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The problematic nature of evaluating esports' "genuineness" using traditional sports' criteria: In-depth interviews with traditional sports and electronic sports journalists

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ABSTRACT

Researchers often use traditional sports' theoretical frameworks to evaluate esports' 'genuineness'. Therefore, this article shows how esports is assessed by traditional sports and esports journalists and how this is important for esports research. We conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews ($n = 15$) with the journalists representing top-tier Polish media and used inductive conventional content analysis. Three main analytical categories and ten subcategories indicate how the two types of journalists differ in their assessments of esports being or not being 'real' sport. The results highlight how problematic it is to use traditional sports as a frame into which esports needs to fit. We indicate the misconceptions of this approach and propose more inductive ones (e.g. searching for esports' distinct frameworks or revealing those used by different groups or communities). Also, our research has some practical implications and is a kind of 'map' showing the esports' new quality and its complex nature.

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Esports; traditional sports; journalism; COVID-19; esports research

Introduction

Despite multiple definitions and perspectives, all approaches to esports emphasise its technological specificity and competitiveness (e.g. Karhulahti, 2017; Taylor, 2016; Reitman et al., 2020). In the last decade, it has ceased to be seen solely as youth entertainment (e.g. Hindin et al., 2020), and its growth includes an increase in the number of events organised, their popularity among millions of viewers, and the growing number of gamers and their professionalisation (e.g. Campbell et al., 2021). Simultaneously, researchers often ask whether esports is 'real' or 'genuine' sport and compare it with traditional sport considering different characteristics. The presented article is based on these reflections and addresses the assessments of traditional sports journalists (we also use the shorter term 'traditional journalists') and esports journalists using semi-structured in-depth interviews. The insiders' view on esports has some major implications for researching esports and is important for practical reasons, which we discuss later.

Despite esports increasing popularity, the research is still in its nascency. After an initial descriptive stage, the focus shifts from explaining what esports is to a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon (e.g. Reitman et al., 2020). Some researchers focus on the relations between esports, traditional sports, and the media. Both offline and online gaming events and live streaming, and the relations between them, are being studied when considering these relations. Also, the

researchers ask how to understand esports in terms of virtual versus real, how technology mediates gaming, and how esports communities fit here (e.g. Hayday et al., 2021; Taylor, 2015). This is important from the perspective of the presented research, as media studies esports' definitions use media contexts and reference traditional sports, often simultaneously pointing to esports' limitations.

For example, Holt (2016) believes that for a 'cybersport' to be considered a 'genuine sport', it is crucial to come as close as possible to sport in its purest form (i.e. one that involves gross motor skill). However, even if this is the case, esports are completely virtual, unlike 'real', non-virtual sports, and this raises doubts about their genuineness. Thus, many studies compare esports to traditional sports, and researchers wonder how the phenomenon 'borrows forms from traditional sports' (Jana et al., 2007, p. 157) and which aspects of esports derive from professional conventional sports.

In their canonical article Jonasson and Thiborg (2010) see esports as a 'sport within and through the medium of cyberspace' (2010, p. 288) and analyse sporting qualities of competitive gaming 'in relation to the definition of sport' (2010, p. 288), which is Guttmann's (2007) model of modern sports. Jonasson & Thiborg argue about esports' huge potential and evaluate this using the standards of conventional sports, believing esports 'deserve' to be called a sport.

Another example of categorising and considering esports by using the traditional sports framework is Hallmann and Giel (2018) study. They proposed that the status of esports can be determined using five characteristics: involvement in physical activity, having recreational purposes, the inclusion of competition, having a framework of institutional organisation, and being socially recognised and accepted. The researchers believe sports and esports do not fit in the same category and they indicate the lack of physical activity as the main reason. Although they recognise that competing in esports at the highest levels requires certain physical predispositions (including hand-eye coordination), they argue that the relationship between these and the achievements of specific athletes has not been confirmed. The general conclusion is therefore negative, although they recognise that esports is 'close' to traditional sport. Despite not being its equivalent, esports has the potential to become such, like darts or chess (these also lack physical activity but are acknowledged as sports), but also because of the growing acceptance in sports businesses.

Jenny et al. (2017) distinguished similar criteria: play, organisation, skill, broad following, institutionalisation, and physicality. Because esports lacks the last one, it cannot be called a 'true' sport, and the general conclusion is that until esports include motion-based video games, such as the Nintendo Wii or Xbox Kinect, 'the general public may not accept eSports as real sports' (Jenny et al., 2017, p. 10). Also, it could be hard to accept esports as such because of the lack of a long history, and hence the lack of stability in institutional organisation, as there are no well-developed governing bodies to oversee rules, standardisation, and general competition (also see the comparison of early institutionalisation of traditional sports and esports by Summerley, 2020).

Many more studies focus on esports' similarities or differences with traditional sports (e.g. Filchenko, 2018; Hewitt, 2014; Isaac, 2021; Parry, 2019; Thiel & John, 2018; Tjønndal, 2020; Wagner, 2006), and we further relate to some of these in the Discussion. Here, we signal a few, but we aim to indicate how problematic it is to use traditional sports as a frame into which esports needs to fit. The theoretical approaches mentioned above could be deemed problematic exactly because they follow such procedures. We see it as controversial and show how esports is professionally assessed by journalists involved in traditional sports and the ones reporting about esports, both groups viewing and defining esports differently in terms of its 'genuineness'. By utilising this example, we argue that esports needs its own definitions and frames, distinct from traditional sports frames. Esports journalists opinions confirm this by being fundamentally different from the opinions of traditional journalists, and from the above-mentioned theoretical positions. Comparing the opinions of both groups illustrates that defining esports is always a matter of specific perspective and esports journalists are a clear example here because of their professional involvement. Hence, the study is about realising

that esports may be perceived, studied, evaluated, etc. without the frames of traditional sports. Ultimately, we aim to show how this is important for theoretical approaches to esports and its research in general. Also, our study has some practical implications, and we will elaborate on these in the Discussion.

This article is the result of a larger research project on how media sports changed during the COVID-19 pandemic. In discussing these changes, esports is an important issue, as shown by Ke and Wagner (2020), who stated that esports was (especially during the outbreak of the pandemic) a successful ‘extension’ of traditional sports, as it forced immediate brand innovation and far-reaching changes in marketing strategies (see also Goldman & Hedlund, 2020 or Reed et al., 2022; Thibaut et al., 2022 for wider discussion on sports and COVID-19). Our project was intended to contribute to the growing body of research on general changes in sports media. However, it turned out that while studying how media sports changed during the pandemic, and what the role of esports is here, the issue of esports being a ‘true’ sport or not emerged only naturally and was a frequent topic of the interviews. One can say that discussing the pandemic was a focal point that raised the issue of esports’ ‘genuineness’ and that COVID-19 makes it particularly visible and important; hence, this is the reason why in presenting the results, significant space is devoted to the pandemic (COVID-19 was often a pretext and background for journalists’ assessments). Also, one must keep in mind that the general results were broader in scope, but here we focus on respondents’ attempts to evaluate esports by comparing it to traditional sports.

Our research was purely inductive, and after analysing the data, we related these to the above-mentioned theoretical investigations. We interviewed insiders, and media people (i.e. journalists representing the top-tier media in Poland), who have expert knowledge and a particular interest in the issue of esports being or not being seen as a ‘true’ sport.

Methods

Due to the research being part of a broader project, we selected the respondents to include a wide spectrum of media (i.e. television, radio, traditional press, or online platforms and services). In times of media convergence, separating different media is difficult, as these interpenetrate with each other. Nevertheless, we decided that separating media is analytically important here as it allows us to clearly show how media sports changes during a pandemic.

The respondents represented the top-tier Polish media (i.e. the most important and popular and reaching the highest number of audiences), TV, and radio stations, and newspapers or online news services. We interviewed significant journalists for given editorial offices – the ones that hold managerial positions and/or are well-known and recognisable (e.g. TV commentators). When selecting respondents, we assessed their professional profiles (e.g. the media with which they are involved), but we also asked them – during the initial contact stage – to indicate their primary workplace and the sports they are primarily dealing with professionally. As a result, we interviewed:

- Six *esports journalists*, including editors-in-chief of esports sections of the main Polish online portals and other media, and TV commentators of esports events (there already are esports TV channels and online TVs broadcasting gaming events and dealing strictly with esports). All of them declared that their main interest was esports.
- Nine *traditional sports journalists*, including well-known commentators and journalists working for the largest Polish TV stations, heads of TV, radio, and online portal sports departments. The respondents were also press journalists from two widely read sports newspapers. All these journalists indicated many disciplines as their main professional interests, mainly football, cycling, tennis, and/or volleyball.

As mentioned before, semi-structured interviews were part of a broader project on changes in media sports during a pandemic, and we asked the respondents many questions to address this.

During the first two interviews, the relationship between sports and esports and the question of the status of the latter became a significant theme, which we included as an integral part of any future interview. The interviews took place from September to November 2021.

We are aware that separating esports and traditional journalists may be considered a bit stiff and empirically rigorous. Although the declarations of the interviewees indicated their prime interests, and it was easy to identify their primary workplace, a given journalist could work in several media departments at the same time or be professionally interested in many different sports. However, in the case of our research, only one of the respondents stated that although he is professionally interested in esports, he also sometimes writes about football. In addition, we justify this stiff approach in yet another way. While starting the research on media sports during COVID-19, we saw that esports could have a vital role in changing the media landscape; hence, we wanted to reach journalists dealing with esports and decided to divide the journalists into two types. This turned out to be an important variable, as we noticed clear differences between traditional and esports journalists, also when it comes to the status of esports.

In the study design and analysis, we used the approach described by Hsieh and Shannon (2005) and named conventional content analysis (CCA), with the results formatted as thematic analysis with the classification process of coding and identifying patterns. The CCA approach assumes that ‘categories and names for categories flow from the data’ (2005, p. 36), as researchers avoid preconceiving these – this approach is thus inductive, and ‘categories can represent either explicit communication or inferred communication’ (2005, p. 36).

The analysis included all stages of CCA. First, after repeatedly reviewing the data to obtain a sense of the whole, we derived codes and highlighted exact phrases to capture key concepts. Second, labels for codes were formulated, and the codes were linked and sorted into subcategories and then broader categories. This is in line with the CCA, as ‘depending on the relationships between subcategories, researchers can combine or organise this larger number of subcategories into a smaller number of categories’ (2005, p. 36). CCA also recommends giving definitions for each category or subcategory.

In Table 1, we present these definitions, subcategories, and categories and give the number of interviews with sports and esports journalists in which a given subcategory and category appeared. In the Results section, we refer to categories and subcategories using appropriate codes (e.g. C1SC1). Also, next to each quote, an interviewee’s number and type are indicated (e.g. I1, I2, and T for traditional sports journalist or ES for esports journalist); e.g. I05T or I06ES. To meet the ethical research standards, we also anonymised the quotes, removing any piece of information that could help identify a given respondent.

Results

C1 – Esports is a true sport (also because it is autonomous)

According to our interviewees, traditional sports and esports can coexist, and a kind of ‘symbiosis’ between the two is possible (C1SC1). The fact is that these separate ‘worlds’ influence and complement each other, but still stay separate. It does not mean that these two areas are not ‘compatible’ and cannot benefit from ‘connecting’ in terms of finances, fans, spectatorship, etc. For example, interviewees mentioned sponsors, such as bookmakers, or the Polish Football Association, as well as clubs, such as Legia Warszawa or Wisła Kraków, that are engaging in esports and/or create new sections (such as Legia eSports, Wisła All in! Games Kraków). These initiatives increase the interest of fans and occasional viewers from both worlds.

The compatibility of sports and esports makes gaming (and esports/video games in general) particularly suitable to further promote already recognised sporting brands and further increase profits as a result (C1SC3). The respondents gave different examples here, mostly indicating football, and claiming that FIFA (the global football association) ‘in 2020 earned more money on

Table 1. Analytical categories and subcategories and their definitions.

Broad analytical categories Number of interviews with traditional (T) and esports (ES) journalists included in each category	Subcategories and their definitions Number of interviews with traditional (T) and esports (ES) journalists included in each subcategory
Category 1 – C1 Esports is a true sport (also because it is autonomous) Number of T interviews – 4 Number of ES interviews – 6	Subcategory 1 – SC1: Esports' and traditional sports' common features Similarities and connections between esports and conventional sports (even in case these two have been seen as separate). The role of fans in sports and esports is the same. Esports can exist and develop alongside/together with traditional sports. Number of T interviews – 3 Number of ES interviews – 5 Subcategory 2 – SC2: Esports autonomy Esports provides more emotions than (or as many emotions as) traditional sports. Esports does not need to be a part of conventional sports, as it has developed its structures and strategies of development. Esports means a different type of competition (e.g. the athletes prepare differently). Number of T interviews – 0 Number of ES interviews – 4 Subcategory 3 – SC3: Esports is a tool for traditional sports Esports as a tool for marketing and promotion, increasing revenues, etc. Esports as a tool boosting businesses outside of sports. Number of T interviews – 1 Number of ES interviews – 4 Subcategory 4 – SC4: Esports can be considered 'genuine' in terms of professionalism The broadcasting of major esports events in no way differs from major events in traditional sports. Esports brings to life recognised stars/celebrities. Non-esports celebrities get involved in esports, boosting its popularity and acceptance. Esports broadcasts are more creative and interesting than conventional sports broadcasts due to using online spaces, and these being esports' natural environment. Esports attracts an increasing number of sponsors. Number of T interviews – 3 Number of ES interviews – 6 Subcategory 5 – SC5: Esports is still too unprofessional and niche Esports does not (yet) have such financial, organisational, institutional, or technological possibilities as traditional sports does. Esports does not work well as a traditional sports' marketing tool. Esports athletes and fans are a hermetic and niche community. Esports is only for the young. People are used to traditional sports, for example, to the values that come with it (e.g. health, fundamental motor skills, competition). Number of T interviews – 5 Number of ES interviews – 4 Subcategory 6 – SC6: Esports depends on technology and does not involve physical activity The limitations of esports are technological (both hardware and software issues). Esports does not involve any or only involves limited physical activity. Esports is passive; it does not improve health, etc. Number of T interviews – 8 Number of ES interviews – 0
Category 2 – C2 Esports is not a true sport Number of T interviews – 9 Number of ES interviews – 4	

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Broad analytical categories	Subcategories and their definitions
Number of interviews with traditional (T) and esports (ES) journalists included in each category	Number of interviews with traditional (T) and esports (ES) journalists included in each subcategory
Category 3 – C3 Pandemic and ‘genuineness’ of esports Number of T interviews – 4 Number of ES interviews – 6	Subcategory 7 – SC7: In esports, there are not any universally recognised stars Esports does not bring to life stars at all. Esports brings to life international stars, but they are known only within the community. Number of T interviews – 5 Number of ES interviews – 3
	Subcategory 8 – SC8: The pandemic shows esports is gaining in popularity and will grow in the future During the pandemic, esports became more popular. The pandemic brought traditional sports and esports closer to each other (e.g. esports ‘replaced’ traditional sports for fans, athletes, and sports organisations; different alternatives in times of lockdown). Number of T interviews – 2 Number of ES interviews – 6
	Subcategory 9 – SC9: Esports did not have much difficulty adjusting to/coping with the pandemic Online spaces as a ‘natural’ esports’ environment. For esports, compared to traditional sports, the pandemic/lockdown was not a big shock due to esports being technological in its very nature. Number of T interviews – 0 Number of ES interviews – 5
	Subcategory 10 – SC10: Difficulties of esports during a pandemic Esports cannot/was not able to replace traditional sports. Esports pandemic alternatives are not a ‘real’/“genuine” sports. Esports also loses as a result of the pandemic (e.g. financial losses, offline events were impaired). Number of T interviews – 3 Number of ES interviews – 3

Source: Own study.

video games than on football itself (...)’ (I03ES; C1SC3), and – supposedly—for FIFA, it does not matter if people support ‘real’ teams and watch ‘real’ football or play the sporting game released annually by Electronic Arts (i.e. *EA FIFA*). Another frequently mentioned example was the Polish case of Ekstraklasa Games, a virtual competition connected with Ekstraklasa (i.e. the highest football division in Poland) and being the only domestic professional *EA FIFA* competition. These examples prove that esports is getting ‘stronger’, at least in the sense that traditional sport is more ‘dependent’ on this kind of esports initiatives.

While acknowledging this complementary nature of both areas it was esports journalists (but also some traditional ones), who linked ‘genuine’ esports status with its autonomy. Some of the esports respondents emphasised that one should not force these two ‘worlds’ to connect but rather accept their differences (C1SC2):

[...] [I]t seems reasonable to me that these worlds coexist for the good of both of them, because in my opinion, every radicalism is bad. [...] However, in my opinion, [...] one should not disturb the other. (I03ES; C1SC2)

Similarly, esports respondents saw electronic sports as an aspiring field, as it strives for autonomy, and wants to be detached from the traditional sporting context and will manage even in case not being seen as a ‘true’ sport (C1SC2). The interviewees believed this detachment is well justified, both in terms of greater esports’ business and marketing potential compared to traditional sports, and in terms of providing exciting, dynamic, and, consequently, highly attractive spectacles. Hence, some esports journalists were reluctant to connect esports with sport and treated the former as an

independent one. However, when confronted and asked whether it means that esports is not a sport, they claimed that esports is 'autonomous' or 'real' like any other social phenomenon.

Esports journalists believed that broadcasting important esports events is not inferior to large traditional sporting events, and can be even seen as introducing new quality (C1SC4). This is because 'esports is a little less structured, freer, and a lot can be done here' (I06ES; C1SC3; C1SC4). Broadcasting on the Internet means being able to test new, sometimes unconventional, solutions, for example, in visualisation. Another issue raised here was the technological proficiency of esports athletes, often being content creators themselves:

Compared to sports stars, esports stars have a technological advantage. The Internet is their natural environment. Some traditional stars use it efficiently, but [...] content creators operate at the junction of the entertainment and computer industries, and they reach audiences comparable to football stars, or NBA stars, with the only difference that streamers use digital spaces with greater ease [...] they are digital natives [...]. Footballers, even if they live with a phone in their hands or have a staff of people behind them, are the only guests in this cyberreality. The esports stars were born there. (I13ES; C1SC4)

Esports interviewees stressed that esports athletes' popularity often goes beyond games (e.g. they could be online sporting commentators of the games of the Polish national football team). Companies (including those not associated with video games) seek to cooperate with esports' influencers more and more, as for some fans (especially young ones) they are as recognisable as music, movies, or traditional sports celebrities (C1SC4). One of the respondents noted that 'esports certainly creates stars, maybe not in terms of celebrity-like recognition, but in terms of market value' (I06ES; C1SC4). This was also seen by some traditional journalists, as they believed that esports is becoming more 'popular, and the money behind it is from powerful companies' (I07T; C1SC4). This is why many celebrities, not already associated with esports, are suddenly quite interested in it (C1SC4) (an issue we will elaborate on further). They 'explain' esports to wider audiences, and increase social acceptance for this new form of entertainment.

In summary, esports journalists believed that esports is autonomous and creates an attractive multimedia spectacle attracting crowds of enthusiasts, celebrities, and sponsors (C1SC4). However, the ultimate argument to see esports as a 'real' sport is that in the long run, the growing popularity of esports is crucial not only for its future but could also re-evaluate what today is considered as a sport in general:

At this point, we can acknowledge that esports is one of the most popular sports in the world if we call all video games a sport. And this is the only sport with a very bright future. Of course [...] football will naturally grow [...] on a scale of several percent annually, there will be new disciplines that are regionally popular [...] But it is absolutely fascinating that the only truly global sport that is growing at such an incredible pace is an electronic sport. (I13ES; C1SC4)

C2 – Esports is not a true sport

Traditional sports journalists were, for the best part, sceptical about treating esports as a sport defined conventionally despite understanding its popularity and its place in the modern world. They emphasised the difference between well-established, well-known organisational structures of traditional sports and many diverse organisations connected with esports, both in Poland and worldwide (C2SC5). They stressed that, for them, it is difficult to unambiguously pinpoint what institutions are responsible for esports. Interviewees pointed out that the esports community is comprised of professionals (other journalists, players, fans) and strongly dependent on corporations/game developers (C2SC5). This hinders self-governance and independence in terms of choosing one's path, and above all, this dependence makes it impossible to create organisational structures like traditional sports. It is worth noting that although esports journalists were much more positive in terms of esports' future institutionalisation, they confirmed that esports generally

does not institutionally fit traditional sports. All this means that esports is still not like ‘mainstream’ sports (C2SC5):

There is a lot of contempt, in my opinion, for esports among sports journalists because they don’t treat it as a sport. Of course, someone may be indignant, and say that esports is a sport, and that is it—the end. Because these are the times we are living in. But I personally don’t have to agree with that. (I05T; C2SC5)

Traditional sports journalists often criticised the dependence of esports on technology (C2SC6), as this could become fatal, especially during major esports events, when even a small technical glitch can ‘blow up’ the entire event. The interviewees gave examples of games ‘crashing’ due to a major bug previously not detected that could be problematic for gamers and fans. Technological dependence is also problematic for recognising esports as traditional sports because esports is virtual in its very nature. According to traditional journalists, the idea that competition takes place somewhere beyond the ‘tangible’ reality collides with real/traditional sports. Interestingly, the technological limitations and difficulties of esports were also emphasised by esports journalists, although they focused on IT issues only (i.e. they mentioned games’ bugs or problems with the Internet connection or data transfer). However, they did not relate this to the virtual nature of games and did not believe this makes esports somehow inferior compared to traditional sports.

Traditional journalists’ belief that esports is too virtual was often backed by the argument that it lacks physical activity (C2SC6). Nearly all stressed that conventional sport is about a real physical effort that involves long-term preparation and taking care of one’s health. They perceived esports as the opposite, not improving either health or physical condition, and hence not associated with the values of ‘real’ competition in traditional sports (C2SC5; C2SC6):

But when it comes to taking care of, you know, the body, it has nothing to do with the ideas of sport . . . You know, Athenian, Greek, Olympics, right? (I11T; C2SC7)

I’m an old-school type of guy . . . I’m too old maybe, but for me, physical effort is an inherent part of sports. Well, of course, some will say, okay, there is also a lot of activity in esports; they lose a lot of calories, for sure. But is it a sport? Well . . . No . . . This is esports, and let’s just call it such. (I14T; C2SC7)

Also, not recognising esports as a true sport was visible in the traditional sports respondents’ opinions on esports being ‘only an element of youth culture’ (I04T; C2SC6), or ‘just playing video games’ (I05T; C2SC6), or ‘being delirious in front of the computer’ (I04T; C2SC6). Additionally, according to traditional journalists, there are no universally recognised athletes in esports, and esports celebrities are known only within the community of fans and players (C2SC7). It is worth noting that some esports journalists had a similar opinion:

Well, [. . .] these stars[. . .] they are esports stars only, rather than well-known celebrities in society as a whole. (I06ES; C2SC7)

It seems to me that even despite esports is quite large, it is always hermetic [. . .] I find it hard to imagine that someone who has won a game is a star because there are Poles who have had great successes here, and they are not known except in the community of gamers. (I04T; C2SC7)

The issue of the lack of ‘true’ esports celebrities was sometimes accompanied by the opinion on still lesser money – as compared to traditional sports – involved in esports, including the lack of sponsors with whom potential esports stars could cooperate. In the eyes of traditional journalists, the issue of sponsors’ involvement strongly differentiates conventional sports and esports, and in terms of marketing, the latter is still much weaker (C2SC5). This was also raised by some esports interviewees, though in a different context (i.e. they stressed that in Poland esports is not financially supported by state-owned companies or the Ministry of Sport; contrary to traditional sports).

C3 – Pandemic and “genuineness” of esports

According to the respondents, the growing importance and popularity of esports was evident during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, with the rapid rise in numbers of viewers as people look for ‘alternative entertainment’ (C3SC8). However, the interviewees had some doubts about the pandemic being the direct reason for the increase in interest in esports. COVID-19 may be one of the many factors behind this growth, which is highly evident during the cancellation of traditional sports events and widespread lockdowns. Nevertheless, the increase could also have been caused by the general interest in esports, as it has been growing for years with a steady inflow of viewers.

However, esports journalists (and some traditional ones) emphasised the role of pandemics not only for viewership but also for the greater willingness of sponsors to finance many events. What is more, esports gained visibility in the mainstream, and increase in public awareness (C3SC8), and sometimes this could be due to the laws introduced during lockdowns:

[...] Intel Extreme Masters in Katowice in 2020 broke all possible viewership records because it was heavily hampered because of the decision made by the Silesian voivode to forbade the presence of fans just a few hours before the start of the event. (I01ES; C3SC8)

According to our interviewees, the pandemic showed that there is common ground for promoting both sports and esports ‘because suddenly famous athletes started playing virtual Formula 1. Suddenly, Neymar started playing Counter-Strike ... Casemiro founded an esports organisation’ (I03ES; C3SC8; C1SC1). The involvement of these and other celebrities during the COVID-19 lockdowns brought traditional sports and esports closer together (C3SC8; C1SC1).

The ultimate example here was the alternative virtual equivalents of traditional sports after the cancellation of basically every major sporting event (C3SC8). Some traditional journalists stressed the importance of these novelties and saw that mainstream media, sports organisations, and clubs often turned to esports, fearing the loss of fans’ interest and their continuous outflow in the long run:

We were showing a football game (anonymized) [...], and it was being shown on ‘normal’ television (anonymized), and the Internet at the same time, and a TV journalist commented on this game together with a YouTuber, an esports athlete who added his comment for Internet audiences. This raised a lot of interest in the Internet, and as the pandemic progressed, this started to be a normal practice for TV (anonymized). (I08T; C3SC8)

Therefore, some traditional sports journalists seemed to appreciate the importance of esports in the pandemic and saw its growing popularity, although this did not stop them from being sceptical of it, like what we have described above. They did not treat esports as ‘real’ in the context of the pandemic and emphasised that although esports was quite convenient as a kind of alternative, ‘something was missing’ nevertheless. Usually, they referred to the lack of physical components (C2SC6; C3SC10) and ‘emotions’ in esports alternatives (C3SC10), and the closer to the ‘real’ sports the alternatives were, the better they were seen by traditional journalists:

Let’s take Zwift, a virtual platform for cycling that came to the rescue because it turned out that you can organize a kind of substitute for some live events using Zwift. And it is important for cycling that it is about an effort, that it is not like esports, which we see as just a guy with a console who is sitting and playing. And thanks to Zwift, there was real effort there. (I07T; C3SC10)

According to traditional journalists, during the pandemic, esports was only a temporary ‘substitute’, both for fans and for traditional athletes and organisations (C3SC10). This view was shared by some esports journalists who saw esportsing alternatives in terms of ‘promotion rather than a real [...] replacement’ (I06ES; C3SC9) and believed this is in line with the previously mentioned relatively independent status of esports not needing traditional sports to flourish (C1SC2).

According to esports journalists, electronic sports did not have any trouble adapting to the new pandemic situation, which confirmed its independence (C3SC9). Esports did better than traditional

sports because, for esports, online spaces are its 'natural environment'. Hence, during the lockdowns, esports were the only ones generating new content; thus, the pandemic was not shocking after all. The reorganisation of esports was quite easy, as many online tools were already used extensively before the pandemics (e.g. streaming platforms).

However, it is worth noting that some esports journalists noticed that due to COVID-19, esports has had its difficulties (C3SC10), mainly the inability to organise large offline events, financial losses, or the 'lack of emotions' during large events:

There is a lack of [...] the atmosphere of offline tournaments, where fans comfort athletes when they lose, cheer when they win, and the gamers feel this support [...]. Intel Extreme Masters Katowice without fans and with fans, this is a completely different event [...] because the prestige is immediately higher when you see that the whole world is coming and watching. (I02ES; C3SC10)

Discussion

Summarizing our research, both groups differ in their assessments, with esports journalists being more positive towards esports, which should not come as a surprise, as they are involved professionally. This obvious and unsurprising conclusion has some serious implications. Our research highlights some major research misconceptions regarding the mentioned approaches to esports. Juxtaposing traditional sports with esports to evaluate the latter seems problematic at best. The differences among our respondents indicate that taking conventional sports' set of characteristics and using these to decide whether esports is a 'true' sport or not is always a matter of perspective. Certain groups may perceive esports (but also traditional sports) differently, and, more importantly, may include different criteria for evaluating it. This is exactly what happened in the case of our research, as traditional and esports journalists sometimes used similar criteria (and could even agree on some issues), but most often their optics on esports being or not being 'genuine' differed significantly. The opinions of esports journalists are given here particular weight as it is they who presented a position distinct from the theoretical approaches mentioned in the Introduction. For example, they stated that esports is a 'true' sport and illustrated/justified this by assertions of complementarity and autonomy.

Also, when considering the results more closely, one can see that although there is a clear tendency in assessing esports among the two groups, we are not dealing with a strict binary opposition, i.e. esports is a 'real' sport or 'not real' at all. Despite their differences, both esports and traditional sports journalists are quite sophisticated in their definitions. For instance, some esports journalists did not connect esports with sport at all, treating the former as highly independent, and this was also because of its diversity. Moreover, some traditional journalists recognised that not only do esports borrow from traditional sports, but the converse is also true. Especially since esports is one step ahead technologically, this became obvious during the pandemic, when traditional sports used esports to maintain continuity and viewership. On the other hand, sometimes positive esports journalists' assessments came with a remark that esports is not yet as professional as conventional sports and that it is essentially a niche (a view that can be argued with given the reach and growth of esports), and that it did not replace traditional sport during the pandemic being more about promotion rather than a 'real' sport.

As mentioned in the Introduction, researchers often consider the lack of esports' institutionalisation as proof of esports not being a 'true' sport. Our research casts some doubt on these kinds of comparisons. Using the criteria designed to judge traditional sports, with their roots dating back to the nineteenth century, might not be suitable for a still heavily growing twentieth-first-century phenomenon strongly rooted in information technologies (see also Abanazir, 2019). Especially since this traditionally understood institutionalisation (e.g. state or international sports associations) may not even be possible because of the developers holding copyrights for the games they publish and different business entities having their own agendas (see Karhulahti, 2017). In our

analysis, the assessment of esports' institutionalisation and professionalisation varies depending on the type of journalists, with esports journalists emphasising the highly professional nature of esports, which became apparent during the pandemic. Esports coped with it better than traditional sports, and any shortcomings in traditionally understood institutionalisation did not become problematic here, as these were not even noticed by esports journalists. This again shows that defining and judging esports is a matter of perspective. The same is true of esports' lack of physical activity, as this topic never came up in interviews with esports journalists. However, traditional journalists believe that esports is not 'real' because it is not physical. This discrepancy confirms that using this feature to decide on esports status is one-sided, and it is problematic to compare the physicality of sports and esports to assess the 'genuineness' of the latter.

The differences in the interviewees' assessments seem to confirm the view expressed by some about the independent status of both traditional sports and esports. They insisted that instead of talking about esports based on criteria taken from conventional sports, we should try to create esports' categories and concepts. It is important to stress that some researchers do acknowledge this, with Hutchins (2008) being the most visible and distinct example. According to the researcher, traditional sports cannot be the frame to which esports needs to fit, and the very use of the term esports negates its new quality. Nevertheless, his considerations also come close to juxtaposing sports with esports, as he claims that the newness of esports results from so far unprecedented 'interpenetration of media content, sport and networked computing' (2008, p. 386). By emphasising this, Hutchins draws attention to the diversity of esports' forms and features (an issue also stressed by others, see e.g. Hebbel-Seeger, 2012; Seo, 2016), but by doing this, he comes back to the traditional sport framework.

Other researchers want to show that, contrary to popular belief, video games involve the whole body and are physically engaging, and sometimes the games require 'motor expertise' (Besombes & Maillot, 2020, p. 579). In her influential *On the Digital Playing Field*, Witkowski (2012) describes playing *Counter-Strike* as a rich sensory experience in which physicality is an important part and a 'composure, breathing, and the steadiness demanded from a player's body contribute to the sensations experienced' (2012, p. 369). This 'questions the legitimacy of a traditional sports ontology' (2012, p. 349). The problem is that Witkowski does not elaborate on how to define what is sport and, more importantly, when showing that esports is physical, she again refers to the traditional sport as she claims that esports is a 'legitimate sporting endeavour'. Witkowski distances herself from and goes back to conventional sports simultaneously.

Our research proposes a different position. As mentioned, it is problematic to look at esports using the criteria of traditional sports. One can compare both considering their features, or find similarities or differences between them, and these make sports terminology useful in talking about practices and issues in esports. However, the very assessment of the 'genuineness' of esports is always a matter of perspective and/or using different frameworks. Instead of focusing on the 'realness' of esports – physicality, institutionalisation, cultural significance, etc.—the research should focus on how different groups or communities, organisations, or other entities evaluate esports and what criteria they use for these evaluations; thus far, this is a scarce research topic. One of the rare examples is the Tjønndal's analysis of the resistance of football fans to the introduction of Norway's first professional esports league, Eserien – the professional FIFA league – and its inclusion in the Norwegian Football Federation (2020). Tjønndal (2020) shows how fans criticised the idea and perceived esports as unhealthy and as an area of cheating and potentially threatening traditional football in terms of securing sponsorship and gaining media attention.

Also, apart from criticising the mentioned approaches to esports (juxtaposing traditional sports with esports), the presented research sheds new light on sportification of esports (e.g. Heere, 2018). Sportification is understood here as a process in which a given activity (typically not viewed as a sport, e.g. skateboarding) acquires the quality and inner logic of sport, and gradually becomes regulated and organised in specific ways that increasingly mimic organised sport. Our research shows that video games may never be fully

sportificated due to different assessments or frameworks used. Interviewees evaluated esports using some traditional criteria, but at the same time, they distanced themselves from this kind of evaluation. This is particularly evident for statements on the autonomous nature of esports and the fact that, in the long run, it could re-evaluate what today is considered a sport in general. Therefore, we agree with Hutchins (2008), who claims that researchers should propose esports' distinct categories and concepts, and we could add that these could be related to online spaces being esports' natural environment – an issue strongly emphasised by esports interviewees, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The presented research and the problematic nature of juxtaposing esports with traditional sports have some practical implications, especially for esports marketing and management. One could consider whether marketers and managers involved in esports should translate the rules of sports marketing into esports. Especially since the issue of gaining acceptance as to be considered a 'real' sport could not be as important as widely considered (the importance of this is often raised when discussing esports as an Olympic sport, see e.g. Parry, 2021). Instead, the effort could be directed at showing that esports is an important but separate socio-cultural phenomenon. Traditional sports communities (e.g. traditional sports journalists in our study and football fans in Tjønndal's research) may never approve of it, but it is popular and accepted elsewhere; thus, it does not need this approval in the first place. In this context, we must study media people and insiders (i.e. journalists dealing with esports). While they are not marketers or managers, they are still important for how esports is seen and can be seen in the future. The signalled differences between the interviewees – despite some nuances – show that traditional journalists find it more difficult to accept esports. However, this does not mean that it should strive to achieve the status of a traditional sport, but rather focus on its distinctiveness, even despite many connections with traditional sports that were highly visible during the pandemic.

With all this, we are aware of the limitations of our qualitative research, as we sampled only Polish journalists. Research carried out in other countries or regions could yield different results, as some rare studies indicating differences in public reactions to esports across different regions seem to suggest. For example, Painter and Sahm (2023) show that media coverage of esports' race, gender, age, and social class issues varies between Asia, Europe, and North America. We might suspect that journalists' opinions on esports being a 'true' sport might be more positive in Korea – considered the cradle and centre of esports (Jin, 2020). It is quite probable that the acceptance of esports among traditional sports journalists could be stronger there. Other research tropes can be suggested here by studies indicating how news media in various countries evaluate games in general (not only esports). For example, there are some reports on growing game acceptance in the US (Williams, 2003) or Germany (Bigl & Schlegelmilch, 2021), while in China the status of gaming is still rather doubtful (Cao & He, 2021). Overall, we believe that our qualitative inquiry could be a starting point for further analysis, including cross-cultural ones, as these have just begun in esports research in general (e.g. Nyćkowiak et al., 2023) and not only in how the media frame it.

Also, our respondents, being well-aware insiders with broad knowledge of the subject, outlined some unique interpretations (see Table 1 and Results) that could be useful in searching for the aforementioned esports' categories and concepts and/or for any further detailed esports research. We still lack analysis showing practitioners' points of view and using their knowledge, intuitions, and inside to try to capture what esports is. In this sense, the results of the presented research can be treated as a kind of 'map' showing the complex nature and the new quality of esports, but also the need to escape from the inquiries into the 'genuineness' of esports.

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