationalisation of the concepts

Concepts		Sample questions in the topic lists
<b>UGT of social media use for game-related content</b> (McQuail, 1983, 2010; Shao, 2009)	Information	What are the benefits of checking/sharing/creating game-related content on social media for you?
	Individual identity	Describe how you feel when you check/share/create game-related content on social media.
	Integration and social interaction	Do you join any online game/esports groups related to the <i>LoL</i> World Championship on social media? And how is it?
	Entertainment	Describe the most interesting game-related content for you have ever shared/created on social media.

<b>Motivations of esports spectatorship</b> (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017; Qian et al., 2019)	Escapism	Can you list some reasons you like to watch it?
	Knowledge acquisition	What do you gain from watching the game?
	Novelty	Can you list some reasons you like to watch it?
	Enjoyment of aggression	Describe the most exciting moment while watching last time.
	Socialization opportunities	Do you prefer to watch alone, or do you like to watch with your friends? Why?  Describe when you are watching the game with your friends; what do you do?
	Entertainment	Can you list some reasons you like to watch it?
<b>Digital fandom</b> (Bennett, 2014; Croteau & Hoynes, 2019)	Communication	What is your personal experience with online game/esports groups on social media?
	Creativity	Describe the most interesting game-related content for you have ever shared/created on social media with your online game/esports groups?
	Knowledge	What is your personal experience with online game/esports groups on social media?
	Organizational and civic power	Describe the most interesting things you did with online game/esports groups on social media.

### 3.5 Data analysis

This section explains how data was analysed in this study. The thematic analysis was chosen for analysing data in this research. According to Boeije (2010), thematic analysis is used in qualitative research to identify the central themes from raw data through coding to answer the research questions. In addition, Guest, MacQueen and Namey (2012) indicate that textual data, such as interview transcripts, could include multiple layers of meaning, nuances, and contradictions. Using thematic analysis could systematically distinguish and interpret the themes from the data. As a result, Adopting thematic analysis in this research helped to identify and report the patterns of identities sought in this thesis's research question so that the analysis might contribute to a broader understanding of the game fans.

The analysis employed Braun and Clark's model (2006) because of the data-driven nature of this research. There are six steps in total. The first step is to be familiar with the data set. It is vital to go through the whole data before coding, including the transcripts and the field notes; the first step help researcher understands better of the context and grasps the comprehensive scope of the data. Next, generating the initial codes in the data. At this stage, the whole raw dataset needs to be broken down into fragments, and all the relevant data should be identified and coded in this step. It is important to note that all the data need to be coded systematically to reflect the concepts from the theory, and additional codes are possibly emerging from the data. The third step is looking for potential themes in data, and find the similarities and differences between initial codes, and determining the categories and sub-categories based on the patterns in the dataset. After identifying the potential themes, reviewing the themes is essential to make sure the coherence and rationality of the data category in the last step. Then, defining and naming themes is the next step to describe the themes carefully. Relevant themes must be captured and reflect the concepts to answer the research question(s). The final step is producing the report; the main themes should be logical and reasonable to report in the results part (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### **3.6 Validity and reliability**

Qualitative researchers need to consider validity and reliability to evaluate the quality and credibility of the findings in the studies (Brennen, 2017). In qualitative research, validity refers to the accuracy and authenticity of the findings; while reliability refers to consistency and stability in the research results (Golafshani, 2003). Challenges including subjective interpretation, researcher bias, small sample size and generalisability of the research population are critical to affect the authenticity and trustworthiness of the study (Babbie, 2017; Silverman, 2013). As a result, qualitative researchers should make suitable decisions and be transparent about the research design, method and data analysis to guarantee the quality of the final results (Nowell et al., 2017).

Several considerations were undertaken to ensure this research's quality is credible and trustworthy. The researcher has made transparent explanations and justifications for the choice of research methods, sampling, data collection and analysis to ensure the results can be verified (Nowell et al., 2017). According to Noble and Smith (2015), transparency of all the research steps is essential for academic study, which allows other researchers to acquire

the same results through the same research procedures. This process ensures the reliability of the research.

To answer the research question, the researcher needs to ensure that the methodology is consistent with the purpose of the study and elaborate a suitable sampling method to guarantee the validity of the research. Furthermore, a semi-structured interview guide ensures interview flexibility with follow-up questions based on participants' different experiences (Hermanowicz, 2002). The interviews were recorded and transcribed. At the same time, writing memos also took part in the data analysis process because notes will help the researcher understand the participants' behaviours during interviews. According to Nowell et al. (2017), data and memos support the quality of data analysing procedures. Meanwhile, the researcher also made detailed explanations of the theoretical framework, methodology and data analysis to present the study's purpose to other readers (Nowell et al., 2017).

Patton (1999) indicates that the reflexivity of the researchers in academic study is also essential and potentially affects the credibility of qualitative analysis, which is the researchers' own biases and assumptions. The researcher acknowledges her personal and professional backgrounds, beliefs and values that might affect the research findings and keeps reflecting during the data collection and analysis process to reduce researcher bias in this research. The researcher must reflect on her role during the data collection and analysis to ensure a professional and unbiased study. The researcher was born and raised in China, and using a second language to conduct this research might take a lot of work. However, her personal interest in the game *LoL*, the *LoL* World Championship, the esports industry and how fans engage with online communities helps her understand the individual experiences when analysing the data.

### **3.7 Ethics**

All interviewees received an informed consent form (see Appendix 5) before the interviews were conducted to guarantee ethical considerations. The informed consent form includes basic information about this study; interviewees can also find their rights on it. Moreover, at the beginning of the interviews, participants were asked again about their consent verbally and signed the consent form before recording. The participants were also informed that their identifying information would not be present in the report, and the data was only used for transcribing the interviews by the researcher. In addition, the participants can withdraw at any time during the interviews.

#### 4. Results

This research aims to answer the research question: How do the *LoL* World Championship spectators construct their digital fandom identity through social media usage? The data was collected from 12 in-depth interviews with *LoL* World Championship viewers between the ages of 20 – 27 who also use social media for game-related content. The thematic analysis was adopted as data analysed in this study.

As described earlier, esports fandom emerges in the digital environment. It considers people who share the same interest in watching online games and interacting with each other to build digital communities for raising their psychological belongings and social interactions (Qian et al., 2019). The findings support that esports fandom, as a newly emerging online community, shares similarities with digital fandom and video game communities. The main findings are related to three topics: the appealing characteristics of the *LoL* tournament for spectators, digital media use for socialisation opportunities, and knowledge acquisition for spectators are presented in this section. Several themes are emerging under each topic (see Table 2).

*Table 2. Main topics and sub-themes of findings.*

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Sub-themes</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Appealing characteristics of the <i>LoL</i> tournament for spectators	Complex and attractive game to play	This kind of game is still suitable because it is more enjoyable for everyone to sit and play together. (R5)
	Specialisation in esports organisation	I feel like Riot actually gives back with cinematics and stuff, which just keeps you interested in the game. (R9)
	Bondings with <i>LoL</i> tournament on social media	The LPL has a lot of memes on social media, and the LPL region always has fun memes. (R12)
Digital media use for socialisation opportunities	Streaming platform preference for socialisation opportunities	But on Twitch, there's like a specific community...it makes you feel part of the community, and makes you feel more inclined to watch more. (R2)
	Socialisation opportunities with digital media integration while spectating	Even though you are watching it alone at home, it includes discussion posts on forums, real-time bullet comments, and everyone will leave comments after the game end. (R11)

	Mobile social networks for communications/social interaction	We also tend to share those from Reddit in the WhatsApp group. And there, we will discuss it with each other. (R8)
Knowledge acquisition of <i>LoL</i> tournament for fans	Knowledge acquisition by spectating esports on streaming platforms	So if I watch something (esports), I want to learn something from them. (R4)
	Knowledge acquisition and information sharing on social media	There are professional commentaries...They will write more professional analysis comments on social media for game details. (R10)

#### **4.1 Appealing esports tournament to watch: the uniqueness of the *LoL* World Championship**

This section addresses the characteristics of the *LoL* World Championship's uniqueness in the esports business. The *LoL* World Championship turned out to be the most appealing esports tournament globally by viewership — but why? The popularity of *LoL* gameplay has proven its business success in the video game industry, and the professional organisation of the *LoL* tournament has become one of the critical elements to attract spectators. Due to the *LoL* World Championship being held each year at different dates and regions, the organisation have various strategies for promoting the *LoL* World Championship to attract audiences and grow viewership. These strategies appeal to the viewers' interest and emotional bonding with the *LoL* World Championship.

##### ***4.1.1 Complex and attractive game to play: Emotional attachment for spectating *LoL* tournament***

Hamari and Sjöblom (2017) indicate that the esports spectators are game players. When asked how participants started spectating the *LoL* World Championship, all participants agreed that this journey started with *LoL* gameplay. Moreover, they could understand the game rules while watching due to the years invested in playing, which made them feel attached to this esports tournament (see Appendix 1). Although all the interviewees are players of the *LoL*, not all of them played the game first. Two respondents said they first watched the tournament, found this game interesting, and then started playing *LoL*. The remaining respondents played the *LoL* game before started watching the tournament.

Understanding the game rule is significant for watching esports tournaments. According to Campbell, Goss, Kyle and Claypool (2021), the *LoL* World Championship has



the most complex game rules and requires spectators to acquire a higher educational level for understanding. (see Image 1) Respondent 8 watched esports before playing. She stated, “Because from personal experience, when I started watching esports before I played the game, it was difficult to follow what happened, especially when teamfights break. (...) Back then, I could not follow almost anything.”



Image 1. *LoL World Championship 2022 screenshot, retrieved from YouTube, May 26, 2023.*

Due to the complex game rules, the gameplay is vital in spectating the *LoL* World Championship. Most of the participants of this study had played for around ten years and had above-average levels (see Appendix 1). In addition, some interviewees played in the student *LoL* tournaments at universities, which means they have a better understanding of the *LoL* game. Respondent 7 stated: “So it’s the one I’ve invested a lot more time in...In some esports, I have a vague idea, but this (the *LoL* World Championship), I have a really good understanding.”

This “good understanding” could allow spectators to feel emotionally close to the *LoL* World Championship than other esports tournaments. Respondent 8 stated that she does not watch other esports tournaments, even games with the same genre: “I don’t watch *Dota* (Defense of the Ancients, a game by Valve). I have no connections to *Dota*, and while it is still a MOBA [game genre], it feels very different compared to *LoL*; it’s a lot harder to follow because of the different strategies.”

In this study, six interviewees watched other esports tournaments; the rest only watched the *LoL* World Championship. There is only one interviewee who consumed a lot of different esports tournaments. For the rest interviewees who watch other esports tournaments,

the number of times to watch other esports titles cannot compare with the *LoL* World Championship. The main reason is also related to their gameplay habit. To play well in *LoL* takes much time, and other esports tournaments also require time to gain knowledge. Respondent 9 stated, “With other esports, I don’t have that connection. Because I’m not that intuitive compared to *LoL*, I just don’t have the necessary knowledge to follow everything.”

However, to all the interviewees, the game rules of *LoL* is one of the most attractive elements for them to play the game, such as team play, communication and coordination within the gameplay (Riot Games, 2023c). Respondent 5 said, “This kind of game is still suitable because it is more enjoyable for everyone to sit and play together.” Nine respondents admitted that they played this game because they liked to play with friends and had much fun together, and ten respondents still played with friends when conducting the interviews. According to Toth, Conroy and Campbell (2021), compared to other game genres, the players of MOBA games have higher levels of socialisation within the game, and they prefer teamwork and communication skills.

The interviews indicated that gameplay is essential for spectators because they can understand the esports content. At the same time, the unique game rules allow the spectators to build friendships within the game, and they feel more emotionally connected to the gameplay, which also leads to spectatorship of this tournament.

Besides, because the viewers are game fans, there is a charming reason for gamers to watch the *LoL* tournament on the Riot website: the company provides virtual rewards for the spectators in the game (providing free game skins). The interviewees who used the Riot website have all mentioned this point. Respondent 10 lives in China and has to use the VPN to cross the government firewall and watch the *LoL* tournament on the original Riot website. She said,

I watched on the official platform because it has virtual rewards – some skin rewards. Otherwise, who will use it? It’s so troublesome to make it. I especially need to use VPN to get out of my country[China] and watch it.

The interviews showed that all the participants are familiar with the *LoL* game, and this gaming experience makes their viewership for the *LoL* World Championship exclusiveness. Furthermore, there are other motivations for viewers to watch the *LoL* tournament related to specialisation in esports organisation.

#### **4.1.2 Specialisation in esports organisation: Riot company did a good job!**

Although esports are getting increasingly popular among young people globally, and the revenues of the esports market are rising yearly (Tristão, 2022), the interviewees were aware of the shortcomings of many tournaments that were not professionally organised. The list of issues raised by interviewees includes the professional skills of the players, the level of competitions, the scale of the tournaments, the quality of the organisation, the promotions of the competitions and teams on social media, and the quality of broadcasting. However, interviewees consider that the *LoL* World Championship is better than other esports tournaments in terms of scales, professional competition levels, promotions and event quality compared to other esports titles.

Scale is significant when spectators want to watch an esports tournament. Most interviewees who watched other esports tournaments agreed that many are hard to compare with the *LoL* tournament in scale. Respondent 1 said:

The other events are relatively small, or their scale is not perfect, because their audience is also very small in size. For example, I know many events, and they called themselves “world championships” or something, but in fact, there were very few participants; the scale is also limited to specific teams in a particular country.

However, nine respondents agreed that the organisational size of the *LoL* World Championship is reached an international level, which is attractive to them. Respondent 4 said, “They are one of the biggest ones,” and Respondent 7 stated, “This is a very global setting.”

The level of competition for professional players can reflect the professionalism of an esports title. According to Hamari and Sjöblom (2017), enjoyment of aggressiveness and novelty are factors for spectators to watch esports. Enjoyment of aggressiveness refers to players aggressively competing online, making the viewers feel excited, while novelty means new teams and players make viewers feel excited (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017). Thanks to the extensive player base globally, Riot company has the ability to hold esports competitions in major regions worldwide and encourages outstanding players to participate in global competitions. Respondent 1 said, “*LoL* is indeed a competition that allows the whole world to participate.” As a result, the tournament organisation can attract many new talents from different regions each year, making the *LoL* World Championship Finals more competitive and unpredictable to watch.

With many teams competing for the final season globally, professional players have to compete aggressively during the tournament to win a seat to enter the final, and even regional competitions are becoming very aggressive in the *LoL* tournament, especially in the China region, due to the number of players. Respondent 12 is from China and studied in Utrecht during the interviews. She used to play in the Student League while she was a college student in China. She said, “To be honest, I don’t watch North American and European divisions because I think their skills level is average to me.”

On the contrary, the interviewees said other tournaments are not competitive, and the results can be predictable. Respondent 7 watched *StarCraft II* (a real-time strategy game from Blizzard Entertainment), stating that this tournament was not as professionally organised because fewer new pro players competed for the final championship: “Here is the failure of *StarCraft II*. Because it’s unlikely that a new player will come and beat him [the old winner]. I’d say their professional scene stays very stagnant.”

Moreover, Riot company also update the game and competition every year by adding new champions to the game and changing the rules (Reeve, 2023) maintaining a sense of novelty. These changes in the game not only challenge the new players but also bring challenges to the experienced pro players. Therefore, the results of the competitions are more unpredictable for viewers to watch. Respondent 7 said:

With *LoL*, there are so many new teams and tactics, and the game itself changes a lot in comparison to *StarCraft II*. So I expect there to be a lot more excitement when it comes to *LoL*. It was even more exciting because it was like the top, the best of the best going to lose for the first time, made it extra special.

These changes have stimulated spectators’ curiosity to continue paying attention to the *LoL* tournament each year. However, sometimes viewers are not expecting the best team to win but the underdog team to win because they think this is fun to watch. Respondent 6 explained why he loved watching live on the streaming platform: “During last finals, there was a lot of Baron steals [Baron steals refer to a special situation occurs during the match related to a powerful monster Baron Nashor. A team successfully killing Baron Nashor can acquire significant powerful abilities for the team to win, but if the other team manages to steal Baron while the first team is fighting Baron, the game’s results might change completely]. Yeah, like many moments where the game went from one side to the other side very quickly.”

This unpredictability could also be understood as a novelty in esports tournaments and made a remarkable impression on the fans. Respondent 5 thought this unpredictability distinguishes spectating esports from watching TV dramas. She said, “I think esports is hard to compare to TV dramas. I think it has more factors because it is uncontrollable.” This is because the ending of TV dramas is always unchangeable, and it does not matter whether to watch it now or later, but esports is different. Respondent 5 stated, “If you do not watch it (esports) now, you won’t have the possibility to discuss the results with friends in time, and then you won’t be able to experience it.”

The professionalisation of organising esports is an attractive feature for spectators to watch the tournaments. In the eyes of the respondents, the organisation of traditional sports is the profession’s standard, and they would like to compare esports tournaments with sports. Respondent 11 “The *LoL* world championship is already moving towards a certain kind of traditional competitive sports which is more rigorous, or it developed in a more professional direction.” In addition, Respondent 12 believed this professionalisation of the *LoL* tournament came from the standard of Riot company, and two esports tournaments held by Riot (*Valorant* and the *LoL*) are relatively higher at the organised level. She stated, “I think *LoL*, whether it is *Valorant* or *LoL* professional events, the promotion is very systematic and complete, and it must be much better than *CS: GO* (*Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*, a multiplayer tactical first-person shooter video game by Valve), much better than *Dota 2* (sequel video game to *Dota*).”

These findings showed that the fans consider Riot company has promoted its video game competition on an international level and organised its tournament as a professional business. Obviously, the audiences accept this and have set the standard for professional esports tournaments, which should be like the *LoL* World Championship. Respondent 9 said, “I feel like *LoL* esports is probably the most advanced esports today.” Hence, spectating the *LoL* tournament differs from other esports tournaments for the fans. In addition, all the interviewers agreed that watching esports is entertaining for their life in this research. Some participants think competitions are fascinating to watch, and some interviewees find news related to pro players funny.

#### ***4.1.3 Bondings with pros: Fans engaging with favourite players on social media***

Supporting a specific team for a long time is optional for esports fans. In this study, only two females expressed their support for the specific teams for years, and others were

more flexible about supporting the team. Respondent 4 said, “I think in esports, barely any person has a favourite team.” Respondent 8 said, “Basically, you’re gonna support the team that wins.” Moreover, respondent 12 said, “My favourite team and players are always changing.”

However, spectators have at least one or two favourite pro players and tend to support the team with their preferred individual player. Respondent 7 said, “My favourite team is MAD Lions (a European team). But I liked them mostly because I do tend to follow players more than I follow teams.” All the interviewees agreed that their favourite player should be a good individual player. Faker is the name mentioned a lot in the interviews. He is the most famous South Korean player in the *LoL* World Championship history, and his team won 3 times *LoL* World Championship finals (Lee & Nishikori, 2019). Respondent 6 stated, “I just like him because he is exciting to watch. (...) if Faker is playing, I am extra excited.” Moreover, Respondent 10 said, “If the Chinese team is eliminated, then I watch Faker. If Faker’s team is also eliminated, I don’t watch other games until the final one.”

Fans support the players for personal interest more than expecting their team to win in the competition. Respondent 2 said, “I like Jankos (a pro player in G2 Esports, which is a European team), but they(G2)’re not doing that well. However, him as a person made me root for the team.” Furthermore, Respondent 7 said, “My favourite player in Europe is Nisqy, which is MAD Lions’ mid-laner. I do like his personality overall. So he’s always positive and happy when he goes into most interviews.” Respondent 12 said about her favourite player: “I am now a fan of Weibo Gaming (a Chinese team), but I have no idea about that team. I am a fan of this team because of the player. I like TheShy very much.... But the team plays like rubbish. ”

The *LoL* World Championship is held once a year in October and November (Riot Games, 2023d), meaning the competitions are not throughout the year. During the off-season, though, there are regional competitions at different times, and there are times when there are no competitions to watch. At this point, the company finds other ways to connect to its fans, such as using social media for pro teams and players to interact with audiences. Moreover, the promotions on social media are more concentrated on players’ individual images and stories rather than skills and official competition news. Respondent 2 is from Europe, and he followed the pro team and players of LEC (League of Legends European Championship) on social media platforms because those accounts “make YouTube videos of showcase the players’ personality.”

Although only some respondents were interested in teams' promotions on social media because most interviewees changed their support teams every year, for the participants who have fixed support players for a more extended period, this marketing strategy does work. Interviewees who follow the pro team and players' social media accounts often check for updated news. European and South African interviewees followed the pro team and players through social media platforms, such as Twitch, YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram. However, for five Chinese interviewees, although three of them studied overseas during the interviews, they mainly paid attention to esports content on Weibo (Chinese social media).

There are several reasons for this. First, Chinese interviewees are more familiar with LPL (The League of Legends Pro League, the Chinese top-level professional League tournament), and they all expressed that they support Chinese teams and players with or without their favourite teams in the finals. Second, officially in China, using international social media platforms is impossible because of government policies (Han, 2020). Hence, LPL teams and players could only integrate with their fans on Chinese social media platforms. Third, LPL is very active on Weibo, and there are inside jokes related to the strong cultural and linguistic knowledge of China that only Chinese people can understand well. Respondent 12 said, "I usually check things on Weibo or Douban. Because the drama of LPL is actually quite exciting there." Last, the company Weibo corporation has its own *LoL* pro team, which is Weibo Gaming (Riot Games, 2023b). In addition, Weibo also acquired other esports clubs and invested in the gaming industry in China for business reasons (Cheng, 2020). As a result, Weibo as a social media created more hot topics on esports events and the *LoL* World Championship for the game publisher, organisations and fans to promote pro teams and players. This phenomenon is very unique compared to other international social media.

Notably, on Weibo, there are not only pro teams of LPL; European and South Korean teams also have their official accounts. For example, G2 is a famous European team and has competed many times with Chinese teams, which made their name among Chinese esports spectators. They also use Weibo accounts to engage with their Chinese fans. Respondent 12 recalled, "G2 is very active; G2 really enjoy attacking RNG (a Chinese pro team) on Weibo."

This kind of online interaction is very popular among Chinese audiences on Weibo, with many comments from fans. Respondent 1 said:

For the quarrel under the mini blog on Weibo, I will first go to these comments to read fans' arguments; they often leave many arguments here and then read the super chats of some players or specific teams in the centre of the storm, and then find them in the Super League section. Fans always argue in the comments. And it's pretty fun; that's how it feels.

These findings showed that fans are gratified by the pro players' characteristics on social media. Promoting *LoL* pro teams and players on social media without a time limit and using personality characters of players integrated with fans online has created distinctive bondings between esports tournaments and spectatorship. This could be found in other esports tournaments because the marketing mechanism is the same. Nevertheless, in China market, owning a *LoL* pro team made the social media platform Weibo more willing to create topics related to the *LoL* tournament. At the same time, with the high numbers (75 million) of *LoL* players in China (Kamberovic, 2023), the viewership of LPL is also the highest compared to other regions, which made Chinese audiences more willing to follow the *LoL* pro teams and players on social media. As a result, social media contribute to a unique atmosphere for fans to connect with the *LoL* World Championship, especially in China. At the same time, other esports tournaments are hard to compete in due to the number of gamers worldwide.

#### **4.2 Media platforms integration for socialisation opportunities: Streaming platforms, social media, forums, and mobile social networks**

Media platform integration is unavoidable due to technological development, and this phenomenon will continue to create more conveniences for users to easily access and interact with various media content and services on different platforms. In this study, users mainly use game streaming platforms to watch the *LoL* tournament online. However, there are exceptions: Weibo broadcasts LPL live on its social media platform, and Google is more convenient if the spectators want to find something specific about the *LoL* tournament. At the same time, streaming platforms such as Twitch and YouTube in the West, Bilibili, Huya Live and Douyu in China are embedded with communication functions similar to social media, forums and mobile social networks for fans to engage. In addition, it is easier for fans to receive information from their own smaller community's messenger groups on Discord and WhatsApp in the West, QQ and WeChat in China, which reduces their use of social media.



However, it creates more private emotional bondings for gamers to connect inside the groups.

#### ***4.2.1 Streaming platform preference for socialisation opportunities***

There are several streaming platforms for *LoL* esports audiences: the official Riot esports streaming website, Twitch, YouTube, Bilibili, Huya Live and Douyu. According to interviewees, the quality of the community is the primary concern for gamers, especially for Twitch and Huya Live users. In this study, European and South African interviewees who use Twitch to watch esports content paid more attention to communication functions inside the platform than quality. For example, Respondent 2 considers Twitch “a bad platform” and prefers YouTube, but thinks most of the community is on Twitch, thus using that platform more, whereas Respondent 6 finds the live chat messages on-screen “kind of fun” in the platform. According to Hamilton, Garretson, and Kerne (2014), gamers have built more special Twitch game communities than other media platforms, especially for participatory culture.

Chinese respondents indicate they pay the most attention to communication functions on Chinese streaming platforms. Huya Live is a Chinese esports streaming platform with professional game streamers’ focus, and provides interactive sessions between streamers and viewers, which is very attractive to esports spectators (Wang et al., 2022) and forms a kind of esports community between famous streamers and viewers. Respondent 11 lives in China and said,

I will use Huya because I have followed the Mid Laner (Mid Laner refers to the champion fight in the Mid Lane in *LoL* game) commentator in the past two years. If he is broadcasting on the platform, I will watch; but if he doesn’t broadcast, I will definitely choose Bilibili first.

For interviewees who choose streaming platforms for communities over qualities reasons, they are more interested in participating in a game community with others while watching the live. Respondent 6 is from the Netherlands and stated, “So while you’re watching (on Twitch), you see people making jokes about their reaction to something cool happening.” Respondent 10 is from China, and she said, “In the case of recording and broadcasting, I mainly watch the bullet comments, and then to watch the key operations of the players, that’s it.” According to Zhou (2022), bullet comments are a particular function

for streaming platforms in China, and it can be seen as a unique way that young Chinese people use the Chinese language to create an atmosphere of “participatory spectacles” (p. 17) online to interact with other viewers (see Image 2).



Image 2: Bullet comments on Huya Live, retrieved from Huya, 26 May 2023.

Reaction videos on Twitch and bullet comments on Chinese streaming platforms are user-generated content. According to Shao (2009), individuals create user-generated content by participating online to integrate with the content and communicate with others. This participation helps users to build virtual social connections with online communities. Respondent 2 said, “On Twitch, there’s like a specific community with emojis and emotes that they can use, and there’s a lot of inside jokes. It makes you feel part of the community and makes you feel more inclined to (Twitch).”

Streamers’ reactions and bullet comments are very different because of the function. One is the interaction between streamers and viewers (Wulf et al., 2020), and the other is the audience interaction (Zhou, 2022). However, these two functions can provide similar experiences for viewers: engagement with the platforms, interaction with others online, bonding with the same interest, and enjoyment in emotion. The former concentrates on creating an easy, light, and enjoyable atmosphere for peers in a digital environment (Wulf et al., 2020), and the latter provides a strong bonding experience for spectators with linguistics, visuality and cultural knowledge of the same interest (Zhou, 2022).

In this study, knowing other people's reactions towards the same exciting things happening in the game will stimulate connections. Respondent 2 described his experiences as a back-and-forth between looking at the gameplay and the chat on Twitch, which is mimicked by Respondent 1 on the platform Bilibili:

But at some special moments, including whether you almost won or lost, or a certain team battle, you gained a big advantage or disadvantage, it is quite effective to open the bullet comments at this time, you will see how others felt at that specific moment.

Therefore, the different digital functions serve the same purpose: let people behind the digital device feel the existence of other human beings. This feeling will connect them virtually and make them emotionally connected. However, the two functions are presented in different forms and hardly replace one for another. Three interviewees from China and studying in Europe agreed that happiness from bullet comments is an exclusive experience while they watch esports. Respondent 12 only uses Chinese streaming platforms, and she said, "There are no bullet comments on Twitch and YouTube; that's not fun; I won't use them."

However, not all interviewees enjoy esports streaming online communities, especially females. Respondent 8 is a Dutch female who mainly uses YouTube and the official Riot esports website to watch. Other female interviewees are from China and seldom use esports streaming platforms but more general streaming platforms such as Bilibili. Respondent 10 said, "I still use Bilibili the most because Douyu and Huya's bullet comments are too disgusting." This may be because males dominate esports' spectatorship and esports streaming online communities in number. According to Statista's (Gough, 2023) report on Europe's esports spectators in 2022, 37% of the viewers were female, and the percentage of females users on Twitch is close to the esports viewership in the EU (35%) (Wang et al., 2022). However, the total number of female esports viewers in China is slightly higher (44%) (Thomala, 2023), but the number of female users of Huya Live only reached 28% (Wang et al., 2022).

The interviews demonstrate that watching esports tournaments is related to fandom culture and technological functions, and these elements are so essential that they affect spectators' personal choice of streaming platform use. In addition, the different affordances of social media platforms also affect fans' spectating experiences while they watch the *LoL* tournament.

#### ***4.2.2 Digital media use for the immersive experience of spectating of LoL World Championship***

All the interviewees said that they usually watch esports by themselves at home. However, their experiences while spectating esports are not limited to sitting and watching alone at home, especially for bigger international competitions such as the *LoL* World Finals. The interviewees are very busy when they watch the important esports world finals: they enjoy watching with friends online with the mic on, texting with each other through mobile social networks, chatting in the live chat rooms on streaming platforms with other fans, checking with others' reactions, join bullet comments and share their present feelings on social media or forums. This whole spectating experience is much more than what is found in other media entertainment. Respondent 11 explained her experiences:

I think the sense of interaction is stronger. (...) Okay, even though you are watching it alone at home, it includes discussion posts on forums, real-time bullet comments, and everyone will leave comments after the game end. I think there will always be a feeling that everyone seems to be sitting together watching the finals, and then discussing the same thing very seriously. Like, well, I read more books, and watching movies is a kind of entertainment that one person does. I think it is still very different.

All participants agreed that watching esports is more exciting than consuming other media content such as movies and TV series. Some interviewees pointed out that their time for entertainment is limited, and they tend to spend time on things they are more interested in. Besides, digital socialisation is a very important factor for spectators to watch esports, and this activity could make them feel participate in spectating. Respondent 3 said, "I watched it usually with friends online, and we cheer together, and we discuss together (...) I just wasn't alone."

The appearance of digital media has changed the media consumption usage of younger generations (O'Reilly, 2010), especially gamers. According to Mäyrä (2016), playing a video game is an action that highly interacts with the digital interface. Players with longer playing backgrounds are more used to multi-interaction with media consumption. As a new media form, esports allows spectators to interact with the content and other spectators without geographic limitations. In contrast, media forms such as movies and TV dramas are

less interactive with audiences, and there are three interviewees expressed that they are not interested in consuming movies and TV series. Respondent 4 said,

Well, I don't like movies or TV to watch because it's a little bit too boring. And esports is different. That makes it a lot more fun for me. When I watch a movie, I like to play video games on the side. I have to do something.

The participants who considered older media forms are boring might because of their media usage habits. In this study, the interviewees grew up surrounded by digital media; they started playing video games as kids and have more connection to multi-involvement when consuming media. Thus, esports spectating experiences are intensified by technology development. It is not only the esports content transmitted through media but also the digital medium itself that shapes audiences' behaviours. However, *LoL* gamers' social media experiences are limited to their fandom communities by adopting mobile social networks.

#### ***4.2.3 Mobile social networks: Social interaction for spectators***

According to Shao (2009), different uses of social media have different motivations: people consume content to seek information and entertainment, participate online for social interaction, and produce content for self-expression. In this research, participants use social media to acquire knowledge, have fun, and produce content to express their feelings and opinions. However, few of them use popular social media platforms such as Twitter, Reddit, YouTube, Instagram, and Weibo for social interaction for the fandom (no one uses Facebook in this study), and every participant has private fan groups on mobile social networks for gaming and esports.

Mobile social networks (MSN) apps are widely used due to the popularity of mobile phones globally. MSN is an application for mobile phone users to connect, communicate, and interact online (Wan et al., 2019). The functions include the message, post, share, group, and network. In this study, all the spectators interacted with people with the same interest in *LoL* play, and *LoL* esports on MSN apps, and the MSNs include Discord, WhatsApp, QQ and WeChat.

Among all the MSNs mentioned above, there is one MSN favoured by gamers since 2015, Discord (Anderson, 2017). This device is designed for gamers to engage with each other with text, voice and multi-media content sharing based on their interests (Anderson, 2017). Due to the restriction of the Chinese government, this app could not be used in China

(Kuhn, 2023). In this study, the participants from Europe and South Africa mainly communicated game-related things on Discord groups. There is no game-specialised MSN in China, and Chinese participants use general MSNs such as QQ and WeChat to communicate with other fans.

Those groups are very private for spectators, and they usually join because they have familiar people online. Respondent 11 said:

Because we all know this esports blogger, everyone gathers in a group (QQ) to follow friends who watch the game in the same province. People usually do not talk about trivial things in life, but whenever there is a game to watch, the group suddenly changes from no one talking to extraordinary conversations.

Although in China the MSNs are mainly used only by Chinese people, people gathered together for MSNs groups in other regions have much broader backgrounds. Respondent 3 is from Poland, and she shared her experience of the first international Discord group with other players from Europe and Africa, similar to a Dutch interviewee Respondent 8: “We have people born here in the Netherlands. We have a friend who is in England. We are one living in Spain. Moreover, we get many people from Aruba.”

Gamers have shared many things within the smaller communities with the same interest. In this research, the interviewees use MSNs for exchanging other social media content. Respondent 3 described friends “recommending the YouTube videos” into group chat, Respondent 9 memorised friends sending YouTube links for reactions on esports content on Discord for “fun to watch”, and Respondent 7 said he and his friends discussed the information “shared from Reddit into the WhatsApp group”.

People use MSNs to communicate when they are watching esports, and digital interfaces such as voice chat and video chat will make them feel that they are mentally together but physically far away. Respondent 2 described his experiences on Discord: “We design a voice chat to take to each other when we watch it, and we also like to joke around together. If something happens and we react to it together.”

Using MSNs instead of social media to interact with strangers benefits them. First, all the people are *LoL* players, and they can easily find people to play and watch esports together. Second, they share information with their background, so other members get more information than they are looking for online. Last, some of them are aware of the danger of

the internet and want to keep themselves in the small, safe digital community. Respondent 3 said,

I grew up when people say, “the stranger is danger, do not talk to people on the Internet”. The Internet can be dangerous, but if you make sure that people are your age, you can make a lot of business.

#### **4.3 Knowledge acquisition through the *LoL* World Championship: An extensive live broadcasting global tutorial on the *LoL* gameplay**

According to Hamari and Sjöblom (2017), knowledge acquisition is crucial for gamers to spectate esports tournaments and learn how to play better and win in the same games themselves. As previously mentioned, the *LoL* is not an easy video game. Especially when the players want to win the game and play in the ranking system (there are nine tiers in the *LoL*, the higher the tier, the higher the skills required of the player), they need to absorb much knowledge. Respondent 7 stated:

It’s a very complex game; you have so many interactions, and so many champions, with each having their own skill set. (...) it is almost like learning a subject at a university level if you want to join now because there is so much you have to learn.

Therefore, spectating the *LoL* World Championship is the best way to get there.

##### ***4.3.1 Self-learning through watching the *LoL* World Championship***

Learning becomes essential for spectators of the *LoL* tournament, and all informants mentioned the skill-learning process during the interviews. Watching the best players play in esports is the shortcut to knowledge acquisition. According to Anderson et al. (2021), skilled professional players positively affect esports event viewership. In this research, the interviews have shown that the spectators benefit from esports watching, and if they are learning more practical skills from pro players, they are more encouraged to watch. Respondent 3 described her experiences of watching esports as watching live “tutorials” of *LoL* gameplay. Respondent 12 said intimating the professional players is the most effective way of improving play skills, and this is very common among esports spectators – viewers soon use the techniques in their own play.

Moreover, Anderson et al. (2021) indicate that the spectators are likelier to support and follow pro players with advanced tactics and expertise in the competition. In this study,

for the interviewees, the most effective way to acquire game knowledge is to follow the best teams and pro players for skill and tactics, which affects spectators' supporting the team in the competitions. Although fans support a team usually with more complex reasons and esports viewers are more flexible about supporting, winning the competition is a significant factor for spectators to follow the team. Respondent 8 said, "You can see it in the chat, especially when you watch YouTube; people instantly change their minds. (...) but you never supported the team in the first place."

As mentioned earlier, spectators watch esports for knowledge acquisition. Watching the winning team made them feel excited and happy, especially in some critical situations to decide the final result in the competition, and this is an exciting moment to watch for viewers. Respondent 6 is Dutch and supports an EU team, MAD Lion; he stated, "Probably they played quite like a high level in the EU.... They don't play the same way, always in the up like interesting strategies."

There are reasons that watching the *LoL* World Championship is a self-learning process. First, all of the interviewees agreed that they usually use streaming platforms to watch it by themselves at home. Second, everyone's game level and abilities differ, and they concentrate on different skills and tactics during competitions. Last but not least, the understanding level of the game for each participant is different, so they are more used to the self-learning process.

On the one hand, the viewers pay attention to pro players' champion choices, champion abilities, battle routes and teamwork tactics they are unfamiliar with. For example, Respondent 6 said, "While seeing people who are so good at the game doing things that I could not think of, but then they are doing it, and they play like a whole different way of me playing the game... I think it's interesting seeing the strategies they play." Seeing different abilities in the pro play and learning things viewers have never thought of is related to the feeling of novelty. New teams and players bring different tactics, making the competition unpredictable, and audiences are excited about it. They enjoy watching the battles and want to apply them to their play.

This motivation explains why some participants are excited to watch the underdog team fight with the best skilful team. For some interviewees, supporting the winning team does not mean this team should be the best-known high-level-played team, but the not-that-famous underdog team. To support an unfamiliar team is not because of the hunt for novelty; it is still for the knowledge acquisition of the skills and strategies. In esports competitions, spectators possess a comprehensive understanding of the game mechanics. If an underdog



team, despite their average skill level, utilises different strategies to defeat a superior opponent, there must be something exceptional in the tactics to be learned and explored. This kind of unfamiliarity will motivate viewers to support the team fighting in the competitions.

Respondent 6 is an average player of the *LoL* and mainly plays for fun. He was delighted when he talked about it:

Well, because like the one team does win a lot already. And then one team was like, very down at the standings. And they were currently in the finals. So that was kind of interesting. Like you have the one underdog team and the one, yeah, superpower to that.

In this case, the average players understand their play level, and they have noticed that disadvantages in skills can also win the final, which is emotionally related to their play, and encourage them to try more strategies for combating skilful opponents.

On the other hand, spectators with good skills are also willing to watch the battles and notice the mistakes that will affect the game's results. Learning from mistakes is a negative reinforcement of the learning process, and the knowledge has deepened during this process (Chialvo & Bak, 1999). This kind of learning was found in interviewees who are good players. Respondent 4 is a good player of the *LoL*, and he used to play in the Student League while he studied at Erasmus University. His team won Dutch Student League while he played that year. He has friends who play in the Dutch pro team and still plays *LoL* with them. He stated, "I try to always point out mistakes when I see certain things they shouldn't have done which are obvious for a spectator, and that's fun to learn from."

Skill learning for spectators varies for players' personal interests and play purposes. For example, Respondent 3 was playing for ranking in the EU region, and she is concerned about gaining personal scores and winning battles. She said,

When I watched it before climbing [here refer to ranking, higher tier approved better skills], I did not understand anything. (...) But after I started climbing and watching more tutorials, I could catch up with what they're doing [in the competition]. It's usually what you can learn the best from pro players in the moments they go for the fence. (...) that's kind of what I learned from.

However, Respondent 2 did not play for ranking but more for fun, so he usually concentrated on learning how not to lose the game. He stated:

I don't rank, so I don't really need to have the stress of really good. But it's still fine to be able to help out and know where you have to go. Because being lost in the game was just disoriented.

For spectators more concerned about the game and skill learning while watching the esports content, the social interaction function on streaming platforms is disturbing. Respondent 8 uses the Riot official esports website because there are no distraction chat rooms. He said, "I tend to watch without the chat because I find it somewhat distracting...that's why I like the esports website." It is the same with Chinese esports viewers. Respondent 5 said, "I don't use bullet comments myself. [it can turn off if people do not use] Especially when there is something special for watching, and then the screen is entirely blocked." At this point, users choose the streaming platforms for accessibility, familiarity and convenience.

#### ***4.3.2 Knowledge acquisition and information sharing through engaging on social media***

The results found that the motivation for spectators' esports consumption, such as knowledge acquisition, is expanded in their other digital media consumption, namely social media. Although every interviewee mentioned much skill-learning during the spectating of the esports tournament, when asked about social media use, most of them were again related to game knowledge acquisition and information sharing. Due to the complex champions, skill sets and tactics used in the competitions, the player's performances and the unexpected results, fans are enthusiastic about searching, asking, explaining and debating on social media for their findings. McQuail (2010) indicates that information is one of the basic needs for mass media consumption. Furthermore, according to Shao (2009), one of the motivations for users to use social media is knowledge, which includes media content consumption and user-generated media content production: audiences who consume social media content for knowledge acquisition and produce the media content to provide information to others on social media. Moreover, information sharing on social media is one important feature for game fans (Blight, 2016; Pearce, 2009) to create media content online.

This process is usually displayed as game streamers broadcasting live with fans on streaming platforms with live chat, YouTube game influencers' making videos for esports and comments with other fans, and individual posts on forums and social media analysing and arguing with other gamers. All the interviewees in this research mentioned that using social media for knowledge acquisition and information sharing is helpful for them to

understand the tournament better. Respondent 2 stated that he started making *LoL* videos on YouTube when he was ten, and posted about the *LoL* tournament on social media related to specific esports results explanation and “how specific teams are doing in terms of their games.”

For the average players, the level of pro players is high, and average spectators sometimes cannot follow the things happening too fast during the competition, or the game rules change without notice. As a result, live streamers and YouTubers are becoming the best commentators for explaining professional skills and tactics. Moreover, there are many explanation videos on media platforms such as YouTube and Bilibili, and there are more debates for tactics used in the tournament and results on social media and online forums, all enjoyed by audiences who want to improve or showcase their game skills.

Using social media to engage with other fans helps viewers learn things they could not figure out or are unsure if they are right. For example, Respondent 1 said:

Sometimes I will ask questions.... I posted like: “Is this matter really like this? Is it the tactics everyone said, right?” Then there will be many people replying to me, and then I will comment with these people online; I think it is very interesting.

In this research, the interviewees who do not engage much on social media for personal reasons also participate in the *LoL* social media learning process. Respondent 3 is an art student, and she doesn't have much time for social media, only using YouTube to acquire knowledge to improve her ranking: “I usually watch people who make YouTube videos because they put extra time into explaining.” Respondent 12 has a social phobia problem, and she uses social media a lot for entertainment but not for communication with others. However, she is very knowledgeable about the *LoL* game and tournament because of her well-play and game design major. She said, “I only reply [on social media] if others have any questions; if I know the answers, I will reply. Mostly they are about game problems or serious problems about certain players.”

Choi's research (2019) reveals that knowledge acquisition can positively predict fans' identification: spectators with higher identification as esports fans have stronger knowledge acquisition motivation for watching the esports content. Furthermore, this motivation not only affects spectators' esports spectatorship. The results of this study showcased that the motivation for knowledge acquisition by esports fans is reflected in their social media consumption of esports and game information sharing at the same time.

## 5. Conclusion

This study explored the *LoL* World Championship spectators using social media to construct their digital fandom identity. Esports is often conceived as a competitive sport based on electronic computer systems (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017). Due to its accessibility in the past decade, the *LoL* World Championship audiences are growing exponentially. This widespread diffusion raises the question of *what motivates spectators to watch the LoL tournament*, and *what motivates spectators of the LoL World Championship to share/create game-related content on social media use*. What is more, this thesis researches *how these experiences construct spectators' digital fandom identities*. Building upon the existing literature in the field of esports spectatorship and digital fandom, this study is theoretically and thematically analysed 12 interviews, and comprehensive answers to the research questions were found.

### 5.1 Main findings

The results reveal that spectating the *LoL* World Championship is an exclusive experience for esports viewers due to the *LoL* gameplay. The game rules, such as team build, communication and coordination with other players, are the most attractive feature for gamers to play for years, and this emotional attachment to the *LoL* gameplay has connected them to the *LoL* World Championship spectatorship. The professionalisation in organising the *LoL* tournament is also critical for fans to watch. Furthermore, enjoyment of novelty, aggressiveness, and entertainment are the essential motivations for fans to watch the esports tournament. In addition, social media have become the main fanbase for fans to interact with their favourite players and other fans, deeply bonding them with the *LoL* World Championship.

The findings confirm that all those media platforms have interwoven with fans' *socialisation opportunities* to watch the *LoL* tournament and relate to their social media use for esports and game content. Media platforms are reducing the divergence of function usage on different platforms and creating more user convenience. However, in this research, accessibility is not the only reason the participants are stuck on specific platforms. On the contrary, it relates more to users' cognitive, cultural backgrounds and personal experiences. Although digital socialisation is indispensable for fans, they are more willing to look for intimate friendship and support from their MSNs groups instead of general social media;

simultaneously, they are entertained by collective feelings from strangers on the internet. However, the culture has some influences on the emotional expressions between East and West, which have affected the choices of different functions on streaming platforms. Despite this, the internal demand for socialisation needs is the same.

*Knowledge acquisition* became the most important motivation for *LoL* fans to watch esports and use social media. Watching esports on streaming platforms and using social media platforms is accessible to audiences; this accessibility is welcomed by gamers worldwide, making the *LoL* World Championship a global standard live tutorial on *LoL* gameplay. Most of all, this esports tournament has attracted the best players worldwide with all kinds of skills and strategies. Fans have gained game knowledge through esports spectatorship and social media, and their curiosity still stimulates them to continue. The interviews showed that social media platforms allow gamers with the same interests to share knowledge with their own experiences and support each other. The massive broadcast, posts and feedback are bridging the bondings between gamers on social media, reinforcing their learning processes and shaping the users' beliefs of their fan identity.

McLuhan (1994) indicates that the medium is the extension of a man's experiences of the world; technologies have extended human senses, cognition and capabilities, and finally altered individuals' experiences about their surroundings. This research proves that the development of esports streaming platforms and social media platforms allow viewers to expand their perceptions, interactions and social dynamics. Technology has changed gamers' media consumption experiences, which differ from previous media forms of consumption.

The findings show that esports fans differ from sports fans in many aspects. Although esports audiences share similar motivations as sports spectators, such as novelty, enjoyment of aggressiveness, socialisation opportunities, entertainment, and knowledge acquisition; gameplay and skills-learning dominate spectators' motivation for esports content consumption on digital media and team support. Furthermore, fans follow pro players due to their skills and personalities and are more than loyal to the team. Despite the fact that nationality plays an important role when fans support the teams in the final World Championship, most esports fans support best-play teams or winning teams in the daily competitions while they are watching.

For Riot company, undertaking such significant game events every year for spectators free to watch on streaming platforms seems a waste of money. However, holding the esports tournament has become the best marketing promotion globally for their game products and encourages customers to engage in-depth for further in-game consumption. In addition,

gamers voluntarily contribute to tutorials and controversial topics of the *LoL* tournament on social media and also approve of the success of the *LoL* World Championship on the international level.

## **5.2 Implications of the study**

The findings contribute to the existing literature on esports spectatorship and digital fandom. Previous studies on esports spectatorship focused on general esports content consumption in a quantitative approach (Anderson et al., 2021; Choi, 2019; García & Murillo, 2020; Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017; Pu et al., 2022; Qian et al., 2020; Sjöblom et al., 2020). New suggestive findings emerged by adopting a qualitative method in this study, such as attractive game rules of *LoL*, professionalisation in the organisation, and bonding with *LoL* tournament on social media.

It was discussed earlier in the literature chapter that digital technology is the distinctive feature of esports audiences (Anderson et al., 2021; Qian et al., 2020; Pu et al., 2022). This research has confirmed the importance of digital media interfaces. It suggests that studies on esports spectators' consuming motivation should consider audiences' overall digital media use as a whole because the media functions on different platforms have integrated with each other. In addition, this research also finds that cultural differences motivate esports fans to use different media, which is new in esports fandom study.

Besides academics, video game publishers, esports tournament organisers, and professional esports clubs benefit from the findings for esports marketing and tournament organisation in different regions, especially for Riot company. As more video game publishers are interested in the esports market globally, finding solutions for audience engagement is important. The results of this paper help game publishers and professional esports clubs to get more attention from audiences on different platforms. Additionally, traditional sports organisations can use the knowledge to develop creative strategies to integrate with younger generations on digital platforms. Media platform developers could also use the knowledge to develop functions for esports fans to integrate. Moreover, through this research, *LoL* fans could better understand themselves and their media use habits.

## **5.3 Limitations and future suggestions**

Although interesting findings are generated from the data, it is essential to mention some limitations of this study. Obviously, ten out of twelve interviewees are bachelor and

master students, and learning is essential for students. Besides, more than half of the interviewees are good players of the *LoL*. Four interviewees admitted they have ranked in the Platinum tier, and only about 10% of the players who play for the ranking system could reach this level (Kelly, 2022). In addition, four respondents played in the Student League at universities in the Netherlands and China, and one interviewee used to win Dutch Student League while studying. Thus, the results are hard to reflect on ordinary audiences who are average players. In addition, nine interviewees are coming from the Netherlands (4) and China (5) due to the geographic location and nationality of the researcher, and it might be more interesting to hear spectators from famous esports markets such as South Korea in Asia, United States in North America and Brazil in South America (Kamberovic, 2023); those countries also have a large fanbase of the *LoL* World Championship, and will provide more understanding how fans engage in esports spectatorship and social media platforms. However, this does not devalue the findings of the research. The framework of this study was theoretically based, and the purpose of this study is to explore the audiences using social media for digital fandom identities; rather than the description of their personal online activities.

Regardless of interviewees' backgrounds and social media platforms usage, this study finds that media compatibility has gradually permeated digital fans' experiences. The technology development strengthened the digital fandom culture, providing more interactions for fans to engage and build an emotional connection with each other. Based on this study, Future studies could consider employing the quantitative method and incorporating expansive datasets encompassing diverse international and educational backgrounds, as well as varying levels of gameplay. Emphasising the significance of a cross-national approach will help us to understand esports digital fandom better.

Furthermore, in this study, *LoL* esports spectators have developed more ways for *socialisation opportunities* and *knowledge acquisition* based on the functions of digital platforms and social media use, and their experience of media content consumption connects to all digital media use, not only limited to streaming platforms. Future studies could extend this study beyond the *LoL* World Championship to other game-genre esports tournaments to discover if other game-genre esports spectators have different motivations in their digital media consumption. This is important for understanding esports spectators and their media-using habits for both media product development and business purposes.

Moreover, this study reveals that social-cultural context plays a vital role in digital *socialisation opportunities* for the spectators of similar internal motivations when consuming

esports content on media platforms between the West and the East. These disparities are evident in the viewers' inclination towards specific media functions. The findings indicate that the two functions, streamers' live reactions on Twitch and bullet comments on Chinese streaming platforms including Bilibili, Huya Live and Douyu, are presented in different forms in the West and China, possibly related to linguistics and cultural differences, and cannot replace each other. This finding reminds us that technological and social-cultural processes are interdependent on a macro-level angle. Drawing on the finding of this study, future studies could design research on esports spectators in other Asian countries with a higher viewership of esports, such as South Korea and Japan (Kamberovic, 2023), with a larger sample size. Such studies can enrich our understanding of the social-cultural influence on digital media usage within the context of esports studies.



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## Appendix 1. Respondents and Characteristics

Respondent	Date of Interview	Gender	Age	Nationality	Education level	LoL player	Game play year	game play level	still play the game	frequency of watching LoL tournament	Watch LoL Tournament Started from	Watch other esports tournaments	Region in watching	Favourite region	Favourite teams	Favourite players	Focus on	Platform for watching	Social media platforms
1	10 April	Male	25	Chinese	Bachelor student (study abroad - Rotterdam)	Yes	10 years (play first)	average	not so much because of the study	Monthly, depending on the competition	2015	PUBG, Crossfire, SCGO	World, LPL	China	no	no	tactics and skills	Panda TV, Douyu, Huya, Bilibili, YouTube	Weibo, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram
2	14 April	Male	20	Finnish	Bachelor student (study abroad - Rotterdam)	Yes	11 years (play first)	better than average	yes, weekly	Weekly, depending on the competition	2018	Valorant, CSGO, Rocket League	World, LEC	Europe	Heretics, Astralis, G2	Junkos (G2)	tactics and skills; fun things (reaction on Twitch)	Twitch, YouTube	Reddit, Twitter, Discord
3	15 April	Non-Binary	21	Polish	Bachelor student (study abroad - Rotterdam)	Yes	12 years (play first)	good player	not so much because of the study	Weekly, depending on the competition	2019	Valorant	World, LEC	Europe	G2	Junkos, Paul (G2)	tactics and skills; communications with friends	Twitch, YouTube, and LoL official website	Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Discord
4	17 April	Male	27	Dutch	Bachelor graduate	Yes	9 years (watch first)	good player	yes, daily	Daily (not to want miss a game)	2013	FIFA, Call of Duty, Dota 2 and more	World, LCK, LEC	South Korea	SK1	Faker (SK1)	tactics and skills	Twitch, YouTube, LoL official website	YouTube, Discord
5	18 April	Female	26	Chinese	Master student (study abroad - London)	Yes	10 years (watch first)	better than average	yes	Daily when not busy (not to want miss a game)	2013	no	World, LPL, LCK, LEC, LCS	China	RNG(LPL) LCK(Gen.G)	Xiaohu (LPL) Peanut (LCK)	tactics and skills	Bilibili, YouTube	Weibo, YouTube, Twitter
6	21 April	Male	21	Dutch	Bachelor student	Yes	10 years (play first)	average	not so much because of the study	Monthly, depending on the competition	2016	no	World, LEC	no specific, but watch mostly Europe	MAD Lions	Faker (SK1)	fun things (reaction on Twitch) and unexpected results	Twitch, YouTube	Reddit, Discord
7	24 April	Male	26	South African	Bachelor student (study abroad - Rotterdam)	yes	12 years (play first)	better than average	the study, once in two weeks	Weekly, depending on the competition	2014	no	World, LEC, LCK	North America, South Korea	SKT1	Faker (SK1)	tactics and skills	YouTube, Twitch, LoL official website	YouTube, Reddit, Discord
8	25 April	Female	25	Dutch	Premaster student	Yes	7 years	good player	yes	Weekly	2017	no	World, MSI, LEC, LCS, LCK	Europe	MAD Lions	Nisqy (MAD Lions)	tactics and skills	YouTube, LoL official website	Instagram, YouTube, Reddit, Discord
9	26 April	Male	20	Dutch	Bachelor student	Yes	7 years	good player	yes	Weekly	2017	no	World, LEC, LCK, LPL	no specific, but most Europe	Fnatic, G2	no specific, just good play mid-lane	tactics and skills	LoL official website, YouTube	YouTube, Reddit, Discord
10	30 April	Female	27	Chinese	Bachelor graduate (work related with video game)	Yes	10 years	better than average	yes	Weekly, depending on the competition	2016	no	World, LPL, LCK	China, South Korea	RNG	Uzi (RNG), Brother Crystal	fun things (Bullet comments) and players skills	LoL official website, Bilibili	Weibo, Bilibili, QQ message
11	3 May	Female	25	Chinese	Bachelor graduate	not that much after working	12 years	used to be better than average	yes	Daily, depending on the competition	2012	Apex's ALGS	World, LPL, LCK	China, South Korea	WE; IG	Rookie (Top Esports)	tactics and skills	Huya, Bilibili	Weibo, Bilibili, QQ message
12	6 May	Female	25	Chinese	Master student (study abroad - Utrecht)	Yes	8 years	good player	yes	Weekly, depending on the competition	2017	Valorant, Call of Duty	World, LPL, LCK	China	RNG, Weibo Gaming	TheShy (Weibo Gaming)	tactics and skills; fun things (Bullet comments)	Bilibili	Weibo, Bilibili, QQ message, Discord

## Appendix 2. Interview Guide

### Icebreaker questions (after the game):

- Do you play *League of Legends*?
- When did you start playing *LoL*?
- Can you tell me 2 or 3 reasons you like to play this game?
- When do you start watching the *LoL* World Championship?
- Which platform do you use for watching? and why?
- Which region is your favourite to watch?
- Do you have a favourite team to watch this year/last year?
- When do you usually watch the *LoL* World Championship?
- Do you also watch other esports tournaments?

### 1. Spectatorship of the *LoL* World Championship.

(Escapism/Knowledge acquisition/Novelty/Enjoyment of aggression/Socialization opportunities/Digital technology)

- Do you perceive watching the *LoL* World Championship to be different from your other entertainment/esports tournaments?
  - What happens if you know/saw your favourite team/players compete?
  - Describe the most exciting moment while watching last time?
- Can you list some of the reasons why you like to watch it?
- Describe the feeling when you are watching it last time.
  - Describe the most exciting moment while watching last time.
  - What do you gain from watching the game?
  - Do you practice the techniques you learnt from watching while you play the game?
- Do you prefer to watch alone, or do you like to watch with your friends? Why?
  - Describe when you are watching the game by yourself, what do you do while you are watching?
  - Describe when you are watching the game with your friends, what do you do?
- How do you feel about the gaming streaming platforms?
  - Do you think streaming platforms have any influence on your watching experiences?

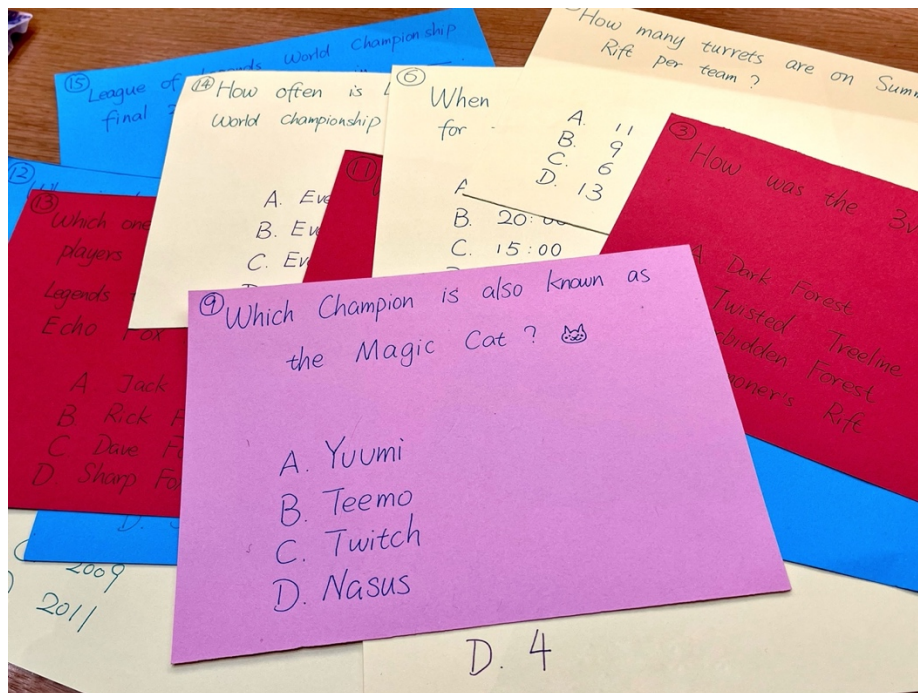
- What functions of the platform you are most fond of related to watching experiences?
- How is it?

## 2. Motivations for checking/sharing/creating game-related content on social media.

(Information/Individual identity/Integration and social interaction/Entertainment)

- Which social media is your favourite when checking/sharing/creating game-related content of the *LoL* World Championship? And why?
  - How often do you do it?
  - Describe this month when you use social media to check/share/create game-related content, what it is about?
  - What are the benefits of check/share/create game-related content on social media for you?
  - Describe how you feel when you check/share/create game-related content on social media.
  - What is your favourite topic of the content on social media?
  - Describe the most interesting game-related content for you have ever shared/created on social media.
  - Do you follow other game/esports accounts on social media, such as publishers, organisers, professional players and game influencers? What are you normally checking on?
- Do you join any online game/esports groups related to the *LoL* World Championship on social media? (What)
  - What is your personal experience with online game/esports groups on social media? (If)
  - How do you enjoy communicating with/listening to other people in online game/esports groups on social media? (If)
  - Describe the most interesting things you did with online game/esports groups on social media. (If)

### Appendix 3. Game League of Legends Trivia



1. What does the abbreviation TFT stand for?
  - Teams fight Teams
  - Team for Team
  - Teamfight Tactics
  - Teams for Tactics
2. What year was the game released?
  - 2010
  - 2007
  - 2009
  - 2011
3. How was the 3vs3 map called?
  - Dark Forest
  - Twisted Treeline
  - Forbidden Forest
  - Summoner's Rift
4. At what level do most champions unlock their ultimate ability?
  - Level 3
  - Level 6
  - Level 7
  - Level 5
5. How is Ashe's bow called?
  - Ashe's Bow
  - Magical Bow
  - Avarosa's Bow
  - Freljord's Bow



6. When exactly does baron spawn for the first time?
- 25:00
  - 20:00
  - 15:00
  - 30:00
7. What's the name of Annie's teddy bear?
- Teddy
  - Blane
  - Tibbers
  - Steve
8. How many turrets are on Summoner's Rift per team?
- 11
  - 9
  - 6
  - 13
9. Which champion is also known as the Magical Cat?
- Yuumi
  - Teemo
  - Twitch
  - Nasus
10. How many dragons are there in League of Legends?
- 7
  - 2
  - 5
  - 4
11. Which professional team won THREE world championships?
- Invictus Gaming
  - Fnatic
  - SK Telecom 1
  - Edward Gaming
12. Who is the best professional player in the world championships history?
- GaRooda
  - Faker
  - King Aj
  - Tyler1
13. Which one of these previous pro basketball players purchased a professional League of Legends team and changed the name to Echo Fox?
- Jack Fox
  - Rick Fox
  - Dave Fox
  - Sharp Fox

14. How often is League of Legends World Championship held?

- Every month
- Every four years
- Every year
- Every two years

15. League of Legends World Championship final 2023 will held in \_\_\_\_\_ .

- USA
- China
- South Korea
- Netherland

1. (3) 2. (3) 3. (2) 4. (2) 5. (3) 6. (2) 7. (3) 8. (1) 9. (1) 10. (1) 11. (3) 12. (2) 13. (2)  
14. (3) 15. (3)

#### Appendix 4. Coding Themes

Theme	Sub-theme	Initial Codes
Appealing characteristics of the <i>LoL</i> tournament for fans	Attractive game rules of <i>LoL</i> (motivation of playing): socialisation/teamwork/communication skills	Unique social game rule of <i>LoL</i>
		<i>LoL</i> is a social game
		<i>LoL</i> is fair to play in team
		<i>LoL</i> is a popular game among peer to play
		Enjoy teamwork while playing <i>LoL</i>
		Enjoy the choice of many champions while playing <i>LoL</i>
		Play <i>LoL</i> is like social rank at school
		Enjoy complexity tactics with many people while playing <i>LoL</i>
		Play <i>LoL</i> with friends is daily activities
	Emotional attachment to <i>LoL</i> game play	Understand well of the game rules
		Invest a lot of time/money to play <i>LoL</i>
		Don't understand the rules of other esports tournament
	Streaming platform preference for virtual rewards in game	Using <i>LoL</i> website because of virtual rewards
	Professionalisation in organisation	<i>LoL</i> is a world-class esports tournament
		<i>LoL</i> is the most advanced esports
		<i>LoL</i> is professional organised esports
		<i>LoL</i> is organised like traditional competitive sports
		<i>LoL</i> is an international scale esports
		<i>LoL</i> international events tend to be highly entertaining
		<i>LoL</i> game event promotion is systematic and complete
		Riot company has successfully develop it's business
	Enjoy of novelty	Hooked by the new championships while watching
		Enjoy different strategies while watching
		Enjoy changing the game rules every year
		Curious of unexpected tactics happen while watching

		Curious about underdog team play while watching
		Curious of unexpected results happen while watching
		Esports are uncontrollable
	Enjoy of aggressiveness	Cheer for a team which play well is excited
		Cheer for a team with familiar players is excited
		Cheer for your own region in the final is excited
		Cheer for the best pro player (Faker) play is excited
		Excited when favourite team to win
		Mood swings a lot when watching favourite team competing
		Prefer to watch regions with high level of competition
		Prefer to watch the best players in the competition
		High level of competition (final) is very excited to watch
		Watch playback when the competition is very excited
	Entertainment	Watching <i>LoL</i> is an entertainment in life
		<i>LoL</i> tournament is super interesting to watch
		Watching <i>LoL</i> felt happy
		Watching <i>LoL</i> can get relaxation
		Watching <i>LoL</i> for pasttime
		Interested in fun play in <i>LoL</i> tournament
		Watching esports and discussing (in MSNs) at the same time is fun
		Favourite team have fun players
		React to funny moment with friends through MSNs while watching is fun
	Bondings with <i>LoL</i> tournament on social media/individual identity	Follow the pro players on social media
		Personal support of the favourite players/teams on social media
		Defend favourite pro players/teams on social media

		Checking information on favourite players/teams on social media
		Finding controversial things related to the <i>LoL</i> players/teams on social media
		Participate in online discussion is fun
		Finding support of the favourite players/team on social media
		Feel fun to read dramas of <i>LoL</i> tournament on social media
		Feel fun to read people change support on social media
		feel fun to watch people discuss of <i>LoL</i> tournament on social media
		Looking for funny things related with <i>LoL</i> tournament on social media
		Finding drama of LPL players/teams on social media (Weibo)
		LPL has a lot of fun memes on social media (Weibo)
Digital media use for socialisation opportunities	Streaming platform preference for socialisation opportunities	Communication with other fans on streaming platforms is interesting
		Communities on Twitch is funny
		Difference between Twitch and YouTube is the fan community
		Jokes on Twitch's live chat is funny
		Looking for others reaction on Twitch is funny
		Using streaming platforms when familiar commentator broadcasting
		Sence of belonging on Twitch fan community
		Have fun watching bullet comments on Chinese streaming platforms
		Prefer bullet comments than virtual rewards
		Special moment to watch bullet comments for good mood
		Watch recording game mainly focus on bullet comments
	Socialisation opportunities with digital media integration while spectating	Discuss with friends online while watching is fun
		Discuss with friends through MSNs while watching is fun

		React to funny moments with friends through MSNs while watching is fun
		Cheering for one team with other fans on social media is fun
		Watching others react on Twitch while watching felt connected
		Watching bullet comments felt everyone cheer together
		Gaining friendship when support the same team on social media
		Meeting other fans online felt understandable with each other
		Bullet comments are really fun to watch
		Jokes on Twitch's live chat is funny
		Reaction on Twitch is fun to watch
	Mobile social networks for communications/social interaction	The online community organised on MSNs
		Friends from MSNs are not strangers
		MSNs groups have the same interest in gameplay and support teams
		MSNs groups for organising watching together
		Using Discord for organising game play
		Using Discord to share game-related content on social media
		Share self-made game-related content in MSNs groups (instead of social media)
		Using MSNs for sharing game-related events
		Using MSNs to share game-related news
		Discuss about game-related content on social media in MSNs groups
Knowledge acquisition of <i>LoL</i> tournament is important for fans	Streaming platform preference for knowledge acquisition	YouTube is easy to access
		YouTube have better-broadcast quality
		Avoid trouble while watching
		No bullet comments on the official site
		Bullet comments are annoying while watching
		Reaction and live chat is annoying while watching
	Knowledge acquisition by spectating esports	Gain understanding of the game while watching

		Learning skill while watching is helpful for gameplay
		Pay attention to individual skills of pro players while watching
		Pay attention to the teamwork and strategies while watching
		Pay attention to mistakes while watching
		Drawing inspiration from the <i>LoL</i> characters
		Discuss the tactics with friends while watching
		Not sure if learnt anything useful
		Strategy for underdog team win is attractive
	Knowledge acquisition on social media	Finding game related information on social media
		Asking for specific questions related to the <i>LoL</i> tournament on social media
		Answer the questions related to game and esports on social media
		Looking for discussions of the <i>LoL</i> tournament on social media
		Looking for professional commentaries on the <i>LoL</i> tournament on social media
		Checking on content related to skills and tactics of the competitions

## Appendix 5. Consent Form

### CONSENT REQUEST FOR PARTICIPATING IN RESEARCH

#### FOR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, CONTACT:

Name: Weijie Huang

Address:

Email: [595461wh@student.eur.nl](mailto:595461wh@student.eur.nl)

Telephone number:

#### DESCRIPTION

You<sup>1</sup> are invited to participate in a research about [Exploring Esports Fandom on Social Media: A Qualitative Research on Social Media Use and *LoL* World Championship Spectatorship]. The purpose of the study is to understand [motivations to watch the *LoL* World Championship and share/create game-related content on social media for digital fandom identities' construction].

Your acceptance to participate in this study means that you accept to [be interviewed]. In general terms,

- the questions [of the interview] will be related to watch the *LoL* World Championship and social media use.

Unless you prefer that no recordings are made, I will use a tape / video recorder for the interview.

You are always free not to answer any particular question, and/or stop participating at any point.

**RISKS AND BENEFITS** [alternatives A and B are presented below, but there may be further variations]

A. As far as I can tell, there are no risks associated with participating in this research. Yet, you are free to decide whether I should use your name or other identifying information not in the study. If you prefer, I will make sure that you cannot be identified, by [measures that will be taken: pseudonym, general identification only mentioning age and gender, etc.].

B. I am aware that the possibility of identifying the people who participate in this study may involve risks for ... [Explain potential risks for the participant's reputation, help, social relations, etc.]. For that reason—unless you prefer to be identified fully (first name, last name, occupation, etc.)—I will

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<sup>1</sup> In the case of minors, informed consent must be obtained from the parents or other official carers. They will have to sign this form. Please make sure to adjust this form accordingly. Even if/when consent has been provided, children should never be forced to participate or to continue participating.



not keep any information that may lead to the identification of those involved in the study. I will only pseudonyms to identify participants.

I will use the material from the interviews and my observation exclusively for academic work, such as further research, academic meetings and publications.

### **TIME INVOLVEMENT**

Your participation in this study will take [45-60 minute]. You may interrupt your participation at any time.

### **PAYMENTS**

There will be no monetary compensation for your participation.

### **PARTICIPANTS' RIGHTS**

If you have decided to accept to participate in this project, please understand your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. You have the right to refuse to answer particular questions. If you prefer, your identity will be made known in all written data resulting from the study. Otherwise, your individual privacy will be maintained in all published and written data resulting from the study.

### **CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS**

If you have questions about your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact –anonymously, if you wish— [Leandro Borges Lima]

### **SIGNING THE CONSENT FORM**

If you sign this consent form, your signature will be the only documentation of your identity. Thus, you DO NOT NEED to sign this form. In order to minimize risks and protect your identity, you may prefer to consent orally. Your oral consent is sufficient.

I give consent to be audiotaped during this study:

Name	Signature	Date
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I prefer my identity to be revealed in all written data resulting from this study

Name	Signature	Date
------	-----------	------

This copy of the consent form is for you to keep. <sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Two copies should be made for each subject: one for the subject to keep and one for the student's records.