

Taking Weibo as an Example to Analyze the Problems Existing in the Current Electronic Sports Communication Mode

Li Tairan

The University of Nottingham, Ningbo, China

Abstract: *Electronic sports have become a popular sport among young people due to their fun and competitive nature. But the controversy surrounding it has been ongoing, with the mainstream view still believing that the addictive nature of eSports poses great harm to young people. Some also argue that eSports do not conform to the spirit of the Olympic Games and therefore cannot be included in the category of sports. Despite so much controversy, eSports still have a huge fan base. Unlike traditional sports, eSports are mainly promoted through new media industries such as social media. This dissertation aims to investigate whether there are any biases in the current promotion methods of electronic sports on social media. On this basis, the research question of this dissertation is: Is the current eSports dissemination model conducive to further promotion of eSports. The controversy and focus of this issue lie in how to correctly understand the shortcomings of the current eSports' promotion model, and what impact these shortcomings have on eSports promotion. The main point of controversy lies in the perspective from which to discuss this issue. From the standpoint of clubs or teams, it is understandable to use celebrity players for promotion, while from the perspective of fans, they prefer players to focus more on the game or receive more promotional content that focuses on the game itself.*

Keywords: *eSport, Social Media, Dissemination Model*

1. Introduction

Breaking down the term eSports, the letter “e” refers to electronics, indicating that eSports primarily rely on computer media and digital technology, while the term “sports” summarizes its organizational, real-time, and competitive characteristics.

The origin of eSports can be traced back to the 1962 release of Space War, which was one of the first multiplayer games to be played on multiple machines (Lowood, 2009). With the continuous improvement of the game, it reached its peak in the 1972 Space War Olympics held at Stanford University (Lowood, 2009). In the 1980s, arcade games had completely exploded in the United States, many creative games, such as Centipede, Pac-Man and Galaga, attracted large numbers of players to the arcade (Borowy & Jin, 2013). Many live gaming tournaments were also organized during this period, most of which were sponsored by gaming companies (Hindin et al., 2020). However, this offline gaming model has seen changes with the popularity of home console gaming machines and the advent of the internet age. From the mid-1980s through the 1990s, home video game consoles brought gaming to living rooms around the world. Unlike personal computer games, these video game consoles used separate consoles and game controllers. Putting the game's graphics on a TV instead of a personal monitor, making the gaming experience accessible to the gamer's family and friends, is a potential consumer catalyst and signals the potential for the rise of gaming (Taylor, 2012). The popularity of these video game consoles allowed more people to have access to competitive games. The development of eSports possessed a digital interconnection model with the advent of the World Wide Web in 1989. Beginning in the 1990s, advances in software and networking technology allowed players to play in real-time multiplayer scenarios. Most of the early games were marched over the Internet or LAN, with FPS, RTS, and sports games being the most popular (Jonasson & Thiborg, 2010).^[1] It was not yet possible to call the games eSports during this period, as the tournaments and the games themselves were not well enough organized, and the competitors consisted mostly of enthusiasts.

Regular schedules and organized seasons began to emerge in the late 1990s and early 2000s as the first organized eSports leagues were put together. Some of the better-known tournaments are “E-sports organizations defunct and ongoing such as the World Cyber Games (WCG), Electronic Sports World

Cup (ESWC), Major League Gaming (MLG), Professional Gamers League (PGL), Championship Gaming Series (CGS), and Cyberathlete Professional League (CPL)” (Hindin et al., 2020, p.4). These are national and international eSports tournaments organized by eSports organizations in cooperation with companies in the computer game industry.

As the eSports industry continues to grow, it is becoming more common for the television industry to cover it, but the channels for eSports-related information are still social media or streaming sites. Channels like Twitch.tv, for example, not only have tournament broadcasts, but also provide users with real-time chat communication services (Hindin et al., 2020). Social media provides a permanent online platform for eSports players and fans (Baker & Pizzo, 2021). Professional players can use social media to engage in peer-to-peer communication with fans, which greatly helps to increase fan stickiness and promote eSports. Therefore, understanding fan preferences through social media is crucial for eSports organizations and brands. This emerging form of peer-to-peer communication and eSports provides a new format for eSports participants, where players can clarify their identity in the social sphere through in-person experience. eSports players can browse a large amount of different content to clarify their content preferences, producers can publish content to gain followers, and in this model each player gradually recognizes their own identity. With the improvement of social media functions and the gradual improvement of players' media literacy, the identities of producers and consumers are gradually blurred, and a controversial topic has emerged in the field of eSports, that is, different participants have different subjective perceptions of eSports and gaming (Xue, Newman & Du, 2019). The blurring of producer and consumer identities allows every eSports participant to voice his or her own opinion, which further lowers the communication threshold for participation in eSports. Because different participants have different perceptions of the subject of eSports, different groups have very different attitudes towards eSports communication. For psychological researchers their subject of concern is that playing video games may make individuals more violent behavioral (Anderson & Bushman, 2001). For some parents of minors who play video games, the main body of their perception of eSports may be its harmful and addictive nature. For professional players, they believe that eSports are both a job and their own pursuit. Due to significant subjective biases among different groups of people, the direction and public opinion of eSports promotion also vary greatly.

The focus of this dissertation on eSports is on the impact of the type of public opinion generated by producers on the dissemination of eSports. Focusing on Chinese social media as the primary subject of discussion, this analysis explores the main types of public opinion regarding e-sports in the Weibo public opinion environment. Whether using relationship marketing and the storytelling capabilities of social media to engage fans will create a group of fans who don't understand eSports itself and only care about the players or the games they win or lose. On this basis, the research question of this dissertation is: Is the current eSports dissemination model conducive to further promotion of eSports.

In order to better understand the impact of this mode of communication, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with ten students to analyze how they have changed after long-term exposure to this mode of communication. The reason for selecting students as interviewees is that as digital natives, they are accustomed to receiving information through emerging media such as social media, and the main audience of e-sports is also concentrated in this age group of students. By analyzing the changes in students, explain the impact of this modes of dissemination.

The significance of this dissertation is to understand the impact of this mode of communication by understanding its effects and to summarize the possible consequences. By analyzing the shortcomings of this mode of communication, it will help the eSports field to rationalize the use of this mode in subsequent campaigns. In the literature review section, this dissertation summarizes research on the relationship marketing and storytelling functions of social media, as well as research on the cultural perspective of eSports and the controversies that exist in eSports itself. The methodology section will introduce the advantages and disadvantages of interviewing this research method as well as the specific research content. Finally the results collected are discussed and conclusions are drawn.

2. Literature Review

Social media has emerged as a vital tool in promoting eSports, transforming how gaming competitions are marketed and consumed. The ability to connect with global audiences instantly has positioned platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Twitch as central hubs for fan engagement, brand promotion, and live streaming of events. This has allowed eSports to grow rapidly, surpassing traditional sports in some aspects of digital interaction. The integration of social media in eSports has redefined fan

experiences, enabling direct communication with players, teams, and brands, which has, in turn, strengthened fan loyalty and broadened the market reach.

The literature review will focus on several key themes: the role of social media in eSports marketing, the impact of relationship marketing through these platforms, and the storytelling function that drives fan engagement. Additionally, the review will explore cultural perspectives on eSports, controversies surrounding the industry, and the evolving relationship between content producers and consumers. By examining these themes, the literature review will provide a comprehensive understanding of how social media influences the growth and perception of eSports.^[2]

2.1 Definition of Key Terms

The three main key-terms in this study are the social media, promotion and e-sports. According to Carr and Hayes (2015) and Humphreys (2017), the social media is defined as an interactive technologies that mainly facilitate for the sharing, creating and also aggregation of the content among the virtual communities. This is also discussed by McFarland and Ployhart (2015) who noted that social media as the means of interactions among the individuals which they use to create and exchange ideas and information virtually. The third definition is from Pearce et al. (2020), who stated social media as being digital technology that is commonly used in the sharing of the information and ideas including the visuals and texts using the virtual communities. The second key term which is promotion can be defined broadly as the method for creating awareness (Lee & Kotler, 2015; Yardley et al., 2016). In the communication industry, promotion is defined as the form of communication for informing, convincing and also reminding the public about certain product. Image, services or community involvement. Eagle et al. (2020) tend to add to what Alexandrescu and Milandru (2018) commented by stating that promotion is a form of marketing communication used to inform the audiences of the relative merits in certain product, brand, issue or service. The third key term that will be often used in this study is the eSports which is defined as the form of competition using the video games (Marelić & Vukušić, 2019). ESports is a short form of the electronic sports which means that form of the competition which is done using the video games (Jenny et al., 2017). Southern (2017) notes that it transforms online gaming to become a spectator sport.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

This study will be based in two main theories which are social exchange theory and the media framing theory to help explain on how social media as a means of communication promotion is likely to promote the e-sports.

Social Identity Theory is one of the most important theories in social psychology that was introduced by Tajfel and Turner in 1979, which describes how people categorize themselves and others into different social categories such as 'us' and 'those' (Hogg, 2016; Trepte & Loy, 2017). Tajfel and Turner stated that people have a drive to establish a positive identity, thus they are willing to be partial to their own group even at the expense of discriminating against other groups (Schmitt et al., 2003). The theory emphasizes three cognitive processes: Social categorization, social identification, and social comparison are among the major areas that are covered by stereotyping. In these processes, individuals may not only build their subjectivities but also acquire their meaning and value from the group affiliations. Social Identity Theory has been applied in various fields and it focuses on the relationships between groups, intergroup competition, and formation of social identifications (Losh & Nzekwe, 2017). In the case of this study on e-sports, Social Identity Theory will be useful in explaining how participants – be they players, fans, or content creators – create a sense of identity for themselves within e-sports community. It can also be applied in explaining why people who support specific e-sports teams or games are partial to their own teams/games and how this influences their behaviors and interactions on social media platforms.

3. Methodology

As the research question: Is the current eSports dissemination model conducive to further promotion of eSports, in this dissertation is more complex and focus on the impact produced, it is more appropriate to use qualitative research. Choosing the method of interviews to analyze the current e-sports communication environment of microblogging can be used to ask relevant questions for different interviewees, so as to dig into the deeper reasons.

4. Reasons for selecting interviewees

This study will interview ten students, mostly selected males, who regularly watch eSports events as the main audience for most eSports viewing. Their answers are very informative. A small number of female students who watch eSports will be selected. As a more active group on social media, their responses can provide insight into their views and opinions on social media. This study focuses on the good and bad forms of communication on social media, so respondents need to answer based on their own personal experience of using social media, and depending on the answers, the interviewer will ask different questions. At the end of the interview, the current forms of communication on social media will be deductively analysed as to how good or bad they are.

5. Discussion and finding

5.1 Demographics of the sample group

Table 1: Demographics of the sample group

| Participant | Age | Gender | Occupation |
|-------------|-----|--------|------------|
| 1 | 24 | Female | Student |
| 2 | 23 | Male | Student |
| 3 | 24 | Male | Student |
| 4 | 24 | Female | Student |
| 5 | 24 | Male | Student |
| 6 | 24 | Male | Student |
| 7 | 24 | Male | Student |
| 8 | 24 | Male | Student |
| 9 | 24 | Male | Student |
| 10 | 24 | Male | Student |

As shown in Table 1: From the 10 student groups interviewed, male students are more averse to the current star making and emphasis on winning and losing in electronic sports, while female students hold a neutral attitude towards this dissemination environment. The perception of this promotional model may be influenced by gender, as male eSports players place more emphasis on the game itself and hope to obtain more information related to the game itself or to improve their skills. Female eSports players do not hold a strong opposition to promoting their players, believing that interacting with fans can increase visibility and strengthen fan stickiness. Most male eSports players tend to use the game's own launch platform or professional gaming software to obtain relevant game information, while female players may use social media such as Weibo more to obtain information. In idealized content acquisition, both male and female players hope to obtain content that is more focused on the game itself, and this is consistent.

Before delving into the detailed analysis of the viewpoints expressed by various interviewees, let's first summarize the existing issues regarding the dissemination of e-sports on Weibo.

1) The promotional methods are single. The current promotion methods in the eSports industry are relatively single, mainly relying on traditional means such as social media, video platforms, and offline activities. Although these methods can attract the attention of the audience to a certain extent, they lack innovation and differentiation, making it difficult to stand out in the fierce market competition. For example, promotional content on social media often focuses on match previews, contestant performances, and exciting moments, lacking depth and interactivity; Although promotional videos on video platforms are well produced, their dissemination is limited and it is difficult to reach a wider audience.^[3]

2) The target audience positioning is vague. The main audience for eSports is young people, who value gaming experience, social interaction, and competitive pleasure. However, in the promotion process of the eSports industry, there is often a lack of precise targeting and in-depth analysis of the target audience. This leads to a lack of targeted and attractive promotional content, making it difficult to effectively reach potential audiences. Meanwhile, due to a lack of deep understanding of the target audience's needs, promotional strategies often struggle to evoke emotional resonance and enthusiasm for participation from the audience.

5.2 Finding

5.2.1 There is a significant difference in gender recognition of promotional content

Among the women who participated in the interview, their attitude towards celebrity promotion in

eSports was relatively neutral, and they were more accepting of activities other than gaming that professional players participate in. Male participants expressed a desire to focus more on the game itself. This different attitude may come from the different focus of attention brought about by gender differences, where women pay more attention to emotional content and men pay more attention to rational content.

5.2.2 ESports players generally pay attention to the game content itself

The 10 participants interviewed all expressed a preference for obtaining content about the game itself, and this emphasis on the game is not related to gender. The fundamental reason is that the original intention of eSports players choosing to play games is mostly to enjoy fun or relax with friends. On this basis, eSports players do not pay high attention to the personal life or other information of the players, mostly out of curiosity or accidental attention. But currently, in terms of the eSports promotion environment on Weibo, most game news only simply reports game wins and losses or event previews, as well as some updates on players, which is different from the content of the game itself that most players want to obtain.

5.2.3 Debate on whether eSports is sports

Contrary to the views of some researchers, most of the interviewed participants stated that eSports aligns with the spirit of sports and can therefore be incorporated into sports programs. The performance carrier of traditional sports is based on athletes' physical abilities, and the winner is determined by measuring their jumping height, running speed, or other factors. The carrier of eSports, on the other hand, relies on the reactions and strategies of athletes, which are essentially conclusions drawn through brain thinking and are also part of physical abilities. So eSports is recognized as a sport in the hearts of most eSports players.

6. Conclusion

The research question of this dissertation is: Is the current eSports dissemination model conducive to further promotion of eSports. The main focus of this dissertation based on research questions is to investigate whether there are shortcomings in the current electronic sports communication model and how to improve it. The main conclusions are obtained through interviews with ten students, the main group of eSports fans. After summarizing the interview content of ten students through inductive deduction method, it was found that further segmenting the eSports audience may have a certain effect on improving the visibility and influence of current eSports promotion, while further deepening the dissemination of the game's content, and correctly balancing profits and serving fans.^[4] What each club or team can do in response to the above opinions is to make statistics and divisions on their own fan base. At the same time, the dissemination between different games should also be further subdivided. Some teams or clubs may operate more than one game. Therefore, when promoting games, it is necessary to select professional promoters for different fields to develop dissemination content. This is not only a way to respect one's own fans, but also a good way to win reputation for oneself.

eSports culture, as an emerging industry, can be recognized as an interactive culture. This interactive culture is reflected in every corner of eSports, between players and teammates, between two teams, between fans, or between fans and clubs. The key to using this interactive culture to create high-quality promotional content lies in using clubs as a bridge to enhance the interaction between fans and the game itself. As eSports fans, most of them play games for entertainment purposes. With a large number of professional players, eSports clubs can obtain exclusive content or skills within the game. On this basis, publishing these skills through social media deepens the interaction between fans and the game, which also allows fans to pay attention to the club itself while loving the game more. This subtle promotion is one of the important ways to increase the club's visibility.

Overall, as an untapped industry, the promotion methods of eSports are still in the exploratory stage. The fundamental purpose of this dissertation is not to criticize the current eSports communication model, but to improve the current eSports communication by summarizing and analyzing the opinions of the main fan audience. This is a win-win situation for eSports clubs and fans, as fans can receive more eSports content they want to harvest and clubs can enhance fan stickiness, thereby increasing their own profits. Summarizing the content of the entire dissertation, a rough conclusion can be drawn that clubs, as publishers of current eSports promotion, need to take the position of fan groups as recipients when writing promotional content. Directly linking fans with promotional content and strengthening the promotion content in the gaming industry may be the next direction for improving eSports communication methods.

References

- [1] Abarbanel, B., & Johnson, M. R. (2019). Esports consumer perspectives on match-fixing: implications for gambling awareness and game integrity. *International Gambling Studies*, 19(2), 296-311.
- [2] Abeza, G., O'Reilly, N., & Seguin, B. (2017). Social Media in Relationship Marketing: The Perspective of Professional Sport Managers in the MLB, NBA, NFL, and NHL. *Communication & Sport*, 7(1), 80–109. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167479517740343>
- [3] Alexandrescu, M. B., & Milandru, M. (2018). Promotion as a form of Communication of the Marketing Strategy. *Land Forces Academy Review*, 23(4), 268-274.
- [4] All, A., Castellar, E. P. N., & Van Looy, J. (2015). Towards a conceptual framework for assessing the effectiveness of digital game-based learning. *Computers & Education*, 88, 29-37.