

Esport as a traditional sport:
a qualitative research on the sportification of *Rocket League*

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ABSTRACT

Esports has rapidly evolved over the past few years and has together with the gaming industry turned into a major entertainment medium that can be compared to traditional sports. This study aims to explore the characteristics of the *Rocket League* esport, how the esports scene functions as a marketing tool, how fan engagement plays a role in the success of esport, and how these things can be compared to traditional sports. Despite the growing popularity of esports, there is a limited amount of research that compares esports and traditional sports, specifically from the perspective of esport commentators. This study addresses this gap by looking how *Rocket League* commentators experience the esport landscape and how they compare their work to traditional sports commentary. Therefore the main research question is: *How do Rocket League esport commentators experience the esport media landscape and how can their work be compared to traditional sports commentary?* This question is answered by doing a qualitative research that uses semi-structured interviews with seven experts in the *Rocket League* esport. These seven experts have an extensive amount of experience in the esport scene and work or have worked at the highest level of broadcast in esport. These commentators provided insight into various themes of the esport such as esport commentary, broadcast professionalization, marketing, and fan engagement and compared these aspects to traditional sports. The data was collected using through in-depth interviews, which were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis. The three main themes that came out of the analysis were: esports vs traditional sports, esport as marketing, and fan engagement. The main findings showed that esports draw their inspiration from traditional sports, however, esports is also a young and evolving esport with a distinct identity that focuses more on fan engagement and being less serious. Sportification helps the esport scene to bridge the gap to traditional sports and become more approachable. The fundamental difference between esports and traditional sports is the ownership of the developers. Esports are often an owned product with the goal of being a marketing tool. Marketing and entertainment are closely linked, and fan engagement plays a crucial role in the success of esport. The fans can enhance the atmosphere during matches which influences the viewing experience. COVID has also impacted the esport by introducing hybrid working environments which still impact the esport scene to this day. In conclusion, the esports scene is an evolving field that integrates elements of traditional sports but still innovates them to fit their unique identity. There is a focus on personality, authenticity, storytelling, and fan engagement that plays a bigger role in esports, compared to traditional sports.

KEYWORDS: *esport, sportification, broadcasting, commentary, Rocket League*

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1. Introduction

"THIS IS ROCKET LEAGUE!" is one of the most noticeable catchphrases of the *Rocket League* esports scene. This sentence was called by a commentator during one of the most thrilling finals of a world championship. After that final, the sentence was a monumental mark to show how exciting the esports can be and to create excitement among fans. This phrase was even copied by other esports because it works so well for capturing the moment for fans. *Rocket League* is a video game produced by Psyonix in 2015 and acquired by Epic Games in 2019. The game is similar to soccer but with cars, with more than six million players worldwide. The game has a competitive online multiplayer in different game modes, with an esports scene focusing around the 3v3 game mode. Teams have their own regional tournament seasons in Europe, North America, Oceania, South America, Middle East & North Africa, Asia-Pacific, and Sub-Saharan Africa which each year conclude in a world championship (Psyonix, 2024). The *Rocket League Championship Series (RLCS)* started in 2016 and has been ongoing for 13 seasons now (Makuch, 2016). At the start of 2024, it was announced that BLAST would take over the broadcasting rights for the competitive tournaments of *Rocket League* for the upcoming years (BLAST, 2024). This means that BLAST will run the operations of competition, event production, marketing, commercial rights, and broadcasts for the *RLCS* (BLAST, 2024).

The gaming industry was in 2013 already surpassing other creative industries like the music industry and had already similar revenues to the movie industry (Marchand & Hennig-Thurau, 2013). Now, the gaming industry and therefore also esports is still showing growth in their audience and revenue (Roth et al., 2023, p.1).

Watching and playing electronic sports (esports) has rapidly gained worldwide popularity, therefore this new form of mainstream entertainment is an extremely relevant theme to look into (Wohn & Freeman, 2020, p.74). What is interesting to note is that although this is a new form of entertainment, it still follows a similar broadcasting frame as traditional sports (Taylor, 2018, p.2). This can be related to sportification, where it is shown that esports borrows many elements from traditional sports broadcasts (Block et al., 2018, p.29). And while viewing and playing esports is all based on digital systems, many esports are held in large venues like stadiums where spectators gather just like traditional sports (Cumming et al., 2022, p.261). The term traditional sports in this research is meant to refer to modern mediated sports that have been around for a long time and are not in a video game environment, so we can separate them from esports. Sports and sports media are known to be a part of the culture and contribute to and validate ideologies that are present in society which makes sports an interesting thing to research (Kido Lopez, 2023, p.8).

This shows that gaming and esports are an ongoing and still growing industry, the esports scene in particular shows a resemblance to how traditional sports are presented and

played. *Rocket League* in particular shows a resemblance to traditional sports as the game describes itself as soccer with cars. Sportification could explain how these comparisons in esports come from traditional sports and follow a similar broadcasting style. With this year BLAST taking over broadcasting rights, this could show how broadcasting in esports is changing and has evolved over the past couple of years. A way of answering this question would be by asking people who work in the field of broadcasting esports. Someone who regularly works on broadcast in the esport scene would be an esport commentator.

This leads to the research question: *How do Rocket League esport commentators experience the esport media landscape and how can their work be compared to traditional sports commentary?*

1.1 relevance

Prior research has shown that the topic of esport has not been researched thoroughly, as research on esports is slowly coming up (Steinkuehler, 2020, p.5). The current research focused more on specific analytical case studies that are mostly based in North America, for example, Oh et al. (2023, p.988) have an analytical quantitative study that has a focus on esports in North America. Another example is how Turtiainen et al. (2020, p.367) also limit their research by only analyzing one broadcast of the World Cup. It has also been shown that existing research often consists of interviews, surveys, or case studies, with a focus on players or consumers (Reitman et al., 2020, p.35). In traditional sports, there is already done research on the television commentary of sports commentators. For example by LeCouteur & Yong (2022) who focused on television commentary for men's and women's Australian Rules football games, and by Van Sterkenburg et al. (2012), researched Dutch commentary of televised soccer. This shows that research on commentators has been done in traditional sports but not within the esport scene. This shows a gap in the research, where there was not looked at commentators in the esport scene and how they view the relationship between traditional sports and esports. This shows the academic relevance of looking more into esports and their relationship with traditional sports through the lens of experts in the field, as this would improve prior research.

With this research, I want to focus on one specific esport that is played and watched all over the world regions all over the world have teams competing in regional tournaments and for the world championship (Psyonix, 2024). The goal is to get a more in-depth view of the esport scene with the help of experts in the field of esports to see their view on this growing industry. The gaming industry is a giant industry which has great social relevance (Marchand & Hennig-Thurau, 2013). The esport scene and gaming industry are still both

showing growth in their audience and revenue which makes it an interesting topic to research (Roth et al., 2023, p.1). Another reason for choosing to do this research, besides academic and social relevance, is my personal affinity with esports. I myself have watched the *Rocket League* esports scene since the third season. The scene instantly captivated me as besides that I have played the game myself, the esports is very easy to follow. Fundamentally it is similar to traditional sports and the matches are very short, which makes it easy to watch. Another thing I noticed was how the commentators explained the game and told viewers what to watch out for. I noticed how they told viewers about ongoing storylines and what was at stake during a match. From then on I was a loyal watcher of the esports scene, and as I saw the esports scene growing I was more intrigued with the works of esports and wanted to do a focused research on it, as there is not yet much research on this specific topic.

1.2 structure of the research

To present the findings of this research, which looks to answer the main research question, as described as looking into the experience of commentators in the *Rocket League* esports and looking at how this can be compared to traditional sports, will be done in five sections.

The introduction will introduce the research question and will address the context of this study while showing the academic and social relevance. The theoretical framework will address prior research and introduce the main themes to answer the research question, this section has three main themes which have sub-sections to further explore these main themes. The first theme introduced in the theoretical framework is live esports, with the accompanying sub-sections: spectators of esports and rising of esports. The second theme is the sportification of esports which is explored with the sub-themes of broadcast narratives, and player careers. The final theme looks at broadcast commentary while also talking about commentary narratives, and broadcast professionalization in the sub-themes. The methods section will explain how the research was done, this will be explained through the research design, sampling of interviewees, operationalization, analysis, ethics, and validity and reliability. After this, the results obtained from the interviews with experts will be discussed using the three founded themes: Esports vs traditional sports, esports is marketing, and fan engagement. Each of the founded themes consists of sub-themes that resulted into the main theme. The sub-themes of the first theme are Inspiration from traditional sports, The uniqueness of esports, and Commentary styles. The second theme consists of Esports as a marketing tool, Esports as entertainment, Power of Personality, and Storytelling. The final

founded theme has the sub-themes Power of fans, Audience engagement, and Live vs online. The conclusion will be the final part of this thesis and will present the main findings, limitations & future research, and implications.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 introduction

In this section, I will explain the most important parts of esports and the similarities it has to traditional sports. This will be done by first diving deeper into live esports, the sportification of esports, and broadcast commentary. Esports has rapidly evolved into a global sport blending the elements of traditional sports and entertainment with the digital and technical environment where esports has its roots. The trend of sportification of esports plays a crucial role in the scene. There is a focus on professionalizing esports to familiarize consumers with traditional sports. Sports are also a cultural part of our society where the sports players fit in and here esports is trying to imitate the same thing. The phenomenon of playing esports in a live environment and playing while other people are watching in a stadium can be seen as similar to traditional sports. Lastly, broadcast commentary plays an important role in the viewer's experience of sport and we can draw parallels between esports and traditional sports. At the same time, there are also significant challenges for the esports and their working environment.

2.2 Live esports

The term esports refers to competitive multiplayer gaming that involves spectating real-time gameplay, team competitions, and tournaments that can be online or offline (Wohn & Freeman, 2020, p.74). Esports has different definitions and can be seen as games, sports, or mass entertainment (Reitman et al., 2020, p.41). Other elements of the definition emphasize physicality, computer mediation, institutional infrastructure, and spectatorship (Reitman et al., 2020, p.41). Competitive gaming is an important aspect of esports that is often used in its definitions, these competitions can be held more amateur in a garage or professionally in a stadium between the best in the world (Reitman et al., 2020, p.41). Esports are facilitated by electronic systems where the input of players, teams, and output of the esports system are mediated by humans through technology (Reitman et al., 2020, p.41). While traditional sports need access to a peer group, sports facilities, coaches, and transportation, esports only require a computer and an internet connection (Örsoğlu et al., 2023, p.546). In this research when talking about traditional sports, we mean sports that have existed for a long time and would not be considered esports as they are not competitive multiplayer videogames. Technology plays a role in esports but other views and definitions focus more on the mental and physical abilities in the use of technology and communication it has (Reitman et al., 2020, p.41). For this research, I will use the definition

of esports which states them as competitive multiplayer gaming that involves real-time gameplay, team competitions, and offline or online tournaments. Esport is a digitized sports activity that has many characteristics of traditional sports, however, it can not be considered one because of its digital characteristics (Cumming et al., 2022, p.260). Other research suggests it can be seen as a sport because of other similarities and criteria that esport have in common. Physical activity, recreation, competitive elements, organizational structure, and social acceptance of esport are criteria that are categorized as a sport (Reitman et al., 2020, p.35). In 2022 during the Olympics, the Asian Olympic Council recognized esports as an official event in the Asian games, which helped the recognition worldwide of esport as a sport (Örsoğlu et al., 2023, p.535). Just like traditional sports, esports is also physical, demanding dexterity, coordination, quick reflexes, visual acuity, and mental focus (Steinkuehler, 2020, p.4). Esport takes place in a digital environment and therefore is only able to be seen through mediated productions (Cumming et al., 2022, p.260). This means that even at an event in a stadium, viewers can see through screens what is happening in the game, just like people at home would see. Knowing the differences and similarities between esports and traditional sports is important to see what they have in common and how they are presented.

2.2.1 Spectators of esport

Spectatorship is a core part of esport and involves competitive video gaming that is produced and consumed as a spectator sport (Cumming et al., 2022, p.258). This is done through various elements of esport, such as promotional efforts, broadcasting infrastructure, the organizational structure of the teams, tournaments, leagues, and the players' physical performance (Reitman et al., 2020, p.41). It shows that esport is multifaceted and involves not only gameplay but also its surroundings in the spectator part of the sport to create a compelling and engaging experience that can be compared to traditional sports. Esports are watched mostly online through YouTube and Twitch, but also as an offline event in person generating a global viewership (Örsoğlu et al., 2023, p.535). As esports are less familiar to the public than traditional sports, esports require the pyramidal structure of amateurs, semi-professionals, and professionals to generate sufficient interest, income, and profit to support their professional players (Johnson & Woodcock, 2021, p.1457). This means that esports reach a smaller audience and therefore need a structure to provide enough interest and money. It is not sufficient for every game to become an esport because it requires a large community of players who are interested in viewing and being spectators of the highest level of play and aspire to those levels themselves (Johnson & Woodcock, 2021, p.1458). The spectatorship of games has grown because of esport (Cumming et al., 2022, p.264). As

more people play games and watch games in esports, more people start paying attention and watching esports. Spectatorship is an important method that is used to analyze esports and compare it to other traditional sports (Reitman et al., 2020, p.38). This comparison shows the popularity and reach of esports events in relation to traditional sports, it is important to consider all parts of the esports ecosystem, including gameplay, media, technology, and community involvement (Reitman et al., 2020, p.41). In esports spectatorship is described as not only watching the game but as actively engaging with the community (Reitman et al., 2020, p.39). Watching is not the only part of engaging in viewing esports in an online or offline event. Watching games live can not only be done physically in venues but also digitally through live streaming platforms (Reitman et al., 2020, p.39).

The performance of sports itself and playing competitively in front of a crowd represents how gaming is a spectator sport (Turtiainen et al., 2020, p.366). This form of digital competition is often aligned with live streaming. Esports is very much intertwined with technology and media, therefore live streaming is part of its nature (Reitman et al., 2020, p.38). Because of Twitch esports have grown at a fast rate (Ward & Harmon, 2019, p.1010). Live streaming has enabled esports to become more accessible and to not only create individual tournament hosting but also professionally organized tournaments (Wohn & Freeman, 2020, p.73). Twitch is a live-streaming platform used by its users to broadcast content that varies from gaming to non-gaming content, Twitch has more than 10 million daily users and 2 million creators (Wohn & Freeman, 2020, p.74). Taylor (2018, p.2) suggests that live streams are very professional and even become full shows with serious production forms. Various live streaming platforms offer their services, such as Twitch, YouTube, and Facebook. But Twitch is by far the biggest with around 10 million daily active users (Wohn & Freeman, 2020, p.74). Live streaming reshapes interactive experiences, social engagement, and the sense of community in the online world as people have different reasons to watch live streams (Wohn & Freeman, 2020, p.74). To understand the streamer identity from an esports perspective it is shown that esports players use their game expertise as a prior way of entertaining, compared to a variety of broadcasts that try to entertain through humor or theatrical performance (Taylor, 2018, p.2). Parallels can be found here in traditional sports and how they engage with their audience, the drive from the esports scene to be seen and legitimized by the public is the reason why this way of entertainment is being governed and organized to create these parallels (Reitman et al., 2020, p.41). Esports has a new discourse where streaming provides independence from traditional media and television is no longer necessary (Taylor, 2018, p.2). However, television still impacts esports as they follow a similar broadcasting frame (Taylor, 2018, p.2). Global companies that make and publish the most popular game titles host some of the largest competitions worldwide, but there are also still smaller competitions held locally and voluntarily (Steinkuehler, 2020, p.4).

A production crew mediates the content which is then projected onto screens in a venue and streamed to audiences across the globe, this means everybody has the same viewpoint and all spectators watch through the same lens, therefore esports is argued to fit Bale's landscape of sameness (Cumming et al., 2022, p.259). While viewing and playing games is all in a digital world, viewing can be done more physically, as most esports events are held in large stadium-like venues where spectators come together to engage in the games, just like traditional sports (Cumming et al., 2022, p.261).

2.2.2 Rising of esports

Esports as a theme has seen an increase in stories for newspapers, magazines, and stories and can be considered as going viral (Newman et al., 2022, p.251). Esports has grown over the years to become an ecosystem of consumers, players, organizations, and other stakeholders (Reitman et al., 2020, p.35). The viewership and salaries in the esports scene have risen to a level similar to that of traditional sports (Steinkuehler, 2020, p.4).

Investment in the esports industry is something that has also been proven to be more popular although they do not have a proven business model that generates cash flow, which shows how making money within esports is still in an early learning stage (Newman et al., 2022, p.241). The ecosystem of esports reached a revenue of one billion dollars in 2019 and is estimated to continue to rise. The esports ecosystem consists of games, events, streaming services, and supporting business activities (Newman et al., 2022, p.242). These parts of the esports ecosystem resemble and are familiar with traditional sports (Newman et al., 2022, p.242). However spectating a sport also brings negative parts to the sport, just like in traditional sports there are people whose passion is going too far and turns into obsessive passion, while on the other hand people who are harmonious and passionate about the sport (Qian et al., 2024, p.423). Obsessive fans neglect the professional commitments of others and show toxic behavior to validate their own identity and team identification within a community (Qian et al., 2024, p.422). Toxic fans are harmful and disruptive towards other fans, players, and teams, this can be in person during live events but is also done through chat functions in live streams (Qian et al., 2024, p.422). The harmonious fans may not be subject to this form of toxicity and root for their favorite team and have a healthier relationship with their passion (Qian et al., 2024, p.434). This shows that spectating a sport always can be a double-edged sword which can generate positive but also negative interactions and obsessions among fans. There are also cultural and social aspects to this part of esports, as these live events allow esports to be integrated as a cultural activity and therefore influence people's leisure time and identity (Reitman et al., 2020, p.39). There is now a growing network of collegiate esports clubs that participate in their own nationwide

collegiate esports league competitions with growing participating schools, which started as something small is now growing as young people have a growing interest in esports and some schools in the United States even feature athletic scholarships for their professional gamers (Steinkuehler, 2020, p.4). Women are shown to have an increasing participation in the esports industry and it is suggested that esports reflects and contributes to the cultural shift of gender dynamics (Reitman et al., 2020, p.39).

2.3 Sportification of esports

A lot of effort is put into the sportification of esports by presenting competitions in a familiar way that is comparable to traditional sports (Turtiainen et al., 2020, p.352). The needed skills such as motor abilities and fast performance align with the physical and mental demands of traditional sports (Pargman & Svensson, 2019, p.18).

Sportification theory states that all sports develop through similar patterns towards increased specialization, standardization, rationalization, regimentation, organization, equalization, and quantification (Turtiainen et al., 2020, p.352). To evolve from something humans did for work into more structured, organized, and competitive events that resemble professional sports and therefore blur the lines between work and play (Pargman & Svensson, 2019, p.19). There is a distinction between professional sports players and amateurs, for professionals, there are blurring boundaries between play as labor and play as leisure called playbour (Johnson & Woodcock, 2021, p.42). Playbour is the transition from doing something for fun and getting money from it to playing a game and making it your actual main job. For esports to grow playbour is involved through streamers as it can raise awareness of the game, show new tactics, and the size of the competitive scene (Johnson & Woodcock, 2021, p.42). This way esports are evolving and professionalizing into a sport that is taken more seriously. Esports have gone through sportification at a fast pace similar to traditional sports, where esports are integrated into the sports framework through a process of internationalization and professionalization with sponsored teams (Pargman & Svensson, 2019, p.32).

An important part of traditional sports is their cultural significance and formal support of the activity, where governing bodies are developing traditional sports, this now also happens with esports (Reitman et al., 2020, p.40). A way to professionalize the esports and give it a familiar feel from traditional physical sports entertainment includes: tournaments, leagues, fans, teams, sponsors, prizes, team owners, and player contracts (Reitman et al., 2020, p.40). The esports scene has evolved into an organized and competitive scene with professional players and a structured competition that mirrors traditional sports, still showing

a growing global audience and economy (Pargman & Svensson, 2019, p.21). The similarity between esports and traditional sports is because of their competition, league organization, and physicality, just as with other sports the players or teams are defined by their performance and their goal is to win against other professional gamers and win the competition (Steinkuehler, 2020, p.4).

2.3.1 Broadcast narratives

Esport broadcasts have many elements that are similar to sports broadcasts (Block et al., 2018, p.30). Previous research has shown that esport broadcasts follow the same structure as sports broadcasts in the areas: of structure, commentary and expertise, game presentation, game highlights, teams and players, and audience (Turtiainen et al., 2020, p.366). In the narrative of esport business stories, there are three main protagonists (Newman et al., 2022, p.255). They would focus on the young mostly male individual who spent his time with gaming activities, the entrepreneurial techy millennial, and a group of sports investors looking for team ownership (Newman et al., 2022, p.255). The last one would look to extend their grasp in the sports industry or to gain a younger audience (Newman et al., 2022, p.255). These stories are described as where gamers are taken out of their parent's basement and given structure and capital to go and compete in stadiums all over the world. This commercialization of esport is compared to other traditional sports but as a different branch of the sports industry that can increase fan engagement (Newman et al., 2022, p.256). Existing sports brands see esport as a way to extend their brand to new generations and consumers (Newman et al., 2022, p.258). Younger consumers are more likely to watch esports compared to older generations, this is because of the negative perceptions older generations have of gaming, and younger generations are more accepting (Örsoğlu et al., 2023, p.547). There are besides the negative, also positive effects of gaming as it develops spatial skills, improves relationships, parental obedience, and social networking, enhances academic performance, and lowers the risk of alcohol and drug use (Örsoğlu et al., 2023, p.548).

Esport does not only follow the elements and media presentation of traditional sports but also reinforces these structures and practices (Turtiainen et al., 2020, p.366). Similar to traditional sports, esports make a lot of use of infographics and augmented views to cover the sports scenery (Block et al., 2018, p.30). Recent trends focus on capturing and making a visual presentation of live sports, which includes 3D reconstructions, highlight detection, and player tracking (Block et al., 2018, p.30). These techniques enable broadcasts to give viewers new insights into the performance and strategy of players through the use of data-driven content (Block et al., 2018, p.30).

2.3.2 Player careers

Just like many traditional sports esports are a superstar market, which means that a small number of top players earn the largest share of the earnings, compared to the rest of the players (Ward & Harmon, 2019, p.988). This is a result of the biggest players attracting larger audiences and sponsors through digital communication platforms like their social media and Twitch, therefore resulting in more earning potential and a superstar effect (Ward & Harmon, 2019, p.992).

Esport mirrors traditional sports by professionalizing online gaming, an important aspect is the team owners and developers who create sport-like leagues for the teams to attract fans and create more business opportunities (Newman et al., 2022, p.260). This sportification of the esport aims to make the esport more professional and similar to traditional sports to attract more investors and business potential so esport can be a contender in the broader sports entertainment industry (Newman et al., 2022, p.260). Developers pursue expansion into more media networks to attract new audiences and new sponsorship deals to be a contender in sports entertainment (Newman et al., 2022, p.260).

Esports are gaining more recognition and gamers who aspire to make it their career are also increasing, but gaining social acceptance to choose this career is still an ongoing process (Örsoğlu et al., 2023, p.353). The younger generation is not just playing these games for fun, but are also looking for recognition and wants to show that esport is a professional sport (Örsoğlu et al., 2023, p.549). Compared to traditional sports players feel less support from their family, while this positive support would help in the professionalization of esport (Örsoğlu et al., 2023, p.546). Reasons for starting in esport differ from starting in traditional sports, in esport, there are factors of loneliness and peer effects while in traditional sports environmental factors are mentioned (Örsoğlu et al., 2023, p.546). Esport players are tended to focus on winning while also focusing on their mental health based on their performance (Örsoğlu et al., 2023, p.547).

Just as in any sport, the careers of players in esport are short as the young players have the edge (Johnson & Woodcock, 2021, p.1459). Gamers do not maintain their skills and abilities of fast reaction after the age of 30, leaving professional gamers in the same uncertain spot as traditional sports players, but with less future employment options in other sectors (Johnson & Woodcock, 2021, p.1459). Another uncertainty can be the professional's income as only top performers earn the most earnings (Ward & Harmon, 2019, p.988). However, there have been recent moves to ensure the careers of these professional gamers with contracts, and after their retirement by becoming a coach or trainer and tutoring new players or even becoming a sports commentator. It is however still a risky career as it is a

highly competitive scene with an uncertain long-term career (Johnson & Woodcock, 2021, p.1459).

2.4 Broadcast commentary

Sports commentary is often only available to those who are not present in the stadium and are listening to broadcasts (Kido Lopez, 2023, p.102). Live sports matches are in traditional sports often interpreted for viewers by sports commentators, which could suggest commentators send a preferred message to the audience (Desmarais & Bruce, 2010, p.340). However in esports, commentary is not only available for the people at home, the fans that are at the stadium can also listen to the commentary (Cumming et al., 2022, p.260). In esports, these sports commentators are often called casters or broadcasters (Johnson & Woodcock, 2021, p.1456). Like traditional sports, commentators in esports relay the gameplay during larger competitive events (Ruvalcaba et al., 2018). When traditional commentary is compared to research in esports commentary there are some similarities as it follows traditional sports. Many esports follow a play-by-play commentary style in which they describe the details of the action happening on screen (Johnson & Woodcock, 2021, p.1456). Another commentary style is color commentary, this is where a commentator fills gaps by offering additional information, statistics, amusing comments, and asking questions to the other commentator (Johnson & Woodcock, 2021, p.1456). Both these commentary styles originated and are proven to be successful in traditional sports, and now many esports use this model of play-by-play and color commentary in their broadcasts for their success (Johnson & Woodcock, 2021, p.1456).

The commentary is used to mediate the viewers' experience of the sport and an opportunity for broadcasters to shape the competition (Kido Lopez, 2023, p.25). The commentary can be dramatized or personalized to create conflict and amplify the sport with more emotion and aggression (Kido Lopez, 2023, p.25). Commentators use statistics and predictions more often because of the rise of fantasy sports (Kido Lopez, 2023, p.25).

The way that sports and media are conceived is done through the expectation that sports are live and a real competition (Kido Lopez, 2023, p.33). Just as in broadcasting, the liveness of the commentary, views from the stadium, replays, and statistics have become part of the live and real competition (Kido Lopez, 2023, p.54). Watching a live broadcast shows parallels of fandom in a stadium as there is space for self-expression (Kido Lopez, 2023, p.81). Fandom is also a big part of traditional sports, and involves a way of personal identification, to state someone's identity, values, and engagement in the world (Kido Lopez, 2023, p.78). The level of consumption by fans can be done in many ways and can be more

than only just watching a match or engaging with branding (Kido Lopez, 2023, p.25). A community of fans also creates rivalries and allows the building of a group (Kido Lopez, 2023, p.52). The consumption of games in a stadium is a key expression of fandom and can be seen as a form of self-expression (Kido Lopez, 2023, p.81). Just like traditional sports, the consumption from esports fans also happens in big stadiums where fans express themselves, root for their team, and have rivalries. Results have shown that esports fans also prefer tighter matchups to more one-sided ones, but the expectation before the match does not impact their viewing decision (Oh et al., 2023, p.987).

2.4.1 Commentary narratives

In traditional sports commentary, it is shown that commentary helps construct and reinforce dominant meanings and that sports commentary often works with cultural assumptions and discourses about race and ethnicity to create a narrative for the player (Van Sterkenburg et al., 2012, p.423). It should be noted that women's experience in esports is different compared to men's. Women players in esports often receive comments and acts of sexual harassment based on appearances from consumers of the games (Ruvalcaba et al., 2018, p.308). This shows that in the gaming community, there is a higher rate of sexism and stereotyping, which could be connected to a similar hypermasculine culture that surrounds traditional sports (Ruvalcaba et al., 2018, p.308). Research has shown that most common descriptors in traditional sports commentary are based on technical aspects and skill of performance, but also focus on more personal commentary and relations for female players whereas for male players there is more focus on physical characteristics (LeCouteur & Yong, 2022, p.697). This suggests that both esports and traditional sports narratives can be focused on gender, but there is not much research on this topic. Commentary is used as a tool to identify, focus on, and interpret key moments (Kido Lopez, 2023, p.25).

Nationalism is a strong element that is focused on throughout broadcasts, and therefore nationalism and locality play an important role in the commentary of esports (Turtiainen et al., 2020, p.366). Data and statistics are also an important part of the broadcasts to highlight aspects of gameplay that go unnoticed and create stories; for example the lack of engagement of players, unusual strategies, tactics, behavior, and skill which is better than before (Block et al., 2018, p.38). Commentary, statistics, and replays are used in esports to add a new broadcast style where also players and game narratives are introduced and announced in a montage (Kido Lopez, 2023, p.52). These uses of statistics, commentary on players themselves, players' performance, and storytelling are similar to traditional sports where they also focus on these elements (Ruvalcaba et al., 2018, p.296).

2.4.2 Broadcast professionalization

The production of these broadcasts where commentators work has been professionalized, where in the beginning it was more casual, now larger companies are behind these professional productions to create a high-value production that has helped to grow esports (Johnson & Woodcock, 2021, p.1456). Not only the production has professionalized, but also the commentators themselves. Being a commentator has become a realistic career path with its own set of skills, as two aspects of the labor of casting are most important. Different from traditional sports, esports are at a much faster pace, not only in the game itself but also in the constantly changing formation of teams and players (Johnson & Woodcock, 2021, p.1456). Casting requires technical skills, a deep knowledge of the game and teams in the esports scene, the ability to deliver knowledge at appropriate times, quick response to on-screen action, and the ability to keep up with the rapid flow of esports games, but besides these technical aspects, casters also have to be liked by the fans of the esports (Johnson & Woodcock, 2021, p.1456). This shows that casters are highly knowledgeable in their esports, not only do they know about sports commentary they also have a lot of inside knowledge of the esports scene itself.

2.5 Conclusion

To conclude, this section showed the rich landscape of live esports. It has many sides and is embedded in technology, entertainment, and competitive gaming. Events are there in all forms from small events between players to professional events between the best in the world and held in stadiums. These esports events give entertainment to a worldwide audience thanks to streaming platforms like Twitch and YouTube, enabling fans to participate in various ways. There is however also a challenge in this accessibility, with toxic fan behavior that takes their fandom too far, this fandom can be compared to fandoms in traditional sports. Esports are continuing to thrive which influences identity, entertainment landscape, and cultural dynamics while blurring the lines of virtual and physical competition.

Sportification plays a significant role in the esports scene as it represents a dynamic shift in the landscape of game competitions. Through sportification, esports seek to professionalize and familiarize themselves with their audiences. They emulate practices of traditional sports and professionalize online gaming, esports leagues, teams, and events to resemble traditional sports to gain a bigger audience, more sponsors, and more stakeholders. This form of resembling traditional sport is not only showing in media coverage and presentation but also in the career paths and opportunities for professional gamers.

While esports offers opportunities there are still uncertainties regarding the length of careers and financial stability.

Broadcast commentary is a vital part of esports, just as it is in traditional sports. It gives the spectator a better experience as it provides insights and entertainment. Esports mirrors traditional sports commentary styles as esports casters also use play-by-play and color commentary to engage the audience and give a better viewer experience. There are however challenges considering gender representation and professionalization of casters. Esports continues to gain momentum driven by the players, competition, and stakeholders of the esports scene. This is all to solidify esports as a legitimate form of entertainment and a professional sport.

Research in esports shows that there is still a lot to uncover as despite the rise of esports there is not a lot of coordinated research (Steinkuehler, 2020, p.5). Research around sports science is often done in a naturalistic setting where they use interviews, surveys, and case studies (Reitman et al., 2020, p.35). Prior research on the concept of esports focused on analysis from live streams, this research adds more insight from within the field and how experts view the esports scene themselves. Players and consumers are often the most common subjects to study (Reitman et al., 2020, p.35). Literature is often focused on China only but now expanded to include other communities in South America and Europe (Reitman et al., 2020, p.35). Esports in media studies is also based on qualitative research with interviews, observations, and content analysis (Reitman et al., 2020, p.39). These studies were focused on the relationship esports have with traditional sports and media (Reitman et al., 2020, p.38). This shows that prior research in this field is best studied using qualitative analysis.

3. Methods

3.1 Research design

Qualitative research is used to understand concepts based on people's experiences. Qualitative interviewing is less concerned with the collection of data and is more focused on understanding the context and meaning of the information and opinions of the interviewee (Brennen, 2017, p.29). We try to understand the meaning of the interviewee through their experiences and perception, in this case, of the *Rocket League* esports scene. To answer the research question, semi-structured interviews with experts were held, which explored the feelings, emotions, experiences, and values within the world of the interviewees through face-to-face guided conversations (Brennen, 2017, p.30). Experts in the esports scene would qualify when they have a lot of experience in esports and in this case, specifically in *Rocket League*. Experts can be defined as people who have more knowledge than any other person would have on a certain topic, therefore only a few possess the knowledge and this knowledge is not accessible to just anyone (Bogner et al., 2009, p.19). These experts I interviewed are commentators, also known as casters, who work or have worked on the *Rocket League* esports broadcast. The commentators do not only talk during matches but also before and after which requires a lot of effort, knowledge about the scene, and preparation. These people have a lot of knowledge about the topic as they are working in the esports scene. As stated before casters of esports do not only just talk about the games, they have to have a deep knowledge of the game and have to keep up with the current flow of the esports. This means that esports casters are highly knowledgeable about the esports scene, have a lot of inside information, and can be seen as experts in this field. Expert interviews give a better understanding with more in-depth answers on the discussed topic. It is said that the best way to approach experts is through an open interview with a topic guide, as through this way you can acquire the most knowledge and context of the experts (Bogner et al., 2009, p.31). Professional commentators can give in-depth answers based on their experience in the scene which we then can create meaning from and a better understanding of the esports scene. Where other research focuses more on the experience of players and fans, this study uses expert interviews with esports commentators to better understand the approach esports take to legitimize, professionalize, and use sportification to benefit the esports.

The research consists of seven expert interviews with people who work or have worked as an on-camera commentator for the European and North American broadcast. The interviewees themselves are from North America or Europe and while they work or have worked on the world championship live events, during the online events they tend to work

mainly on one of these sides (see Appendix A). These people were all male and have all worked multiple years on the highest level of presenting the *Rocket League* Esport by working for the *Rocket League Championship Series (RLCS)*. They all have a lot of experience in this field and can be called experts in esport. After the seven interviews saturation was reached. In qualitative research saturation is an important aspect, and is something that needs to be reached (Lowe et al., 2018, p.193). Saturation can be described as the point when additional data does not lead to new themes in the research (Saunders et al., 2018, p.1895). During my research I noticed towards the final interviews that themes kept reoccurring and no new themes were found in the data, therefore saturation was reached after the seventh interview. The seven interviews were all between 50 and 60 minutes long.

These interviews were semi-structured so there was more flexibility during the interviews and it had a natural flow of conversation. There was a set list of predetermined questions and topics, but the way the conversations went also depended on the answers of the participants. Notes were taken during the interview to keep in mind what participants said, so questions could be asked later during the interview. The interviews were voice-recorded so that the interviews could be transcribed afterward, participants were notified of the recording beforehand and gave permission.

3.2 Sampling

The interviews have been gathered using a mix of purposeful sampling and snowball sampling. This way of non-probability sampling is best used when there is less control and no possibility of probability (Babbie, 2018, p.186). Purposeful sampling is when participants are selected on the judgment of the researcher and therefore the participants have to have requirements so they can be representative and useful for the research (Babbie, 2018, p.187). This research focuses on *Rocket League* commentators, also called casters or on-broadcast talent, from Europe and North America. These commentators have a lot of experience as these are the longest-standing scenes within the *Rocket League* esport, another benefit is there is less of a language barrier as these broadcasts are done in English by people who their native language is English. Purposeful sampling was used to match interviewees to the criteria of being a *Rocket League* commentator who is working in one or both of these continents, with also having experience of attending a live event for work.

I asked commentators through the social media platform X, formerly known as Twitter, if they would like to participate in an online interview. The interviews were done through the communication platform Discord as this is a familiar platform to talk through in

the gaming scene. With online interviews, I have reached commentators worldwide and created a broader scope of participants with more experience in the esports scene. As there are not many commentators in the *Rocket League* esports scene who work on the highest level of broadcasting, this was a great way of getting into contact with experts in this field. I was aware of the time zone differences between me and the participants, which I needed to schedule around, so the participants were available for the interview.

Qualitative interviews are face-to-face and in-depth conversations where both verbal and non-verbal responses are important (Brennen, 2017, p.30). Discord was therefore the perfect platform to use for an interview, as this is a platform that supports video calls and also makes it easy to record their voices through my computer. My interviews were done online, where six of them were with both video and audio, and one with only audio. Non-verbal responses were therefore noticeable and helped with the flow of the interviews by seeing their non-verbal reactions to questions, which allowed me to wait for a verbal response.

Commentators in esports are still very active on X, previously known as Twitter, so this was a great platform to reach out to them through. Snowball sampling is best used when participants are difficult to locate and using the already existing pool of participants to help find new ones (Babbie, 2018, p.188). After an interview is done I used snowball sampling to ask if they know other commentators who would be willing to do an interview. As these commentators are all friendly with each other and know each other well through their work and are even friends outside of work, this was a great way of finding and reaching more participants from the *Rocket League* esports scene who fit the criteria while also gaining trust and familiarity with them to get more participants.

Before an interview was done, privacy was stated as an important part of the research as their name was not mentioned to give them anonymity. When messaging them for the first time on X, I told them this interview was for my thesis which researches the *Rocket League* esports scene.

When they agreed to do the interview I asked for their name on Discord, added them there, and sent the consent form (see Appendix C). I also notified them of the voice recording which was used for my transcription. Before the interview started I asked if they would prefer to do the interview through a voice or video call. After the interview, I offered them to send the final thesis and results if they were interested.

3.3 Operationalization

The operationalization matches the theory to the themes from the interviews. In the theoretical framework, the concepts of esports, live esports, sportification, and broadcast commentary are mentioned in connection to the entertainment media. During my interviews, I wanted to talk about these specific topics. As mentioned before the goal of the interviews is to learn more about the experience of experts in the esports scene of *Rocket League*. So we can better understand the approach esports take to legitimize, professionalize, and use sportification to benefit the esports. My interview guide helped me to navigate through my interviews and gave me a guideline and structure to help me find the next question to ask. Depending on the interview it was sometimes more unstructured if there was an opportunity to dive deeper into the answer that was given. My interview guide consisted of three themes, an introduction, and a conclusion. The themes were: commentary of esports, viewers of esports, and the future of esports. These themes all had around 9 questions per theme, which resulted in a total of 26 questions. To start the interview I wanted them to start talking about esports so I first introduced questions that related back to them and their work in esports. An example of a question I used is: *“How would you describe yourself what is your work in esports”* (see Appendix B).

When focussing on sportification, I want to gain more information on whether they see the growth of esports, how they view it as a sport, and where they see the esports scene going. I wanted to know more about the influence of sportification and therefore traditional sport in *Rocket League*. Therefore their view on the influence of traditional sports in *Rocket League* was asked. I also wanted to know if they see similarities between other sports and the presentation of *Rocket League* before, after, and during the matches. I also wanted to know more about the evolution and professionalization of the competitive scene and wanted to know how that mirrors traditional sports. These topics were mentioned in the first theme of my interview which was called, commentary of esports. Example questions of this section are: *“Do you get inspiration from traditional sports commentary?”*, *“What style of commentary do you like more?”* and *“Could this style of commentary be compared to how traditional sports are commented?”*. In this theme I also want to ask questions surrounding their commentary style and what their tactics are, where they learned this, and if they borrowed tactics from a traditional sport. Other questions could be related to the broadcasting of the esports itself and if they borrow or use certain similarities from traditional sports in structure, commentary and expertise, game presentation, game highlights, teams and players, and audience. For example by asking how they talk about players, if their nationality plays a role, their stories, and their statistics to make an engaging story for viewers (see Appendix B).

As mentioned in the theory, spectatorship is a core part of the esports that these experts have to focus on. Asking them about how they try to keep the viewers engaged, which tactics they use for that, and how they try and keep people engaged before, after, and during the matches are questions that were asked related to this topic. I was also curious about the difference in the entertainment of spectating between watching online through YouTube and Twitch, and when there is a live event people can attend. How do these differ from each other, and do they use certain methods that are picked up from traditional sports? This was also related to the crowd and the fans watching, and how are they engaged when they view a broadcast online vs in person. These topics were handled in the second theme of my interview guide, which was viewers of esports. An example of questions in this theme are: *“Can you discuss the role of esports commentators in shaping the viewer experience and driving engagement with esports events?”*, *“How is the esports experience set up and presented online and how is this done in live events?”*, or *“What type of stories are you setting up?”*. Other terms that I focussed on in the second theme and that came across in the theoretical framework are commentary styles and playbour. Surrounding playbour, I was curious about how they view the difference between streaming for fun and streaming professional gameplay. Do they see a difference between the streams of players and how their streaming, seeing their faces, and using their platform helps the professional scene? I wanted to know how they create narratives for their broadcasts, how professional brands get involved, and how the esports scene is made more appealing for them. What narratives do they use for their star players and do these players have a big role that can be compared to traditional sports? I also wanted to know more about this presentation of players, because these professionals are often younger. On the topic of Broadcast commentary, I wanted to know more about how they use commentary to create stories and what they are trying to tell by commentating. I was also curious about how they use technology and make engaging and compelling stories with it. How do they come up with these stories and is this way of storytelling similar to that of traditional sports, and did they use it as inspiration? Do they see an increase in viewership with certain matchups and are there ways to attract more viewers?

To focus on live esports during the interviews, I asked esports casters how they view the esports scene, how they view the professionalization of the scene, and where they see the esports scene going. With these questions, I gained more knowledge and insights on the current state of esports. an example of these types of questions are in the third theme of my interview guide, which was called, future of esports. I asked the interviewees for example: *“What opportunities do you see for growth in esports commentary?”*, *“How do you see the role of esports commentary evolving in the future?”*, or *“How has esports changed from when you started, compared to now?”* (see Appendix B).

3.4 Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the interviews as it is a perfect method to identify and report patterns within the interview data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.79). With expert interviews, the attention should be on the thematic units with similar topics in the interviews (Bogner et al., 2009, p.35). The coding was done by first asking permission to record their voices so that they could be transcribed after the interview. The transcription also involves paraphrasing but always includes the participant's opinion (Bogner et al., 2009, p.35).

After the transcription was done, the coding of the transcriptions was done in ATLAS.ti by first noting down all the interesting quotes from the interviewees, this ended in 677 quotes, which was around a hundred quotes per interview. Coding was done through open, axial, and selective coding to find similar and occurring themes by making new connections and getting the results from the data (Boeije, 2010, p.95). I made use of open, axial, and selective coding to keep an open mind through the coding process and be open to finding new codes. However, finding reoccurring themes and patterns was still the main goal of my analysis and therefore is a thematic analysis. By looking at these quotes similarities have been identified and were put into subcodes. Text can be linked to multiple themes or codes depending on how many topics are addressed (Bogner et al., 2009 p.36). The importance lies in the connection between the interviews and not in the individual interviews (Bogner et al., 2009, p.36). The context should always be taken into account as we should be looking for overarching themes between all the expert interviews (Bogner et al., 2009, p.36). By looking at the context of the interviews and all the interesting quotes resulting in the first initial 31 subcodes. These subcodes were made by finding recurring themes that continued through all the interviews. Examples of subcodes were interviewees mentioning their work and job title, or mentioning a certain commentary style, these quotes were grouped together into their respective subcodes (see Appendix D). After the first 31 subcodes were found I looked at grouping these subcodes into similar codes. The subcodes were put into ten different codes. The ten different codes were found by linking similar topics together that fit within a certain recurring overarching theme from the interviews. An example of this would be all the different commentary styles subcodes that were mentioned: color, play-by-play, and hybrid, and putting these three subcodes under the code commentary styles (see Appendix D). Finally, these ten codes were grouped together into three different themes resulting in the three main themes found in the research. These three themes are overarching topics that reoccurred in all the interviews and are important themes to the esports scene. These three themes are: esports vs traditional sport, esports is marketing, and fan engagement. These final themes were created by looking at the codes and grouping

them together, this was done for example by looking at the codes: power of fans, audience engagement, and live vs online. These codes all talk about how fans are an important part of the esports and are crucial in the experience whether it be online or at an in-person event, thus creating the theme of fan engagement (see Appendix D).

3.5 Ethics

Ethics are an important issue in doing interviews. As stated before the participants must feel safe and comfortable to be able to share their thoughts and say what they want to say. For them, this is their daily work and privacy is therefore essential. It is therefore important that no names are mentioned, which means the names of the participants, names of people behind the scenes, and the names of organizations surrounding the theme of esports are not mentioned. It is important that the interviewees can give informed consent before they participate. Participants were notified before the interview about the purpose of the interview and were given a consent form before the interview where it was stated that names would not be mentioned (see Appendix C). Before the interview started participants were asked if it is okay to make voice recordings of the conversation and that it is a safe space where you are not forced to answer all questions. After the interview was done I asked if I needed to remove certain names from the transcript of people they mentioned who are working behind the scenes.

3.6 Validity and reliability

Validity and reliability are important to mention in research to make it credible. This research would be considered reliable as the findings of the research can be replicated when using the same methods. The research would be able to be replicated as each step of the research is written down and described. Research is considered valid as you research the selected topic that you want to study and learn more about. This research focuses on learning more about the *Rocket League* esports scene and how sportification plays a significant role in the presentation of the esports. The research was done by learning about the experiences of experts in the field. I believe this is a valid way of doing research on this topic and learning more about the esports scene, as these casters are very knowledgeable and have a lot of experience in the field. This research can also be used for later research and be compared with other esports to look for similarities within esports. The patterns and themes that have been found in this research by doing expert interviews resulted in a conclusion with no deviant cases. When research on this topic with expert interviews is done

again following a similar interview guide (see Appendix B), similar results would be expected. As saturation was reached during these seven interviews, which means that there were no new themes found and data became repetitive (Lowe et al., 2018, p.193).

4. Results & Discussion

After the interviews were done the coding resulted in themes. This part will talk about the results that were found after the coding from the interviews and the final overarching themes that were created. The answers to the interviews have been put in three main themes: esports vs traditional sports, esports marketing, and fan engagement. The responses of the interviewees showed similarities and can therefore be put together, the results of these three themes will be discussed below.

4.1 Esports vs traditional sports

The first theme that was found was esports vs traditional sports. This theme is based on the codes: inspiration from traditional sports, the uniqueness of esports, and commentary styles. This theme shows the common and unique parts that sports and esports have and how sports are defined. Each of the sub-themes contributes to the main theme by making a comparison between traditional sport and esports. Each sub-theme shows how esports is different, what is drawn from traditional sports, and what is unique, we also look at the similarities and differences in commentating styles between traditional sports and esports.

It is shown that esports draw their inspiration from traditional sports that influence their language, terminology, and narratives. However, esports do maintain their own identity because of crucial differences between traditional sports and esports, such as the short careers of players and the flexible roles of commentators. This shows that esports are unique from traditional sports but also learn from them. Sportification helps to bridge this gap from traditional sports to esports while still evolving and innovating in a new and young esports scene that is part of the gaming community.

4.1.1 Inspiration from traditional sports

This theme was found due to comparisons between esports and traditional sports, which were constantly made by the commentators. *Rocket League* was often compared to hockey playstyle-wise. This resulted in commentators looking for inspiration within hockey to pick up certain language and terminology. Another comparison that was made often was to the commentary of Formula 1 and football, commentators often mentioned how European casters look towards those sports, while North American casters look more to Baseball, hockey, and American football to get inspired for their commentary. As interviewee 3 said: *"Hockey would be the one I pull from the most. I know some of the other guys get ideas from F1. Because F1 has done a good job with storytelling and that's a big part of our job."*

Another sport that was mentioned was poker, as this is also a game that requires sitting and takes a lot of mental power. This reinforces the idea of how sportification plays a big role in esports (Turtiainen et al., 2020, p.352). As interviewees said they use the idea of competition and draw a lot from how traditional sports are played and presented to represent esports. It shows that according to the interviewees, esports uses sportification to create a familiar environment that is similar to that of traditional sports by also using similar broadcast narratives. Interviewees have mentioned that esports and traditional sports have a lot in common and esports definitely got their inspiration from traditional sports to create their own thing. For example, names for jobs and terminology are sometimes taken from traditional sports to make it more understandable for an outsider watching for the first time. This reinforces what Reitman et al. (2020, p.40) say about creating a familiar feel in esports with sportification that is similar to traditional sports. It is also mentioned by the interviewees how esports are growing and, by getting more experience, learn what works for them and what they can do better than traditional sports. Esports very much realizes it does not have to copy everything sports does and how the gaming community is also much different than a sports community. This shows how sportification is used to familiarize people with esports but also shows how esports have evolved and are still growing and learning as it is a very young scene compared to traditional sports. Esports are still creating their own identity, which is different from traditional sports as the audience is also different.

4.1.2 The uniqueness of esports

As mentioned above, esports do take things and draw inspiration from traditional sports, but according to interviewees esports are also very much their own thing. This resulted in commentators mentioning what exactly is different between traditional sports and esports. A big part that is missing in esports is longevity, which means that traditional sports have been around for much longer than esports have existed. This results in sometimes not having the data and information that traditional sports do possess, about players, game tactics, analytics, and playstyles. While the esports scene still relies on statistics to tell stories, esports also realizes the scene is still very young and there can still change a lot in how the games are played. As interviewee 1 said: *"I think there has been a big push to make it very analytical where especially when the Esports is starting out. We just frankly do not have that."*

It shows that as mentioned in the theory, in sports broadcast commentary analysis are a very common and heavily used (Kido Lopez, 2023, p.25). Esports try and do the same thing, which shows how they have drawn from traditional sports. However, according to the interviewees, there is a crucial difference in how these analyses are presented and what they actually say. As interviewee 4 said: *"They are similar, we are in the infancy stage"*

whereas sports are already in the adult stage of being able to craft narratives because they have all the stats they would ever need. We do not yet have that resource.”

This shows that esports is a much less developed scene as traditional sports have existed much longer and therefore analysis can be much more in-depth. The young esports scene can not yet draw the same narratives as not only the esports scene. Another aspect that is different from traditional sports is the workload and diversity. Commentators mention how they can have different roles during a working day, while in traditional sports these are more set. Commentators in esports are required to be more diverse and flexible. As interviewee 5 explained: *“Whereas in e-sports, I might be on the desk for one segment, I might be casting another match and then I’ll introduce the teams for all the matches and maybe go up on stage and give this big speech.”*. This example shows that the role of working in esports is much more diverse and flexible, compared to traditional sports. Kido Lopez's (2023, p.102) and Cumming et al. (2022, p.260) theory is therefore reinforced as they mention how traditional sports commentary is only for the people who are not in a stadium. But the interviewees added much more to this by explaining how their job is much more diverse and is not only for the people at home, but also for the people who are there at an event and how they interact with them. As interviewee 3 explains further: *“Yeah, we interact and coordinate a lot with the audience because as I said, they’re, they’re a part of the show.”*, which shows that their job is much more than only being a commentator.

4.1.3 Commentary styles

Commentary styles are very much taken from traditional sports and their commentary. In all of esports, there is, just as in traditional sports, the commentary styles play-by-play, color, and analyst. Commentators do mention how they use sports commentary as inspiration but also look at each other to learn from and mention improvisation as an essential skill. The unique thing about esports though is that even in a live setting you can still hear the commentary, just like you would hear it at home. This changes the job of a commentator into also being a hype man in the stadium. Another unique thing about esports commentary is a self-invented commentary style called hybrid.

As interviewee 5 explains: *“We’ll do what’s called hybrid where we’ll kind of both do a little bit of play-by-play, but we’ll also mix in some color. And then I try to kind of shade more towards color”*. Just as the theory from Johnson & Woodcock (2021, p.1456) stated, that play-by-play, color, and analytics are used on broadcast commentary, this hybrid style was not touched upon and shows a unique esports style of commentary that can be added onto the theory.

Commentary is also used in promotional clips and advertisements, which results in commentators having very famous quotes on pinnacle moments in *Rocket League*. Commentators talked about how their commentary in these extremely hype moments walks a fine line between everybody experiencing the moment and them not talking too much, while still amplifying the excitement. As interviewee 1 said: *"The biggest call ever is 'this is Rocket League'. It's the simplest call in the world. Johnny's biggest call is just 'Ahmad'. I think it's more the inflection than the actual words you use, especially for those hype moments."* This shows that the interviewees see commentary as something that people who watch the matches need more to understand how exciting a match is and this is done more with the inflection of words than the words they actually say. Where in this example is stated as using simple commentary, by just screaming the name of the game or a player's name, the inflection of the words used shows the hype of a moment.

4.2 Esport is marketing

The second theme talks about how esports are not the same as traditional sports, as esports are an owned product. The theme is based on the codes: esport as a marketing tool, esport as entertainment, power of personality, and storytelling. This theme is created due to how interviewees all talked about how a big part of esport is marketing. In the sub-themes, this theme of marketing keeps reoccurring. In the sub-themes, esport was referred to as a way of making money as it is a marketing and entertainment tool. Creating marketing around esport is done by creating personalities and finding engaging stories to make esport more entertaining and more marketable.

This shows that esports are fundamentally different from traditional sports, as these gaming products always have been owned by the developers and have been used for marketing purposes. The goal of developers focuses on increasing the amount of players and generating revenue. Marketing and entertainment have a focus on personality and storytelling which helps to create engaging and relatable stories for viewers to engage with. With these stories, they can humanize players and commentators and build a more personal connection with their audience. While esports is growing, it strives for more independence from the developers to become a more competitive and authentic scene that is similar to traditional sports.

4.2.1 Esport as a marketing tool

Esports are owned by their developers, commentators mention that this results in a different perspective from the developer for esport than compared to traditional sports. Esports are seen as a marketing tool to create a bigger player base to sell their product and to make money. It is not seen as an actual league in itself and developers do have a say as they still own the rights. As interviewee 6 said: *“Right now I would define esports as marketing, our job is to sell the game and to sell the items you buy in-game. And that is how the people who own Rocket League esports view Rocket League esport.”*. This supports what Newman et al. (2022, p.258) say, as they mention how existing brands see esport as a way to attract a new and younger audience. This shows how companies do not see esport as a sport itself but focus more on the marketing aspects and making more money for their brand and attracting more customers. Commentators do however mention seeing a change and getting more freedom in their broadcasting. which shows how esport is still developing as a scene and evolving as a sport. According to the interviewees, the step of becoming free from developers is a crucial step to evolve as a sport. As interviewee 3 said: *“I think the only way E sports succeeds going forward is if these companies give up control of their IP’S. In traditional sports, no one owns hockey no one owns football”*. This adds to what Newman et al. (2022, p.260) state on how esport developers focus on creating business opportunities and sponsorship deals for their esport and therefore becoming more successful. By becoming free of the developer, the esport can be a free and competitive market for creating tournaments and therefore become a more competitive scene, which can be compared to traditional sports.

A struggle that esports do have is creating a new and bigger audience as it is difficult to reach people who do not play the game or are watching matches from a team they are interested in. Commentators explain that they see an increase in viewers in certain matches, which according to them can be explained by the bigger fan bases of certain teams. Another reason they give is when a match is exciting, people tell their friends they should start watching. This contradicted my first idea of storytelling being a factor in increasing viewerships, but by the statements of the interviewees it reinforced the theory from Kido Lopez (2023, p.54) that explains how esport, just like traditional sports are seen as a live and real competition with exciting moments and fans of specific teams.

4.2.2 Esport as entertainment

There are multiple ways of seeing esport, you have the perspective of the love for the esport itself and wanting to show the highest level of play to the world, but there is also the

entertainment side. This is similar to the struggle that traditional sports have, where entertainment plays a big role as it generates more viewers. Esport does have the same battle but also struggles with finding identity, where it, on the one hand, wants to be taken seriously and take itself seriously, but on the other hand, also realizes it is a video game which results in a more fun and less serious way of presenting itself. As interviewee 4 said: *"I don't think esports has a, how professional do we need to get, problem. It's very good at being able to put on a professional product. It just kind of has an identity crisis sometimes."*

Another big difference between traditional sports and esports is the age of the players. Players in esports are often still children and have shorter careers than players in traditional sports. Because the players in esports are young and have shorter careers this does result in less possibility to create marketing around them and tell an engaging story. As interviewee 1 said: *"All of our players are a lot younger. They've got a lot less lived experience. We're talking about players that are like 15/16/17, they're still in school. There's not nearly as much to say about them."* Esports careers start at a young age, which reinforces what Johnson & Woodcock (2021, p.1459) said about sports players being very young, but interviewees added onto this by explaining how this much younger esports players are compared to traditional sports and this makes it difficult for the commentators to tell a story around a player. Interviewee 1 continued with his example: *"Which is then why you get people like Alpha/Jknaps and you're like you've been around for four years. This is great, there's so much."* It shows how the longevity of the esports scene is shorter compared to traditional sports and therefore there is a big difference in the way a story about a player is told. This longevity is also mentioned by Johnson & Woodcock (2021, p.1459) and shows how the careers of esports players are shorter and more uncertain compared to traditional sports players. Although just as Johnson & Woodcock (2021, p.1459) mention that there is a trend of ensuring players' careers, which is reinforced by the interviewees who state more players who retire find a job within the esports scene.

When *Rocket League* was compared with other esports there were many similarities with other esports. Commentary and presentation of esports were very similar, but *Rocket League* also finds itself in a unique marketing position as it is one of the most similar to traditional sports, and plays and looks in a very similar way to traditional sports. As interviewee 4 said: *"It's maybe the closest in terms of e-sports that we have simply because it is the closest to traditional sports in the way it's played and the cadence of Rocket League favors that. It is essentially hockey."* This can result in more marketing options than other esports might have. As interviewee 5 said: *"I think that's where you kind of have to start is you have to have that partnership with traditional sports because again, that's what you're adjacent to, sports."* This draws back to the sportification theory where it is shown that all sports develop through a pattern of specialization, standardization, rationalization,

regimentation, organization, equalization, and quantification (Turtiainen et al., 2020, p.352). Esports are just like traditional sports being standardized and following a similar pattern.

4.2.3 Power of Personality

Personality and authenticity were mentioned by the commentators as crucial parts of creating an entertaining show for fans. Watch parties are mentioned as a more laid-back style of showing matches and watching them together with a content creator, which is gaining more and more viewers. The reason for this is that fans get a more authentic experience from someone they enjoy watching and who has a personality. These are crucial parts for fans to cling on to someone and enjoy a show more. Commentators mention that personality is now a bigger part of their broadcast. Showing the personality of the broadcast talent is done to entertain the viewer more and also create a better experience. As interviewee 6 said: *“Now if you watch the show, you see many people are not wearing suits. I'll wear leather jackets and sometimes we'll wear very bright colors. And we're encouraged to show a lot more personality through that and esports in general.”*. This reinforces Johnson & Woodcock's (2021, p.1456) theory which shows that commentators in esports not only are highly knowledgeable and skilled, but also need to be liked by viewers, and being liked by fans is done through showing personality as the interviewees explained.

As interviewees mention, esports feels more down to earth and friendly, therefore creating a personal connection seems easier. Interviewees mention how showing personality helps to create this relationship which is important for the viewers. As interviewee 3 says: *“I feel like I'm, I'm just hanging out and I'm interacting with people.”*. Just as Reitman et al. (2020, p.39) describe in his theory, engagement is an important part of esports as it focuses more on this aspect than traditional sports.

4.2.4 Storytelling

Telling stories is also done to show more personality and engage the viewer more in the matches that are happening. It is the commentator's job to create this environment and tell the most important stories that are unfolding to make the viewers understand what is happening. Stories are told based on analytics and personal storylines of teams and players. Stats are used to back up storylines that are happening or show how well some players are performing. This can be similar to traditional sports as interviewee 4 said: *“So it's very similar to traditional sports in that aspect, but traditional sports just has more to work with. They have entire departments where you have 15 people and one person's job is to gather who has the most goals.”*. This deep knowledge of the game that esports commentators have

according to Johnson & Woodcock (2021, p.1456) is reinforced by the interviewees. Commentators have to have much more knowledge about the esports and have to be more flexible in their job.

Personal storylines are told to viewers to make it more engaging for viewers, the commentators all mention how the storylines are created themselves and are just out there to be picked up and be told to the viewers. The storylines and personalities make the players and commentators more human. As interviewee 5 said: *“Humanizing those players and telling stories about them, I think, helps the viewers relate to them as people rather than just as cars on the field.”*. This narrative of besides talking about statistics and telling more about the personality of a player also is mentioned in traditional sports (LeCouteur & Yong, 2022, p.697). This shows that there is a similarity in the way of storytelling for traditional sports and esports. However, as the interviewees expanded on this, they believe that statistics are much more used in traditional sports, and that esports, as they do use them, focus much more on personal stories. Interviewee 5 explains: *“I try not to rely on them as much because again, trying to get the human element rather than just rattle off a bunch of numbers.”*, which shows that esports commentators try to imply these statistics and use them to tell a human story around it. This shows who is behind the screen and playing on the field, which makes them more relatable to the viewers. As interviewee 3 said: *“Squishy muffins makes YouTube content. You have people who are streaming. And we have podcasts like First Touch, allowing these players to come on and spread that personality out a bit more.”*. This all reinforces the theory of Kido Lopez (2023, p.52) who mentioned how statistics, commentary on players, and stories of players play a role in esports commentary.

4.3 Fan engagement

Fan engagement is the third and final theme and focuses on the fans of esports who watch the broadcast online but also in real life at events. They are a crucial part of the esports and as any entertainment sector, it relies on fans. This theme is based on the codes: Power of fans, audience engagement, and live vs online events. These sub-themes all have in common how interviewees talked about fans being extremely important to the esports scene. Fans can interact in different ways but fans do have a certain amount of power to them and can engage with the broadcast in different ways, depending if they are watching a match in person or online. Fan engagement is therefore the common theme in these sub-themes as they all mention ways of engagement that fans have during esports matches.

This shows how crucial fan engagement is to the success of esports. This fan engagement enhances the atmosphere online, but especially at live events, which influences

players and the viewing experience. Engaging the audience by making them feel part of the show provides more interactive experiences. These experiences are more available in esports, compared to traditional sports, because of the esports identity that is more approachable. This way of engaging fans is essential for creating a loyal fan base. COVID has led to a more hybrid environment of esports which is still affecting the esports scene. Over the years esports have become more professional and skilled by learning from traditional sports but also from each other to create a better experience for fans.

4.3.1 Power of fans

Fans have a lot of power, just like in traditional sports or with any event, they bring an extra atmosphere to a place. Fans add to the experience and make it a better show, even for the people online, people can feel and hear a crowd of fans and bounce off of that.

As interviewee 5 said: *“GarrettG mentioned as a player, you don't hear the crowd as much as you feel them like when they're going crazy, the viewers at home, they don't feel anything but they hear the crowd and just having that crowd noise.”*.

Fans can also influence matches as it can influence players on an event knowing they have a crowd behind them, but it can also cause more viewers to certain matches with larger fan bases. It shows what Kido Lopez (2023, p.81) talks about and reinforces his view of fans engaging in all sorts of ways and this engagement is an expression of fandom.

As interviewee 3 said: *“He knows how important that audience is to the show. I mean, that outcome that Grand finals could have had a different winner because of the audience.”*. The way fans can express themselves also shows the dedication fans can have which is described by Qian et al. (2024, p.434). The passion fans have, as described by the interviewees, holds power and can influence the esports.

4.3.2 Audience engagement

Engaging audiences is a very crucial aspect of an entertainment broadcast or live event. As interviewee 7 said: *“Engagement is always good. I think, you know, engagement is how a lot of people measure success.”*. Engaging fans can be done in different ways considering it is a physical event or an online event people are watching. Online people would engage through the chat function that online platforms provide to share their thoughts on the matches, and in a way also interact with themselves. As Interviewee 1 gives the example: *“CJ is especially good for this and I think he's taken this from chalked where when you want to interact with chat, it's just OK, 1 in chat. If you think that vitality is gonna reverse sweep.”*. Whereas in-person events create a thrilling atmosphere where even the

commentators work on creating a fun and exciting event with a lot more ways of engaging fans who are there in the building. Interviewee 3 describes it as: *“Have you been to, a concert? It feels exciting. Everyone is there to celebrate stuff. our brain that's releasing everything that feels good and getting physical activity as well. and, that is the same at a Rocket League event.”*. For both these audiences, online and offline, it both comes down to creating a feeling that they are part of the show and also have something to say and in this way, the audiences feel like they are engaged with. As interviewee 7 said: *“They were a part of the show. And so when people feel like they're contributing towards the actual product, I think they'll be more invested.”*.

Just as Cumming et al. (2022, p.261) describe in the theory, that engagement in esports can be done in different ways. The interviewees added to this by showing how fans can engage in physical as well as in online events and showing the importance of this. This reinforces what Reitman et al. (2020, p.39) say and shows how Fans are being able to engage more in esports than in traditional sports. These events influence how fans spend their free time and impact their identity (Reitman et al., 2020, p.39).

4.3.3 Live vs online

The prior topics have already shown that there is a difference between online and offline events in esports. There are differences in presentation and engagement in these two types of events, a big difference for the commentators is getting to be in person which makes it more easy to interact with each other. The presentation of esports can also be very similar to traditional sports in these live events by creating a similar atmosphere that can be found in sports arenas. As interviewee 2 explains: *“I don't think it's, it's any different than any professional sporting environment. It's the exact same thing. It's a bunch of people in the stands, yelling encouragement and booing people they don't like, it's great.”*. This shows that what Cumming et al. (2022, p.261) describes is reinforced by the interviewees. Esports can be consumed live and online, but these live events feel very similar as traditional sports in a stadium.

Over the years esports have learned a lot and have become more professional and commentators have become better at their jobs, resulting in better shows online as well as offline. As interviewee 1 mentions: *“It's more professional in a lot of ways, it's also a lot more friendly and trust-based and chill in every other way. I think professional means when something goes wrong, you can adapt and get the show on course”*. Just as is mentioned in the theory from Johnson & Woodcock (2021, p.1456), esports has evolved over the years and is still learning and professionalizing while becoming better in for example the production of the esports. The interviewees reinforce Johnson & Woodcock on how commentators need a

lot of skill in commentating and knowledge on the esports to be able to be good at their job. Commentators mention they have learned over the years to be better at their jobs and are still learning from each other and from traditional sports. As interviewee 4 says: *“Broadcasts are evolving, like broadcasts are learned more and more every year.”*

COVID however has been noted by the commentators as a big impact on the esports scene. It still has lasting effects and has resulted in different working environments in the scene which are a combination of online and offline. As interviewee 1 mentioned: *“There’s mixed, uh, reactions about it, the fact that we are still online, um, when other e-sports are now doing full in person.”*. Interviewee 5 explains: *“The lack of Fridays at our lams is kind of a carryover from COVID because we only got, I think initially we only got approval to run just the two days with the crowd.”*. COVID was not mentioned in prior research, but interviewees stated this as a very impactful event that is still affecting the esports.

5. Conclusion

This research looked at the esports called *Rocket League* and used esports commentators to look into their experience in the scene and how this compares to traditional sports. To answer the research question *“How do Rocket League esports commentators experience the esports media landscape and how can their work be compared to traditional sports commentary?”*. This research concluded three main themes: esports vs traditional sports, esports is marketing, and esports as entertainment.

5.1 Main findings

When coming to these three final themes it is interesting to look at the used qualitative method for this research. This research conducted interviews with commentators within the esports scene, this was revealed to be a useful method that helped to better understand the esports scene as these experts gave multiple insights that would not have been found using a different method. The seven semi-structured interviews with commentators from the European and North American broadcasts created an environment where these experts could show their expertise and the experience they have in the field to further explain their view of the esports scene.

The first theme looked at how esports and traditional sports share a lot of similarities. The results show that esports often draw their inspiration from traditional sports by looking at for example the commentary of hockey, football, or Formula 1. Esports commentary styles are heavily drawn from traditional sports as they use play-by-play, color, and analyst roles. But esports have also innovated these roles by introducing a hybrid style that blends play-by-play and color commentary. This shows how esports do draw from traditional sports but also evolve as a sport themselves, by adapting to the needs of a more dynamic and interactive esports scene. Despite the similarities, the commentators have shown that they also realize that esports still maintains their own identity. A big difference when comparing esports to traditional sports is longevity, which means that traditional sports have a longer-standing history, which provides more data for analytics that esports do not have. Another difference is the more diverse and flexible roles that are there in esports but not in traditional sports. This part of the esports identity shows an engaging experience for fans which they demand from esports.

The second theme looked at how esports differ from traditional sports as esports are more used for marketing. Esports are often owned products used as a marketing tool by their developers with the main goal of increasing players and selling in-game items. Interviewees noted that for the growth of esports as a competitive scene, the esports needs

independence from its developers. While esports are young, they are still developing and creating their identity. At this moment esports face a dual identity of both wanting to be a serious competition and also being an entertaining game. While wanting to show the highest level of play, they also realize they need to entertain the viewers by balancing professionalism with a fun and less serious presentation of esports. Interviewees pointed out that storytelling on players who are young and have a short career has some challenges, while players with longer careers have more opportunities for storytelling. Storytelling is crucial for engaging viewers and making matches more interesting. Commentators use statistics and personal storylines to create narratives that can be compared to traditional sports, the difference would be in the extent of the data. Commentators rely on their deep knowledge of the game and the history of players to make personal stories that humanize the players, which makes them more relatable to viewers. Personality and authenticity were words that the interviewees used as crucial for creating an engaging and entertaining esports broadcast. Viewers need personalities to connect with to enhance the viewers' experience. Interviewees pointed out a recent trend of watch parties that are hosted by popular content creators, which offer a more relaxed and authentic way for fans to enjoy esports matches. Compared to traditional sports, this makes esports a more friendly and down-to-earth experience with a closer relationship between fans and commentators.

The third and final theme focuses on how fans play a crucial role in enhancing the esports experience for both live events and online broadcasts, which can be compared to traditional sports. The presence of fans and their reaction enhances the atmosphere and can influence players, which enriches the viewing experience for fans. Having an engaging audience is essential for the success of esports. Fans can interact and share excitement online as well as in live events, which creates an atmosphere that interviewees compare to concerts. Having fans feel seen, involved and part of the show is mentioned by the interviewees as crucial for a better viewing experience, which shows the importance of fan engagement in esports. There is a distinct difference in esports between live and online events, mostly in presentation and engagement. Live events offer a similar experience to traditional sports with a crowd of fans engaging in the experience. Over the past few years esports broadcasts have evolved and become more professional, skilled, and being able to adapt to changes. COVID has affected the work of commentators to be more online focussed with only events being in person. Even after COVID, it continues to influence the scene by still being a hybrid working environment. Interviewees noted that the esports broadcast continues to learn, adapt, and evolve by learning from each other and looking at traditional sports to improve the experience for viewers.

When seeing these final themes it is interesting to look back at the theory that was used in this research. The findings of this research have reinforced existing theory and

expanded the theory by interviewing experts on their knowledge of the esports scene which resulted in new findings that were not mentioned in the existing theory. This research especially adds to Kido Lopez's (2023, p.102) and Cumming et al. (2022, p.260) theory as they explain how sports are broadcasted. Johnson & Woodcock (2021, p.1457) have looked in their theory more into esports and what the landscape of esports looks like. Reitman et al. (2020, p.39) describe how esports are presented to their audiences. Sportification theory is at the base of this research as this explains all sports follow similar patterns in their way of becoming a sport and being entertaining for the audience (Turtiainen et al., 2020, p.352). This is also shown in esports as it draws from traditional sports in their way of evolving as a sport. Two elements that are crucial to this process are the viewers who spectate the sport and are fans, these fans generate the excitement for matches and create more traction towards the sport (Cumming et al., 2022, p.258). Another is the stories the broadcast and matches tell, these narratives create excitement for the viewers and engage them in the esports (Kido Lopez, 2023, p.25). By looking at commentators we can see how all sports follow similar commentary styles and draw ideas from each other (Turtiainen et al., 2020, p.366). These are all topics that come back in my research and are explained further by the interviewees, which allows me to expand the theory through the experiences of experts.

to finalize this conclusion I can conclude that the themes have shown that esports is a rapidly evolving scene. While esports draws heavily from traditional sports, esports maintain a distinct identity with characteristics that do set them apart. The esports scene looks at traditional sports as a source of inspiration for language, terminology, and storytelling, which creates a familiar environment for viewers through sportification. The biggest difference between esports and traditional sports is that most esports are owned products by the developers, which results in a more marketing-focused perspective. Fan engagement is crucial for the success of esports, whether it is online or at live events, engaging the audience makes them feel part of the show. Which is more prevalent in esports than in traditional sports. Esports lean more into the fun aspect and have more opportunities to create personality and authenticity in different ways. Over the years esports broadcasts have improved in quality and professionalism, while continually evolving and learning from traditional sports to create a better experience for fans.

5.2 Limitations & Future Research

As mentioned in the theoretical framework, Women in esports are a small portion of the esports scene. Even in commentators, there are not a lot of women. Therefore I did not have the chance to speak to female commentators about their experience in the esports

scene. Future research could look more into the topic of women in esports, specifically in commentary.

Another limitation of this research is the time span of the research, as this whole research was done in less than 6 months, which could lead to looking over certain points. This time limit also comes back in the amount of interviews, as with more time the research could have been expanded. Expert interviews are limited, as there are not too many experts who fill the criteria of being a commentator in the esports scene and working for the highest level of broadcast production while also being available and working for an English-speaking broadcast. Looking further into the limitations of commentators, another future research potential would be the difference between regions and esports commentary styles. As the results showed, there were hints of differences between commentary styles between North America and Europe, as there was more use of the hybrid commentary style in Europe, and their inspiration was more drawn from football and Formula 1. Compared to North America where commentators draw their inspiration more from hockey. An interesting research topic would be to look at different regions and their way of commenting on esports matches, how they view the esports scene, and where they draw their inspiration from.

5.3 Implications

Although the research has limitations, I do believe this research is useful and provides new findings to add on to the existing literature. While having previous knowledge of this field myself as am also a viewer of esports, which could result in biased answers. I believe this previous knowledge enhanced the research. My previous knowledge of the esports scene helped me better understand the interviewees and helped me to ask better questions, which made me able to dive deeper into the research topics and answers the interviewees gave me. My previous knowledge also helped me to be able to determine the best way to approach the interviewees and helped to make the online interviews as smooth as possible. Expert interviews created new insights in this topic of the esports scene. as it showed how experts look at how esports are evolving and where they are standing at this point. It revealed that experts see how rapidly esports are evolving, and while drawing inspiration from traditional sports, esports are creating their own identity with a more engaged audience and hopefully becoming less dependent on the developers. And while esports have a long way of growing to go, experts see it continuing to evolve and becoming more professional and skilled in creating their own identity while also drawing ideas from others to be an entertaining sport.

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Appendix

Appendix A: demographics

Interviewee	Date & Duration	Gender	Country	Work
Interviewee 1	(20-05-24) Interview duration: 53:53	Male	UK	Currently, a commentator on the official broadcast talent, Mainly on the European side. Started working after COVID on the official broadcast talent.
interviewee 2	(21-05-24) Interview duration: 54:37	Male	USA	Previously a commentator on the official broadcast talent, Mainly on the North American side. Worked up until last year on the official broadcast talent.
Interviewee 3	(22-05-24) Interview duration: 1:00:59	Male	Canada	Currently a commentator and part of production on the official broadcast talent, Mainly on the European side. Has worked since the start on the official broadcast talent.
Interviewee 4	(22-05-24) Interview duration: 59:11	Male	USA	Previously a commentator on the official broadcast talent, Mainly on the North American side. Worked up until last year on the official broadcast talent.
Interviewee 5	(23-05-24) Interview duration: 1:00:48	Male	USA	Currently a commentator on the official broadcast talent, Mainly on the North American side. Has gone to college for broadcasting and is part of the official broadcast talent.
Interviewee 6	(23-05-24) Interview duration: 57:10	Male	USA	Currently, a commentator and producer on the official broadcast talent, Mainly on the North American broadcast. Has worked since the start on the official broadcast talent.
Interviewee 7	(25-05-24) Interview duration: 53:68	Male	USA	Currently a commentator on the official broadcast talent, Mainly on the North American side. Has a lot of experience with his own tournament organizing and has worked since the start on the official broadcast talent.

Appendix B: Interview guide

Thanks for doing this,

- Are you Okay with me taking a voice recording, it would only be used to transcribe the interview
- If there are any questions you do not want to answer or want to quit that's okay
- As I told you the interview will be about your experience as someone working in the Rocket League esports scene and what your perspective is on the resemblance of it to traditional sports and the future of esports. there are no wrong answers

Introduction:

1. How would you describe yourself what is your work in esports?
 - a. what does it involve?
2. How did you first become involved in esports, and what inspired you to pursue this career path?

Theme 1: commentary of esports

1. What specific skills and qualities do you believe are essential for a successful esports commentator?
 - a. are there certain rules around commentating?
2. Can you walk us through your preparation process for commentating on a live esports event? How do you stay informed and up-to-date on the latest trends and developments in the games you cover?
3. What style of commentary do you like more?
4. Could this style of commentary be compared to how traditional sports are commentated?
5. Do you get inspiration from traditional sports commentary?
6. How do you see the relationship between esports commentators and the wider esports community?
 - a. How can commentators effectively engage with and support the community?
7. How do you approach maintaining impartiality and fairness in your commentary, particularly when you may have personal preferences or allegiances to certain teams or players?

Theme 2: viewers of esports

1. Can you discuss the role of esports commentators in shaping the viewer experience and driving engagement with esports events?
 - a. How important is commentary in the overall success of esports tournaments?
2. How does it help the experience of viewers?
3. What are you doing in commentary before, during, and after matches to keep viewers engaged?
4. How is the esports experience set up and presented online?
 - a. How is this done in live events?
5. Is commentating online different compared to physical events?
6. What type of stories are you setting up?
 - a. How do these storylines come up?
 - b. Is that similar to other sports?
7. Do you see an increase in viewers with certain matches and why?
 - a. Are there ways you try to attract more viewers?
8. From your perspective, how does esports commentary compare to commentary in traditional sports?
 - a. What unique aspects of esports commentary should commentators be mindful of?

Theme 3: Future of esports

1. How has esports changed from when you started, compared to now?
 - a. How did the scene professionalize?
2. What do you consider to be the biggest challenges or obstacles facing esports today?
 - a. How do you navigate these challenges in your role?
3. Do you think esports has changed a lot, from when you started to, if you compare it to now?
4. Could you share any memorable moments or highlights from your career as an esports commentator?
 - a. What made these moments special or significant to you?
5. How do you see the role of esports commentary evolving in the future?
 - a. Are there any emerging trends or developments that you believe will shape the future of commentary in esports?

6. What opportunities do you see for growth in esports commentary?
 - a. Are there any emerging technologies or approaches that could enhance the viewer experience?
7. As an expert in the esports industry, what do you see as trends shaping the landscape of esports today?
8. what do you hope to achieve or contribute to the esports community through your role as a commentator?
 - a. How do you see commentary impacting the overall experience of esports for fans and players alike?
9. Finally, as someone deeply involved in the esports scene, what excites you most about the future of esports, and how do you see the industry evolving in the long term?

conclusion of the interview

- Thank you for this conversation
- If you know any other casters or commentators who are willing to do an interview, please let me know. Or if you would be able to ask some personally that would be really helpful
- If you want I can also share the final thesis paper with you, if you are interested in the results

Appendix C: Consent form

CONSENT REQUEST FOR PARTICIPATING IN RESEARCH

FOR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, CONTACT:

[Max Jeurissen, 668161mj@student.eur.nl]

DESCRIPTION

You⁴ are invited to participate in a research about sportification of the esports Rocket League. The purpose of the study is to understand more about the Rocket League esports scene and to understand how it relates to and compares to traditional sports.

Your acceptance to participate in this study means that you accept to be interviewed. In general terms,⁵

my questions will be related to talking about casting in the Rocket League esports and your experience with it.

Unless you prefer that no recordings are made, I will make an audio recording of the interview.

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

RISKS AND BENEFITS

I am aware that the possibility of identifying the people who participate in this study may involve risks, this interview will be about participants' jobs and insights into the scene they work in, which could lead to talk about participants' reputation or social relations. For that reason—unless you prefer to be identified fully (first name, last name, occupation, etc.)—I will not keep any information that may lead to the identification of those involved in the study. I will only use pseudonyms to identify participants.

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

TIME INVOLVEMENT

Your participation in this study will take 40 to 60 minutes. You may interrupt your participation at any time.

PAYMENTS

³ This Word template is available on Canvas (BA Thesis Class CM3051; Premaster Thesis Class CM0053 and CM0054; Master Class CM4500; Master Thesis Project CM5000; Master Thesis Project CS5050).

⁴ 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.

⁵ Select what is appropriate.

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, contact person in the dept., faculty or university: vanlienden@eshcc.eur.nl.

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 recorded during this study:

Name	Signature
Date	

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. ⁶

⁶ Two copies should be made for each subject: one for the subject to keep and one for the student's records.

Appendix D: Coding tree

Themes	Codes	Subcodes	Exemplary quotes
Esports vs traditional sports	Inspiration from traditional sports	Comparison to traditional sports	<i>"They're a lot longer form. F1 races, what, an hour and a half, two hours. Football's an hour and a half. Like they're taking a, a lot longer, there's a lot more downtime. Whereas in Rocket League you're talking in 5 to 7-minute chunks and you're mixing in a play-by-play and color."</i>
		Job title	<i>"caster is like very, it's very e-sport which is fine like I still say caster, I think whenever I'm trying to describe my job to someone usually like a family member or something I'll say. So, you know, football commentary, it's like that, but for a video game that's like that's the go-to every single time. So yeah, commentator I think is like the more like widely used term at least."</i>
	Uniqueness of esports	Difference from traditional sport	<i>"I think very similar, just different inflections and different uh vocabulary use for each cos they're serving different markets."</i>
		Longevity	<i>"We can now go back to whenever the premier league started in like 1880 whatever it is. Um And we can then look back and see all of that. Esports doesn't have that data intrinsically. Um And I think there's a big push to, there has been a big push to make it very analytical where, especially when the Esport is starting out. Uh We just frankly do not have that."</i>
	Commentary styles	Hybrid commentary style	<i>"like I'm doing color commentary, but a, a goal is about to happen, I'm gonna switch and ramp up into play by play because that it's just easier than like trying to stop. And then with the delay, Lawler tried to figure out, oh, should he be coming in right now? Like it's just easier to just roll through it"</i>
		Color commentary style	<i>"But generally speaking, you know, I'm there for the casual fan to explain to them. Hey, this is what happened and then my co caster who's usually a color commentator will fill in the details."</i>
		Play-by-play commentary style	<i>"the first season of RLCS Golden Boy, we, we were untested, right? We were not good. We've never done this before in a professional capacity. So he wanted to play it safe and say, ok, we're gonna find play by play and color analyst, you know, your roles stick to those for now. So they took us off doing hybrid stuff and"</i>

			<i>said we would like to just, just do this. Um So we did that for multiple seasons, but we always wanted to bring it back."</i>
		Good calls for promo clips	<i>So everything that then goes into like trailers and whatever else. You then want the moments like Johnny shouting AHMAD. That's such a perfect thing just to chuck in there for a trailer for promotional material that then summarizes the sport</i>
Esport is marketing	Esport as a marketing Tool	Development	<i>"I think there's a lot of potential developments just because again, I think Rocket League is the only real esport at this age or right comparison to traditional sports, you know, call of duty or counter strike. Like yes, they're esports, but I'm pressing the right trigger to shoot or you know, moving the left stick to walk. Like it's, it's a completely different, you know, there is no transferable skill across any esport"</i>
		Way of making money	<i>people don't want to see them but adverts pay for things, sponsorships pay for things. Um, as long as they're not intrusive, like American sports where they have them, like in American football where the game goes into like a picture and picture in the corner, then you have a full screen add-on. That's awful. But if you have just like an ad read or something or you have like billboards that are sponsored or like the mobile one, high-performance replay easy. It's a sentence that pays to keep the bills going.</i>
		Not a free IP	<i>You can't do this because Epic and Psyonix control that IP they can tell people what you can and can't do this inherently stifles competition because. Blast has a contract for four years. If they want to stop innovating, they can stop innovating incentives to make it better and better because if they don't, they'll lose the contract after the four years is up to someone else. But Psyonix also at any point could say we just don't want to do this anymore and no one else is allowed to do it. And now the esports are dead it's just not, it's not being treated as a competition. It's being treated as an extension of the main product,</i>
	Esport as entertainment	Serious vs unserious	<i>it's lighthearted in a lot of ways and I think that leads to a better show. Personally, I'm quite a lighthearted person. I don't like intense analysis. I don't like the OK, we are here to do the job and</i>

			<i>the job has to get done. It's no, let, let, let's chill. Let's meander. We're talking about video games, let's enjoy ourselves</i>
		Reach of esports	<i>I think that promotion is a big problem because, you know, I don't know what the reach is for a lot of these Esports, I don't know how they reach new viewers. I mean, you can have online ads promoting your game and then you can promote the E sport within the game. But I don't know how you promote the competitive side of Esports without bringing people into the game first.</i>
		Kids in esports	<i>again, we're also in a, in a, in a situation where we're not talking about 18 to 30 year olds um who are adults and we can market them and say you have to do media days, you have to do press tours, et cetera. We're talking about a lot of times kids. So it's really difficult to kind of maneuver that um esports also just is suffering from exactly from understanding exactly what does it want to be at the moment</i>
		Between esports	<i>you have games like Rocket League that are free to play, there are e for everybody that can be put in any school, like getting, getting games like Call of Duty or CS or something like that. Um was really hard in like universities and, and schools because it's violent and then, like, you can't, you can't, you can't really market CS on, like mainstream um on mainstream media.</i>
	Power of Personality	Watch parties	<i>And if you look at things like watch parties um where you have team owners uh streaming their teams or you have former professional players uh giving commentary</i>
		Watching content creators	<i>I think this is, this is why personality-focused content works better because people need, people need to feel a part of something, and that gives it to them in some capacity, not a full capacity but some capacity,</i>
		Authenticity	<i>He has no incentive to be excited when he's not. So that to me feels a little bit more authentic and in general authenticity in a world of misinformation and of uh how easy, how aware um the general consumer populace is of things being fake. Anything that has an intrinsic authenticity to it, I think is more valuable.</i>
	Storytelling	Analytics	<i>Derek is very much a one-man version of that. He's got a lot of stats that beat us as he listens to us talk and if we can, we can kind of ask</i>

			<i>questions through the broadcast and he's immediately on it and gets us the info we need.</i>
		Personal storylines	<i>talk about the stories of other bubble players that have come up on the North American side and how they've gone from, you know, being knocked out of the quarterfinals for some \$100 weekly. You still like now they're a legitimate threat to be at the top level in the world and kind of humanizing those players and telling stories about them, I think, helps the viewers relate to them as people rather than just as cars on the field.</i>
Fan engagement	Power of fans	Making it a show for people at home	<i>we try to keep things as positive as we can, as exciting as we can at these lands because we know that the viewers at home are listening for that cue from the crowd like, oh, that was exciting because they said it was and I'm excited now</i>
		Telling their friends	<i>you'll always see viewership BumpS during specific and it's crazy how like live and reactive it is too because there, there'll be times where you'll have a series that you don't go in expecting it to be crazy but it turns out oh my God, like we're in, we're in game six and this is a crazy comeback. The match is good and you'll see the viewership start rising and I'm like, are people telling their friends that they need to watch it? Like what's happening? What causes like mid-series, what causes those bumps?</i>
		Fans of teams have power	<i>in a live event, the audience is there, like they, they can dictate flow to the point that a big moment uh recently, last year in Boston Fera knew that the audience was cheering for not his team. They were cheering for, I believe it was BDS on the other side and they're going into grand finals knowing that they had a disadvantage because if that energy is not with them, the players feel it. And he got out and he gave a big speech to try to get the audience on his side, he knew how important that audience was to the show. I mean, that outcome that Grand finals could have had a different winner because of the audience</i>
	Audience engagement	Online engagement	<i>When we're online, um CJ is especially good for this and I think he's taken this from uh Johnny and Rizzo, especially from uh chalked where when um you want to interact with chat, it's just</i>

			<i>OK, 1 in chat. If you think blah, blah, blah. OK. Well, if you think that vitality um I'm gonna reverse sweep this 1 in chat.</i>
		Offline engagement	<i>just try to fill that time as you would on an online broadcast. That's, but, you know, you might kind of turn around and go, to the Kcorp fans, they want to see their team get going can I get some noise from the blue wall and, you know, and you kind of get that crowd and then maybe you, if you have a little bit of freedom. Yeah, you take like a wireless mic and you walk over to the gentle mates' section and you go, hey, well, the blue walls loud. Can I get something out of you guys?</i>
		Being part of the show	<i>it's higher when you feel like you're a part of the show and you're a part of the product and like, in someone's case, like where they're a chatter and we call on them and they actually have to pick a card. They were a part of the show. And so when people feel like they're contributing towards the actual product, I think they are, they'll be more invested.</i>
	Live vs online	Presentation of esports	<i>So figuring out a way to, like, make something that is as absurd as Rocket League feel genuinely important. Um, I think is a skill that a lot of people shy away from a lot of people. Like, no, let's just lean into it being goofy and I totally understand that, and I, I can enjoy and appreciate that as well. But I enjoy um commentary that uh does a good job of like finding a way to make it feel serious because the players are taking it seriously.</i>
		Profesionalizati on of esports	<i>I think esports in the last couple of years has done a really great job of presenting a professional product. Um, I think it continues to do a good job of presenting a professional product,</i>
		Covid	<i>"COVID changed so much when it comes to e-sports commentary and everything like COVID will be looked back at as like ground zero of a billion different ways that the e-sports product has evolved."</i>