# Marketing and Branding in esports

## Significance of player branding to esports organizations

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**Abstract**

Esports is a new growing industry that can offer a significant amount of opportunities in sports business, which makes it important to research. The ecosystem and organizations are mostly relying on sponsorship revenue and players are one of the core elements in organizations partnerships. The goal was to analyze the importance of player brands to esports organizations through literature review and reflect that on the data gathered through interviews with Finnish esports organizations on their views and processes related to player branding.

The topic was researched very broadly and there isn't a specific assignee, therefore several different facets like players, organizations or marketers can benefit from the results and conclusions. The research method was qualitative research where the data was gathered via semi constructed interviews. Six different Finnish esports organizations participated in the interviews, which ensured that it would generate broad enough view about this topic.

Player branding was seen in the literature review and in the interviews as a very important element for esports organizations. Results also showed passion as one of the core elements in the whole esports industry, and especially in player branding. Finnish esports organizations understand the value of player brands, but still have challenges in utilizing it, therefore one of the follow-up researches would be to analyze ways on how their processes could be improved.

**Keywords/tags (subjects)**

Esports, E-sports, Competitive gaming, Player, Athlete, Sponsorships, Marketing, Branding, Social Media, Organization, Team

**Miscellaneous (Confidential information)**

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**Markkinointi ja brändäys esportsissa**
**Pelaajabrändäyksen merkitys esports organisaatioille**

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**Tiivistelmä**

Esports on uusi kasvava ala, joka pystyy tarjoamaan todella paljon mahdollisuuksia urheilubisneksessä, minkä takia sitä on tärkeä tutkia. Sen ekosysteemi ja organisaatiot turvautuvat pitkälti sponsorirahoitukseen ja pelaajat ovat yksi pääelementeistä organisaatioiden yhteistyökumppanuuksissa. Tavoite oli analysoida pelaajabrändin tärkeyttä esports organisaatioille tietoperustan kautta ja verrata sitä dataan, jota kerättiin haastatteluilla Suomalaisten esports organisaatioiden kanssa heidän näkemyksistänsä ja toimintatavoista liittyen pelaajabrändäykseen.

Aihetta tutkittiin hyvin laajasti eikä tiettyä toimeksiantajaa ole, minkä takia useampi eri taho kuten pelaajat, organisaatiot tai markkinoijat pystyvät hyötymään tuloksista ja johtopäätelmistä. Tutkimusmenetelmä oli laadullinen tutkimus, jossa data kerättiin puolistrukturoitujen haastattelujen kautta. Kuusi eri suomalaista esports organisaatiota osallistui haastatteluihin, joka varmisti, että aiheesta saataisiin tarpeeksi laaja näkemys.

Pelaajabrändäys nähtiin tietoperustassa sekä haastatteluissa todella tärkeänä osa-alueena esports organisaatioille. Tulokset osoittivat myös autenttisuuden yhtenä ydinosana koko esports-alalla sekä erityisesti pelaajabrändäyksessä. Suomalaiset esports organisaatiot ymmärtävät pelaajabrändien arvon, mutta heillä on silti vaikeuksia hyödyntää sitä, jonka takia yhtenä jatkotutkimuksena tulisi analysoida miten näitä prosesseja pystyttäisiin kehittämään.

**Avainsanat (asiasanat)**

Eurheilu, E-urheilu, kilpapelaaminen, Pelaaja, Urheilija, Sponsorointi, Markkinointi, Brändäys, Sosiaalinen Media, Organisaatio, Joukkue

**Muut tiedot (salassa pidettävät liitteet)**

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**Table of contents**

**Figures**

# 1 Introduction

Esports is a rapidly growing sports industry with unique characteristics, that has separated itself from traditional sports by leveraging digitalization and reaching young demographics (Scholz 2019, 4). Esports has been able to take the huge gaming market and made its competitive side into a beloved spectator sport. It is global, digital and has a young fanbase, which is continuously growing and expanding itself into reaching larger masses. (BITKFRAFT 2017, 3-4.) The growth can also be seen in Finland where it took the number one spot as the most followed sport between 18 to 29-year-old men from Ice Hockey in 2019 (Sponsor Insight Research 2019) and hosted its first arena sized event in Hartwall Arena on the same year (SEUL 2020). Based on these facts and the statement by Hamari and Sjöblom (2016, 3-4), that there is still limited amount of existing literature about esports makes it important to research this phenomenon in order to form a knowledge foundation and support its growth. It has significant amount of potential as an industry, which is expected to retain its market revenue growth trajectory based on the Newzoo (2021) estimation.

The literature is even more rare when researching player branding related to it or how Finnish esports organizations approach this topic. Therefore, this study aims to correct that by establishing a literature review that analyzes the esports ecosystem thoroughly and defining the significance of player branding, specifically from the organizations point of view. After creating a literature foundation this research will provide unprecedented insight into how Finnish esports organizations view player branding as a topic and how they utilize it in their day-to-day operations. The main aspects that this research aims to define are the importance of player branding for an esports organization and overall views and methods of Finnish player organizations related to it.

This research doesn't have a specific assignee, therefore it is more so aiming to provide insight that can be beneficial to professional players, marketers, researchers, existing or future player organizations and basically anyone interested in esports. After reading this thesis the reader should be able understand the different aspects of esports, its ecosystem and the significance of marketing and branding for organizations, especially the player brands role in all of it. In the end this research provides conclusions that might pinpoint the key challenges and opportunities that player branding has for organizations, which can be utilized later to research possible solutions and methods.

One of the main objects of a thesis is also to expand the knowledge and academic capabilities of the thesis author. The motivation to conducting this research came up during an internship where the thesis author started networking into esports and had various conversations related to the esports ecosystem, players, organizations, branding and the potential future that Finland has in it. After this thesis the author should have gained a significant amount of knowledge about esports marketing and branding that could be beneficial for a future employment in the industry.

## 2    Research methodology

In this chapter different aspects of the research will be discussed, explaining research design, problems, and methods. Through this chapter reader should get an understanding what was the starting point for this study and where it was aiming for. In addition, the different processes during this study will also be discussed to establish the reasons behind why this study was required and how were the chosen methods used. During this chapter esports will also be briefly explained as a phenomenon and why it is a topic that is important to research.

### 2.1    Esports as a phenomenon

Esports has been for the past couple years enjoying a lot of publicity and hype, partly because of the growth estimations. For example, Newzoo (2021) estimated that the worldwide market revenue would break the $1 billion mark in 2021 and reach $1.6 billion in 2024. It is not only the revenue that is attracting interest, but also the expanding audience. In fact, second illustration of the popularity is another Newzoo (2021) estimation where they state that the total size of the esports audience will reach 577 million people in 2024 and it has been growing for the past two years by almost 40 million each year. It is also important for people to understand that esports isn't a simple trend, which will fade away after a while, it is part of a cultural shift that is changing how young people consume entertainment (Cunningham 2016).

It has even started to break into mainstream media in Finland and there are a lot opportunities for it to grow, which makes it an interesting topic to research. Even though Finland has a small population, there are already multiple successful organizations and significant amount of successful professional players in various games playing all over the world. It has already established itself in the culture, which can be seen in the Sponsor Insight research (2019) where esports was the most

interesting sport in the 18 to 29-year-old men demographic in Finland leaving ice hockey behind by one percent. The industry itself has also started to grow in there, and it has started to move towards professionalization where organizations are attracting sponsors and are becoming able to compensate their players (SEUL 2020). There are already success stories and evidence of its popularity, which means that it has potential to grow into a prosperous sports business sector in Finland therefore it is research its challenges and possibilities to ensure that the industry develops into the right direction.

Sponsorships are significant part of what is driving the whole esports ecosystem, especially for player organizations. Major esports team Fnatic revealed that 95% of their revenue are coming through sponsorship deals. (Bose 2018.) This should already give some context on how crucial sponsorships are for team's success. Bose (2018) also emphasizes the importance of branding and tournament success to be able to leverage it in sponsorships. In both of these two aspects that impact sponsorships, players have a major role. This is also one of the core ideas that the thesis is researching, what kind of an influence can a player brand has in organizations and what are the main issues standing in front of a successful brand building process. In addition, players are also in an exceedingly competitive and volatile environment, which means that their careers can be short (Scholz 2019, 67). For players, this study is also an important since it could provide them insights on how their brand can bring more opportunities or enable a more reliable career.

In this paper we are focusing on the professional and business side of the players, where esports players have similar characteristics of an athlete, therefore during this study they will be viewed and talked about as athletes or players to make it more coherent for the reader. In this thesis esports are also referred to as a sport or competitive gaming, and professional esports organizations as teams or player organizations.

## 2.2 Research design

There wasn't an assignee for this study, although it was discussed that this study could also be done to a single esports organization, which would make it possible to go deeper into the organizations processes and find possible solutions for them. The reasoning to interviewing multiple different organizations instead of one were that, since esports is a brand-new industry especially in Finland it requires a broader study of the industry as a whole. The conclusion was that there would

be more benefit from a broader study that would study multiple organizations on their views on marketing and branding players and how they implement it in their day-to-day operations. Broader study enabled that it would be possible to draw conclusions of the overall view on this topic, which in a new industry like this could be beneficial to multiple different facets. Instead of one beneficiary, this study can benefit professional players, researchers, marketers looking to invest in esports, organizations who can reflect on the methods of others and future organizations who could model their operations according to the findings. Since the thesis is also written in English there can be potential beneficiaries from all these facets around the world.

## 2.3   Research problem

Research problem for this study is that there isn't any knowledge on marketing and branding esports players, especially in Finland. Without some knowledge base it isn't possible to understand the value of it for organizations and figuring out solutions on how to improve it. This is one of the main problems that esports also has, since it is a relatively new industry there is not much existing literature or research about it. The lack of existing literature and knowledge about esports was also emphasized as a problem by Hamari and Sjöblom (2016, 3-4) in their research study. Although the situation has improved and there is more literature for this study than there was in 2016 for Hamari and Sjöblom, it still complicates conducting a study on esports and requires added scrutiny on the information sources.

Especially player branding as a phenomenon is a brand-new concept in esports and specifically in Finland it hasn't been discussed or researched nearly at all, which means that the study has to approach this topic from the surface level before it can progress further into more detailed problems. Some of the literature in this study were from the traditional sports point of view, which can be useful since there are multiple similarities between esports and traditional sports. However, it is important to understand that esports is unique and although we can take ideas from traditional sports those might not be easily replicated in esports (Takahashi 2018).

The study was divided into three main research questions:

*How important is player branding for esports organizations?*
*How do Finnish esports organizations view player branding as a topic?*
*How are Finnish esports organizations branding and marketing their players?*

The aim was firstly to understand the esports ecosystem through the theory section and then to evaluate what kind of a role does player brands have in it. Secondly the study is looking to gain inside knowledge from Finnish esports organizations, related to marketing and branding players, which is mostly new information to the public. In fact, part of the study is to provide inside knowledge for people who are interested about esports. However, the research object isn't necessarily to provide concrete tools or solutions on how to market and brand players, but more so to be a cornerstone research and build a knowledge foundation that could be utilized for example, in future studies that can go deeper into finding solutions for player branding in organizations. Through the information from Finnish organizations the study is seeking to find out how they view this topic and how they implement it in their day-to-day operations. As it was briefly mentioned in the previous chapter, pinpointing the key issues or possibilities that organizations have in player branding are crucial for the end results, so this study can draw conclusions on what are the main challenges and opportunities in player branding.

This study also explains some of the unique characteristics of esports and can provide value for someone who might not be familiar about this industry. Different aspects of the industry's ecosystem are explained quite thoroughly in the theory part, in order to ensure that the reader doesn't require deep knowledge to follow and still understand the key takeaways from the research.

To summarize, this research primarily aims to find out the importance of the players brand, especially to Finnish esports organizations and recognizing key issues or possibilities that it might have. In addition to inside knowledge from the organizations, this study provides industry knowledge about different aspects of the esports ecosystem.

## 2.4   Research method

As it has been mentioned already esports is a new phenomenon and there is limited information related to marketing and branding players. Therefore, this study uses qualitative research method, since according to Kananen (2008, 32) qualitative research as a method is preferred when the study is researching phenomenon's that doesn't have much existing information. Qualitative research usually answers to questions: how, what, in what ways, and why on different actions or phenomena's, which are all crucial questions in solving the research problem (Saldana, Leavy & Beretvas 2011, 30).

In qualitative research the opinions and expectations can remain uncommitted during the research, which also means that the goal isn't to prove a hypothesis, but more so to come up with a new point of views or hypotheses. Qualitative research also enables the researcher to be more flexible in planning and executing the process. (Eskola 1998, 14-16.) These are important qualities of the research method since it is hard to predict the direction where the research will go or the end results with a new phenomenon like this. Flexibleness also ensures that during the study it is possible to steer the direction that the research is headed or fill in some gaps in the literature review if the interviews provide information that wasn't expected.

Most qualitative research studies are using some form of interviews since it allows the interviewed individual to express themselves easily and in their own words, but it can also provide spontaneous answers or conversations (Saldana, Leavy & Beretvas 2011, 33). As a data collection method this study uses semi structured interviews, which ensures some structure in the form of previously decided themes and questions that will be discussed during every interview, but contrary to structured interviews, there are no previously determined answers, which means interviewees can elaborate as much as they want in their answers. This way the interview has some structure to ensure the research is getting valuable information, but also leaves a bit of freedom to discuss these important subjects. (Eskola 1998, 63-64.) Qualitative research data collection methods can involve several different tools, for example notepads, computers or audio recorders, but the most important data collection tool is the researcher itself, since they are the ones observing and in an active part of the actual data collection. (Saldana, Leavy & Beretvas 2011, 32.)

Part of the interview process is to determine who and how many of interviewees are needed to reach desired results, hence the research must use sampling. Since there is a limited time and a budget the researcher has to use sampling, which is a decision-making process where the researcher decides what are the needed interviews to ensure that the goals of the study will be reached (Saldana, Leavy & Beretvas 2011, 33). This research is aiming to find overall views and opinions of the Finnish esports scene, therefore the selection of participating organizations has to be broad enough. However, since the industry is still developing in Finland and there isn't significant amount of participants to choose from, the goal was to reach at least five organizations that have present activity in professional gaming and have teams or players competing in esports. Five or more organizations would already consist most of the professional organizations that are operating in Finland, assuring the research will get a broad enough view on these topics. In the interview selection it also has to be taken into account that all of the options might not be willing or available for the interview.

This study was able assemble six interviews with six different Finnish esports organizations that were available and willing to participate. The interviewees are employees who are in some way part of their marketing and branding decisions in their organization. All the interviews include predetermined questions that are related to solving the research problem. These interviews will be conducted through Discord, which is a free voice, video, and text chat app. They will be conducted, transcribed and analyzed in Finnish, but translated into English in the thesis. The interviews will include obviously audio, but also video if the interviewee approves it, although it isn't crucial for the data collection. All of these are recorded through a video recording software OBS Studio and downloaded to the researcher's computer, however the recordings will be deleted after the research is published to ensure the anonymity of the participants.

It is recommended to listen to the recording immediately after the interview, since the conversations are still vividly in the researcher's memory. The quicker the researcher goes back to the recording and makes a copy of it for safety reasons also ensures that it doesn't disappear anywhere. After conducting interviews audio or video recordings will be transcribed into readable document, so it is possible to analyze the data. There are existing software's that could transcribe the interview but transcribing it yourself will help starting the process of analyzing the data and make sure it is as accurate as possible. Depending on the research itself it isn't always required to transcribe

the whole interview verbatim, however it should have all the necessary conversations that are related to your research questions or problems. (Saldana, Leavy & Beretvas 2011, 39, 45.)

These interviews are not completely transcribed word for word since it would be too time consuming, and everything isn't relevant to solving the research questions. Although the conversations that have an impact on the research will be transcribed entirely except the parts were the interviewees are talking about specific names or examples on their organization, from where it could be possible to recognize the interviewee or their organization. Categorizing some of the answers helps the researcher to analyze and compare the different data received from the conversations (Saldana, Leavy & Beretvas 2011, 92). After the transcription is documented the answers will be divided into different categories based on the themes or specific questions that have emerged in all of the interviewees.

Researcher also have to make sure that the results gathered from interviews and literature are reliable, which requires planning and focusing on quality control. In qualitative research it is difficult to ensure the absolute reliability since the study is about humans and their opinions, which can change over time or even a day. Measurements used to evaluate the research quality are reliability and validity. Reliability focuses on the research process, and its object is to establish a process that would give the same study results if it was done again. On the other hand, validity is about the research planning and the design, where its goal is to ensure that the study is concentrating on the right elements in order to reach a successful study. Although, these concepts are useful and require constant monitoring from the researcher, in qualitative research it is impossible to measure the exact success or reliability of the study. At the end the researcher is the one who is evaluating the reliability of the study. (Kananen 2014, 145-147.)

## 3   Esports

Collis (2020, 14) describes esports followingly:

> *Esports, or competitive video games, are not single-player experiences with memorizable level layouts. Instead, picture intricately choreographed teamwork, pixel-perfect commands, and, brilliantly innovative strategies, all taking place in gloriously simulated environments, where the impossible is matter-of-fact and the spectacular is assured.*

Esports is an abbreviation from electronic sports. It can be practiced by anyone who has the necessary IT-equipment, but what makes it a sport is its competitive nature, which means that all video gaming isn't esports. In esports you are competing against another humans and challenges set by the game in a competitive environment. (SEUL 2020.)

## 3.1 History and the future

Esports can also be defined as competitive gaming, and one of the first games that had the characteristics of a competitive game was Tennis for Two that was made in 1958 by William Higinbothamin (Scholz 2019, 2). On the other hand, one of the first esports events can be considered the 1972 Spacewar tournament where, students competed against each other in Stanford University. The participants were competing for the main prize: title as the Spacewar champion and a year-long free subscription of the Rolling Stones magazine. (Baker 2016.) Fast forwarding to this day, video games and competitive gaming has been growing and the main prizes of esports tournaments are a good example of it. Comparing the previously mentioned Spacewar tournament to Dota 2 The International 2019, where the winner team took home staggering amount of over 15 million dollars, we can put into perspective how much esports has grown from the first tournaments 50 years ago (Esports Earnings 2019).

Another telling number of esports was the 2017 League of Legends world championships, where a match gathered 80 million individual viewers overall (Scholz 2019, 3). Comparing that number to the mega events in traditional sports, like FIFA's 2014 World Championship game that had 350 million viewers and 2014 Super Bowl with 125 million viewers, we can get an understanding of how esports compares to traditional sports on an interest level (Statista 2014). Although the viewership numbers of the League of Legends World Championship have been scrutinized of being inaccurate, and it is difficult to compare statistics between traditional sports and esports (Scholz 2019, 3), it still gives you a glimpse behind the curtain of how huge major esports events are and can be in the future.

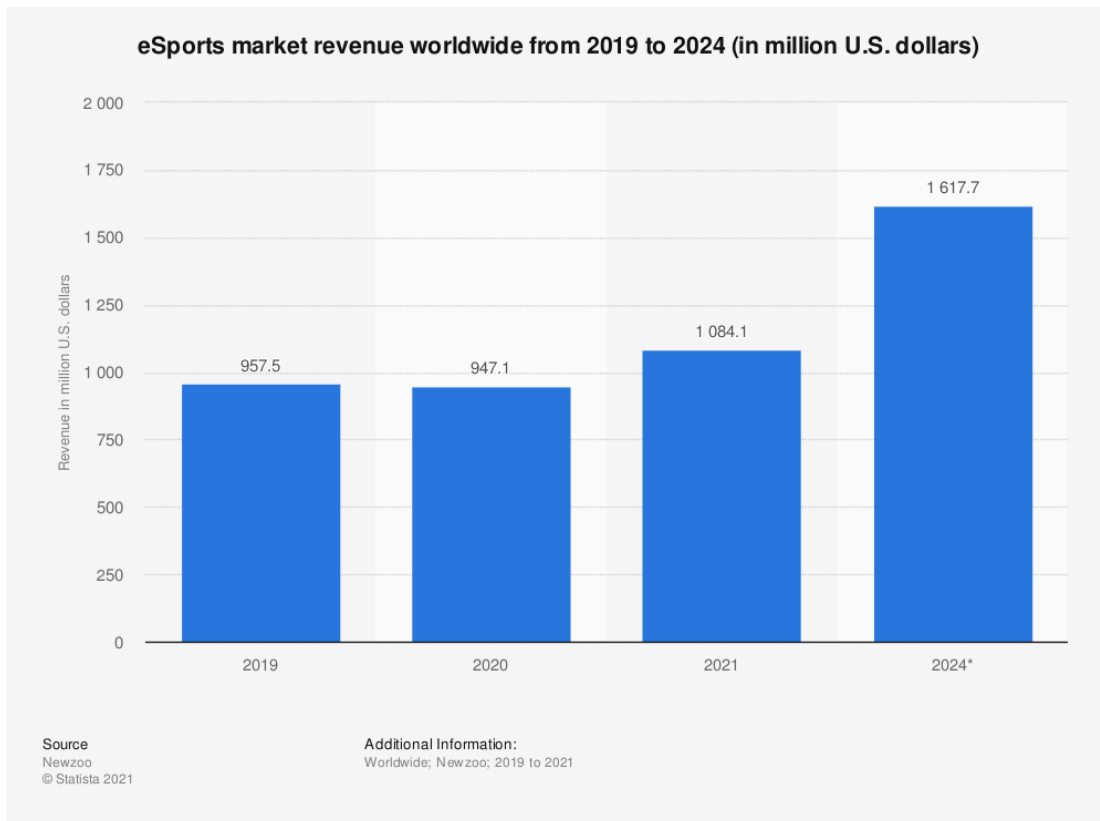eSports market revenue worldwide from 2019 to 2024 (in million U.S. dollars)

Figure 1. Figure of the esports market revenue (Newzoo 2021).

Esports growth projections and future potential are part of the reasons why it is generating con-siderable amount of hype. In the figure 1, can be seen the small dip in market revenue during the Covid-19 year, however the industry is still expected to bounce back and grow rapidly in the next couple years and reach $1.6 billion in 2024 (Newzoo 2021). Even though esports is relatively new industry the growth has been incredible in their audiences, tournament prizes and the whole market revenue. In the next chapter the research will discuss what are some of the reasons for this growth and what makes esports so unique.

## 3.2   Ingredients of esports

What separates esports from other traditional sports and makes it such a unique industry is how digital and global it has become. Combining those two with the boom of Internet esports has ended up in a place, where people from all over the world can compete against each other or spectate matches together. One of the biggest strengths of it is its young audience, especially

compared to traditional sports where they have problems with their audiences average ages continuing to grow. Esports is showing the way in sports business as far as the digitalization and attracting young demographics go and that is part of the reason why traditional sports organizations have also started to invest in esports. (Scholz 2019, 4.)

One of the catalysts for esports has been that it has brought up the competitive side of gaming and made it into a popular spectator sport, specifically inside these younger demographics like millennials. While millennials keep getting older, there will be new younger demographics starting to follow esports, that leads to esports broadening its demographic and growing its overall fan base. This is part of the reasons why esports are projected to grow so fast as an industry, it has the right ingredients; its digital, very competitive, fast-paced, and has a young audience. (BITKRAFT 2017, 3-4.)

A study demonstrated that 65% of the esports fans were millennials (Mindshare 2016), while Tran (2018) reported that 62% of US viewers are aged between 18-34 and Bathurst (2017) reporting the median age of US esports viewers are 28 years old. While the exact numbers might sway to either side of the spectrum between studies, we can draw a conclusion that most of the esports audience are still young and under 35. From a business point of view, it is also important to break the myth that esports fans are living with their parents with no income, since in a study 43% of esports fans reported having a yearly income of $75,000 or higher and 31% reported of having $90,000 or higher, which makes this an attracting demographic to marketers (BITKRAFT 2017, 6). BITKRAFT (2017, 6) also sheds light into another myth, that esports fans are all men, which isn't true, although the exact percentage of women esports viewers is difficult to measure at the moment, and there have been inconclusive results based on two different studies with the percentage altering from 15% to 38%. However, the key takeaway here is that whatever the exact percentage is, esports has a substantial woman following too.
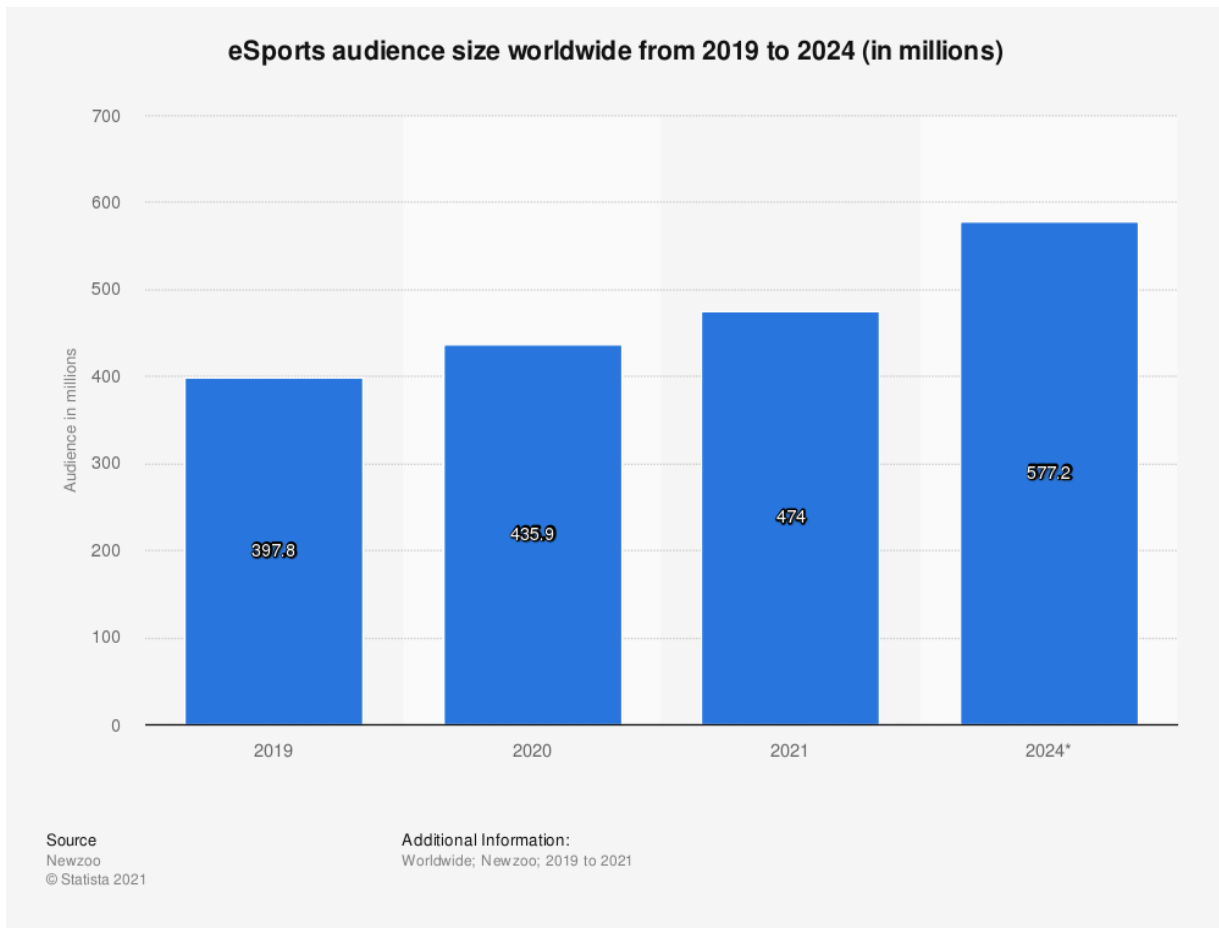
Figure 2. Statistics of the esports audience worldwide (Newzoo 2021).

The statements in the previous chapter by BITKRAFT (2017) and Scholz (2019) on esports audience growth are supported by the Newzoo's estimations where esports is expected to enjoy a large growth in their worldwide audience for the next 3-year timespan reaching 577 million people in 2024.

While the audience is growing and diversifying, so is the supply in gaming and esports to fulfill the growing demand. Same way we have different genres and types of traditional sports from karate to ice hockey, there are tons of different games within multiple genres in esports. Today the most popular genres in esports are first-person shooters (FPS), battle royales (BR), multiplayer online battle arenas (MOBA), collectible card games and fighting games (Collis 2020, 8). Inside these genres there are wide range of games, and at the moment the biggest esports games as far as the prize pools are concerned are Counter Strike (FPS), Dota 2 (MOBA), League of Legends (MOBA), Fortnite (BR) and Call of Duty: Modern Warfare (FPS/BR) (Stern 2021). However, what are popular

genres or games in esports can change suddenly since it is still a new and growing industry, although there can be anomalies like Counter Strike with its additions, which has been one of the top titles in esports for the past 20-years. It is also important to understand that the interest and popularity of games and genres varies between different regions. For example, Europe and North America has been more interested in FPS games, while in Asia fighting and Real-Time-Strategy (RTS) games are more popular than elsewhere. (Heinz & Ströh 2017, 19-20.)

## 3.3 Ecosystem and Stakeholders

In the previous chapters the thesis has discussed the unique characteristics of esports regarding its audience and growth, but the uniqueness can also be seen in the ecosystem, which will be examined in this chapter. One major difference that esports has compared to traditional sports is that it is industry driven. Even though traditional sports have federations and regulations that control the direction where the sport going, all of those sports were started by regular people just playing a game and it has naturally continued to evolve from there into a regulated sport. However, in esports these games and even genres are created by video game developers who control the direction and growth of the game from the beginning.

Video game developers have a lot of control over their game, since they can determine their own rules or what type of content they want inside their sport, theoretically they could even shut down their own game and block anyone from playing it. Also, the same kind of regulation bodies or structures that traditional sports have are just now coming into esports, which has been one of the reasons that the industry has been able to grow naturally and become this unique industry through innovations. In the absence of regulating, esports has gained a reputation of being this Wild West industry that challenges the traditional business models and norms. Wild West analogy mostly comes from the absence of regulating, but also from the difficult risk evaluation process, since everything is new and continuously evolving, there isn't much to reflect on when starting a business. (Scholz 2019, 5-9.) But everything being new is also part of the appeal esports has as an industry, since even though it is possible to take ideas from traditional sports, it isn't something that can be just easily transferred into esports and duplicate the success it had in traditional sports (Takahashi 2018).

Most of the stakeholders in esports have derived from gamer enthusiasts who have been at the core from the start, forming the industry to what it is today. At the beginning there wasn't the same hype there is today that would draw outside investors and other businesses into the scene. This led to a situation where these enthusiasts, whom most have been casual or professional gamers in the past were able to create a culture of their own. (Scholz 2019, 47.) Therefore, the circles in esports are quite small at the top and most people know each other, especially at the owner level. Even though some of them are friends Taylor (2012, 151-152) considers the competition to be quite fierce, since there is a continuous need for new sponsorships and star players, which can lead to conflicts between owners.
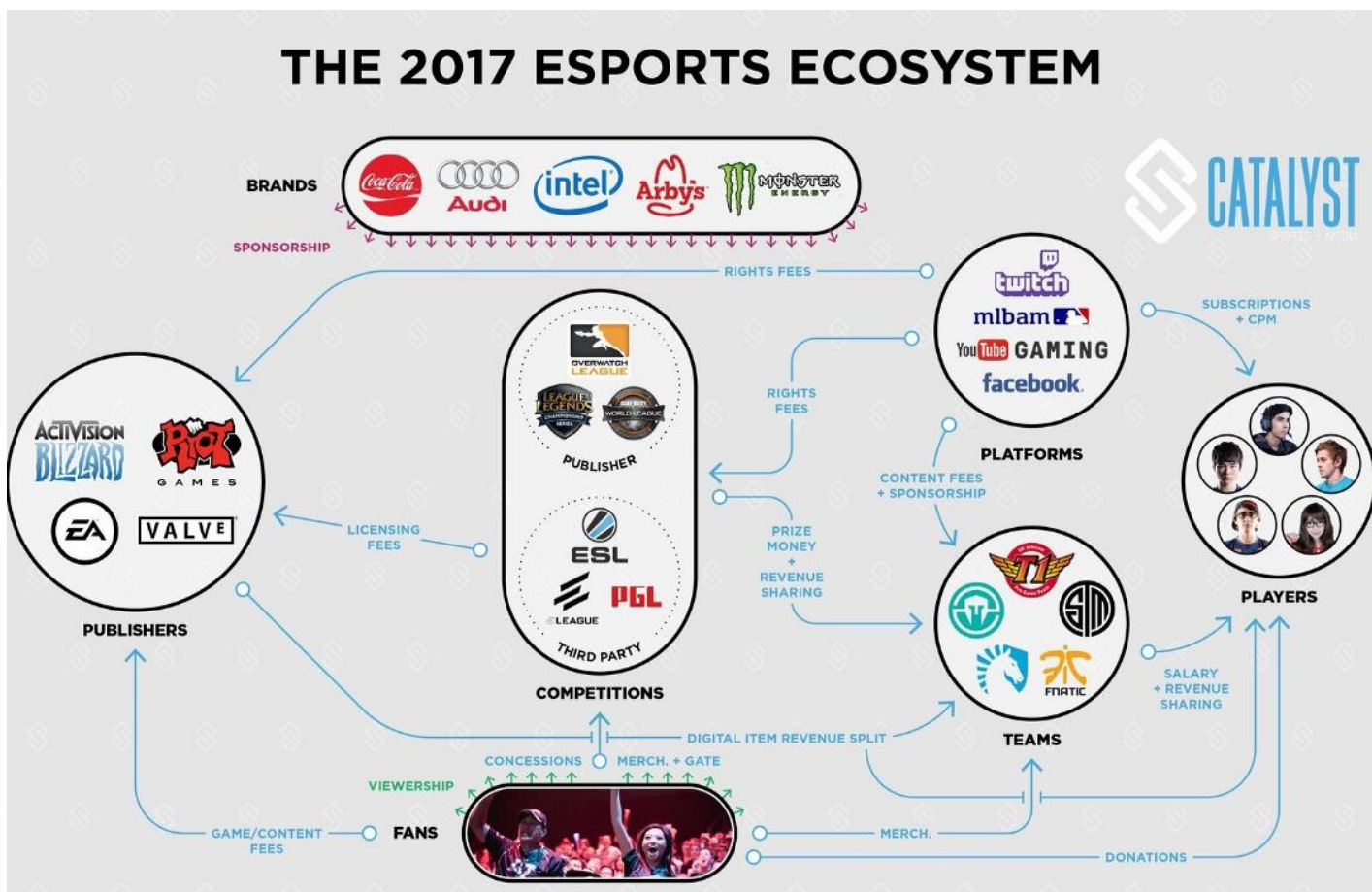


Figure 3. The 2017 esports ecosystem (The Meta Report 2017).

With this graph from 2017 we can get a better understanding what the esports ecosystem looks like and what are the key elements that run this industry. The video game developer is usually the

one who ends up publishing the game, although some big publishers might also use outside developers (Trowe 2018). As was mentioned earlier, video game developers have a lot of control and oversight of the direction their game is going, since they own all the game intellectual property. Most of the revenue for publishers comes through the actual game sales and in-game content, and esports used to be just part of the marketing strategy for these publishers in order to boost their game revenue, but they are starting to shift into a direction where they are establishing franchised leagues in order to capture the continuously growing sponsorship and media rights money. The publisher can build their own league where teams are competing against each other like Activision Blizzard did with Overwatch League or they might license it to third parties like Electronic Sports League (ESL) who can run the competition for a license fee and generate revenue for themselves through the media rights fees, ticket sales and sponsorships.

**Player organizations**

One of the main differences between esports and traditional sports teams are that in esports, for example one of the largest organizations Team SoloMid (TSM) and Team Liquid have a lot of players and teams who are participating in many different games. This helps in achieving a broader following for their organization and brand, since they are operating in various segments (Lehnert, Walz & Christianson 2020, 2). According to Forbes (2020) Top 10 most valuable organizations in the world list, the top four TSM, Cloud9, Team Liquid and FaZe clan stands out from the rest with valuations ranging between $305-405millions.

With this kind of size and a brand recognition they are able to have a significant influence in other stakeholder parts, for example they can move into whichever esport they choose and bring their massive exposure to that particular game. It is also quite obvious that when these huge organizations join different games, they bring their massive fan bases to it that in turn brings money into that particular ecosystem, which is why these organizations are paid the top sponsorship money. (The Meta Report 2017.) Teams make a huge majority of their revenue through sponsorships, therefore for an organization to create a sustainable business model in the long run, it is crucial to secure sponsorships that provides them a reliable revenue stream. Being a recognizable brand and successful in tournaments is one of the most important ways to be able to leverage their existing sponsorships and generate new ones. (Bose 2018.) However, The Meta Report (2017) argues that

other potential revenue streams like media rights, gate and concession sales, and distribution fees from streaming platforms will be more viable in the future.
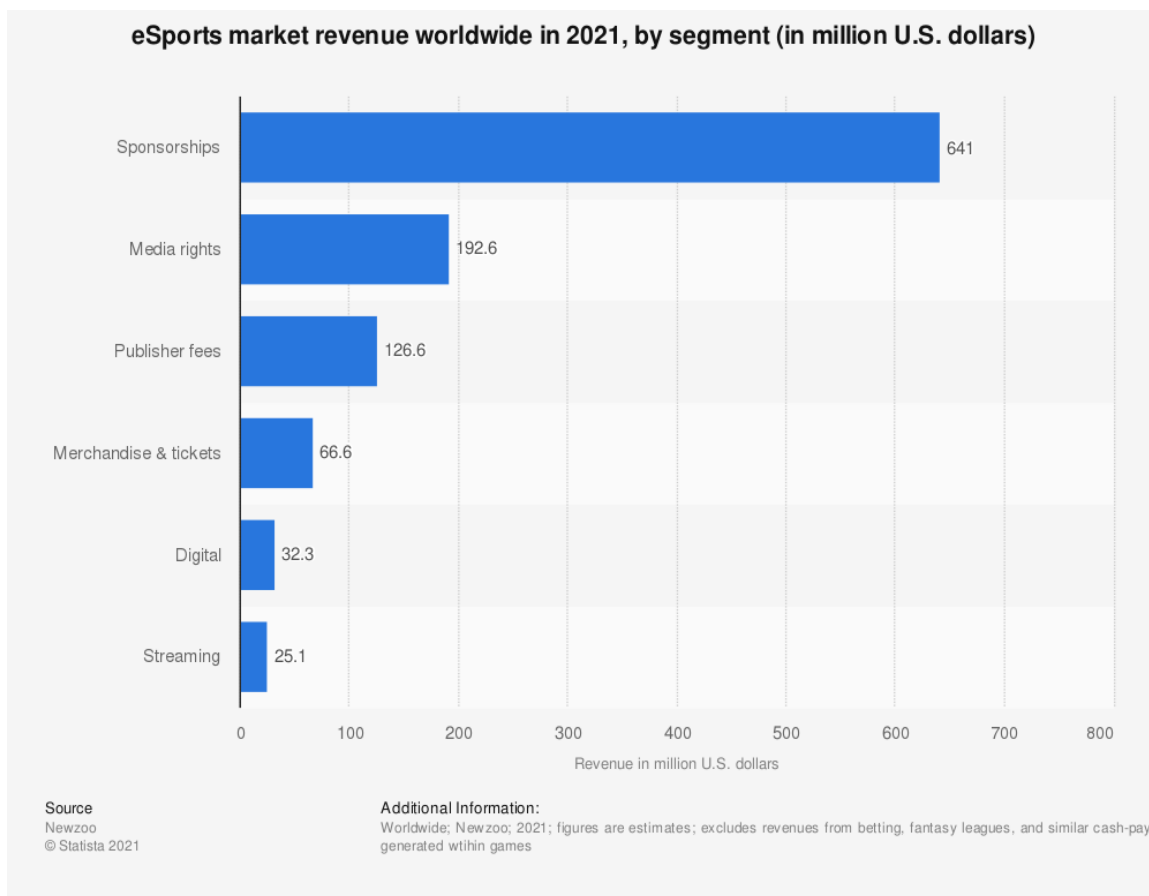


Figure 4. Esports market revenue by segments (Newzoo 2021).

It is important that there will be other revenue streams to rely on, but it is evident from the figure above, that sponsorships are still far ahead of other revenue streams. With that much head start it will likely remain as one of the most important revenue streams in esports for the near future. Therefore, it is crucial to research topics related to marketing and branding, and how they can impact on sponsorship revenue; one of the driving factors in the esports ecosystem.

**Brand investments**

Esports has relied on sponsorship money from the beginning, and some endemic brands like IT-corporations Intel, Logitech and Nvidia have been investing into the industry for a long time now. For endemic brands the value of the investment has been easier to identify from the beginning,

since they are manufacturing products for the casual gamer and esports enthusiasts, therefore attaching their brand into esports is an obvious match. On the other hand, non-endemic sponsors have been more reluctant to invest in the past, since it is a new industry, and it has been difficult to estimate returns for an investment and therefore justify it. (Scholz 2019, 82.) However, the continuing growth have also been noticed by the biggest non-endemic brands in the world like Coca Cola and Nike, whom both have partnered with League of Legends (Malvone 2020, 6). Johan Cruyff Institute (2020) goes further asserting that *"the presence of non-endemic brands in sponsorship now exceeds endemic ones for the first time"*.

The shift can also be seen in the athlete level where Tyler "Ninja" Blevins was the first esports player to break into the level of mainstream fame that he reached and was able to leverage that into multiple sponsorship deals, which included a massive deal with a non-endemic brand Adidas. (Malvone 2020, 6.) Even though these brands have begun investing to esports, it doesn't necessarily mean that these collaborations will be successful. In fact, Rogers, Farquhar & Mummert (2020, 10-12) researched esports viewers perception of non-endemic and endemic sponsors during an event. In their study they concluded that *"Overall, audiences responded positively to endemic sponsors and significantly less so to low-/non-endemic sponsors"*. This study emphasized that natural brand fit and an authentic message will bring better results for the sponsor in esports. However, they also suggested that non-endemic collaborations could be successful in an overt and long-term partnership, where the fan could get better accustomated to the brands affiliation with esports.

Even with the all the potential demographics marketer or a brand could reach, it is important to remember that if not done correctly their investments might not deliver the positive results they were looking for. That said, from the athlete brand point of view Ninja is a great example of an esports player who grew his brand on popular social media platforms and leveraged that into many lucrative sponsorship deals. Through his brand he was able to diversify his revenue streams into a place, where he isn't necessarily depended on his professional success.

**Broadcasting**

The uniqueness of esports can also be seen in the broadcasting, as Takahashi (2019) argues that, it is one of the driving forces at the moment in the sports entertainment world where esports is

transforming traditional sports broadcasting into a much more interactive show. This is one of the benefits when the majority of it is broadcasted in streaming platforms like YouTube and Twitch, which have been built upon interactive consuming. One other major difference is lengthy air times, in esports a simple day's broadcast can last for over 10 hours, which means that the content around esports is abundant and the challenge is to find the right clips or perspectives to show during the broadcast to get the most value out of it. The promising side of broadcasting in esports is that, since everything is done digitally, almost anything is possible. Although it is good to remember that broadcasting at scale is still a fairly new and growing topic, since most publishers have started to sell media rights just in the past couple years. (Takahashi 2019.)  Bose (2018) seems to agree with this, stating that: "*eSports broadcasting on TV is still in its infancy as broadcasters look for eSports content that will appeal to their target demographics.*"

In traditional sports one of the largest revenue streams are media rights (Takahashi 2019), therefore it is necessary to pay attention where does the esports business model evolve from here and will media rights be the future gold mine for this ecosystem. Twitch and YouTube also differ considerably from the traditional sports broadcasting platforms. One of the illustrations can be seen in the relationship between a professional player and their fans, which is very interactive. In fact, live streaming platforms have made these super stars considerably more accessible to their fans in a completely new way compared to traditional sports. (Schultz 2017.) This could be an essential part in forming a player brand in esports, that could be utilized to great extent, from where previously mentioned Ninja is a fantastic example.

**Players**

> *Probably the most important stakeholder in the eSports industry is the professional player* (Scholz 2019, 67).

The career as a player can be very volatile and short, since they must focus on one game to build a professional career and there are no guarantees which game will be successful or have enough longevity for them to earn. In addition to that, playing at a professional level can mean their average practice time can be over ten hours per day (The Meta Report 2017), which leads to a very competitive atmosphere where most players are trying to earn as much as possible in a relatively short time frame. (Scholz 2019, 67.) O'Connell (2020) describes that the player earning structure usually consists of regular salary, tournament winnings, sponsorships, streaming and different

merchandize revenue. Since majority of the prize money from tournaments goes straight to the players and coaches (Bose 2018), some of the highest earners end up making most of their revenue through those winnings, which can range from hundreds of thousands of dollars to millions in a single tournament (O'Connell, 2020).

Although Scholz (2019, 68) agrees that prize money is important revenue stream for many, he also gives an example of a different earning structure with a player like Faker. In 2018 his yearly salary was reported to be $2.5 million with $1.8 million of sponsorship revenue on top of that, but on the other hand his prize money was only a fraction of the total income with $200,000. These salary structures can vary between games, since there are games like Dota 2, which yearly tournament The International dominates other titles with its prize pool (e-Sports Earnings 2021). Tournaments like these enables players to make millions with a single tournament, but on the other hand there are players like Faker in League of Legends who has more of a steady revenue with salary and sponsorships. Although he is one of the most famous esports stars in the world, which has likely been the reason he has been able to establish such a high and stable salary.

Players are battling against each other in this very volatile although lucrative environment where even if they make it to the top, the careers can still be short (Scholz 2019, 67). Considering the Wild West nature of esports, that the research has talked about previously and its impact on players also, there should be more emphasis on player branding and the possibilities of leveraging it to provide players with a more reliable career in esports.

## 3.4    Esports in Finland

Esports has been growing rapidly in Finland, to its testament is the Sponsor Insight research (2019) where esports was for the first time the most interesting sport between 18 to 29-year-old men in Finland, passing the long-time leader Ice Hockey by one percent. There are multiple different organizations, institutions, teams, tournament organizers and communities that are working in the esports sector in Finland. In the middle of all of this is the Finnish Esports Association - SEUL, which was founded in 2010 to advance esports in Finland. The most known player organizations are Ence, HAVU, KOVA Esports and SJ Gaming. Also, in Finland there are usually multiple teams inside an organization that are focusing on different games, therefore there are significant fluctuations

between total player numbers between the organizations. When talking about more of the professional side of gaming, the larger organizations are usually paying salary or other compensation to their players. The most significant tournament organizers in Finland are FEL, Rushmode, and tele-operators Elisa and Telia. On top of tournaments there are regular events organized like Assembly, LanTrek and Vectorama. (SEUL 2020.)

A great example of the on growing demand for esports in Finland was the Arctic Invitational hosted in Hartwall Arena in 2019, which was the first ever arena sized event organized in Finland (SEUL 2020). There was combined almost 700 000 people watching the broadcasts online and based on the estimates 4000-5000 people in the audience. Although this was a step in the right direction for esports in Finland, the actual numbers were less that were expected and hoped for. (Hujanen 2019.) While it was criticized for many things in the traditional and social media, and didn't come close to reaching their goals, it still served its purpose as the first esports event of this magnitude in Finland.

# 4   Marketing and Branding

## 4.1   Marketing

Kotler and Keller (2015, 25) states that most businesses financial success is depended on the demand of their products or services and that is where marketing plays a large role.

> *We start with the question: what is marketing? Simply put, marketing is engaging customers and managing profitable customer relationships. The aim of marketing is to create value for customers in order to capture value from customers in return.* (Kotler, Armstrong, Harris, Piercy 2017, 2.)

Marketing has evolved significantly from the old days of seeing it as just selling and advertising, which are nowadays just part of a bigger marketing picture. Before selling and advertising a company should be able to understand how to create value for their customers, whether that is creating product or service that has value or interacting with a customer base in a valuable way. If you do all the other aspects of marketing properly, the last part; selling and advertising becomes a lot more effortless. (Kotler, Armstrong, Harris, Piercy 2017, 5.)

Top level executives have realized how much of an impact marketing has in creating a strong brand or a customer base and how beneficial those are for the company. In this digital world that we are living in there have been more emphasis on the importance of marketing executives and their position inside a company. Nowadays things change quicker, whether that is economic factors, industries, or customers, and because of this there isn't much room for error in marketing. Great examples are companies like MySpace, Yahoo! and Blockbusters that were the cream of the crop in their fields, but they were replaced by Facebook, Google and Netflix in a relatively short time. (Kotler & Keller 2015, 25-26.)

Although digital media and the internet isn't new anymore, there are major improvements happening in the technology that are utilized in digital marketing and the new opportunities that those bring to the table. However, a successful digital marketing strategy still includes the same crucial fundamentals that traditional marketing does; customer segmentation, targeting and positioning. (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick 2019, 5, 13). Through the developments of technology traditional and digital marketing will end up merging with each other, and to be successful in this new world of marketing marketer has to understand the more social people get the more personalized products and services they desire. The future of marketing lies in creating products, services, and company cultures that embrace and reflect human values. (Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiawan 2016, 15-16.)

## 4.2   Branding

*According to the American Marketing Association (AMA), a brand is a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods and services off one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those competition* (Keller 2012, 4).

Branding is very hard and time consuming, but without it you will have a hard time succeeding. Through branding you are trying to influence your target customers rational or emotional opinion on how they value your brand. Even though successful branding is hard to do, the basics are simple albeit important: you must maintain a clear and direct message of how you want your brand to be viewed as to your target customers. (Gronlund 2013, 5.) Wheeler (2012, 26) seemed to agree on this when he stated that it is important for the brand to keep the same united message

whether that is on internet, social media or in conversations and ensure that the company is representing a one voice.

Branding has been practiced since the 1950's and it started as a tool that helps companies separate their products from the mass through creating an emotional connection between the product itself and their target customers. Nowadays with people being connected with each other more than ever through technology and wide ranges of different platforms, consumers have become a crucial part of the brand creating process. (Amodeo 2018, 25.) Some research has already shown that our feelings actually have a larger impact in the way we see brands than originally thought, and because of changes like these, marketers must keep adapting and innovating new ways to grow their brand value and retaining competitive edge (Kompella 2014, 17). Growing the company's brand will create brand equity for them, which is what provides added value to the company that can be leveraged for example, in positioning in the industry or differentiating your products from the competition (Hansen & Christensen 2003, 13-14).

With the continuous bombardment of product advertisement people are starting to become more skeptical towards the traditional product marketing. Because of that companies have started to delve deeper into their brand identity and think about how they want people to see their whole company and not just their products. There is a very clear difference between branding a product and branding an organization, even though both have the same end goal of impacting consumer behavior. Products brand value and the experiences customer receives from it is mostly created by the manufacturer inside a factory, and the quality of it doesn't vary much. But brand value of an organization is dependent on the people's actions and words that represents the whole organization across the world. (Amodeo 2018, 30-31.)

## 4.3   Personal brand

Everyone has a personal brand, all the information that is online in different platforms reflects on the personal brand and how people view their online persona. Since social media and this digital world has expanded into human's everyday life it is crucial to control own personal brand, since even without controlling, it will still carry on developing, but it might not be the direction the person themselves would like. (Castrillon 2019.)

*"Building your own brand has never been more important"* (Gronlund 2013, 89).

Personal brand is very important for employees and entrepreneurs, since studies have shown that most employers check the social medias of people who are applying for a job and some even monitor their current employees' social media. For the entrepreneur their employees' brand can be beneficial for the company in showcasing it to more people in a positive light. When they are in events or conferences interacting with potential clients, they are building their own brand, but also representing their company's brand. (Castrillon 2019.) Personal brand has become a part of employee's brand extension that can impact the whole business. This could be applied for example in esports where you could draw the connection between an organization and their players, where players could be seen and utilized as the brand extensions of their organization.

> *Who am I? What do I stand for? What do I want to stand for?* (Wilson & Blumenthal 2008, 2).

These are questions that people have asked from themselves since the beginning of time. While creating a brand identity these are questions that needs to be solved. Building a personal brand is about thinking what makes a person unique, what are their morals and what experiences in their life might differentiate them from others or make them more relatable. This is the macro level of a personal brand, but the micro level of personality traits, like favorite foods, clothing or other ordinary aspects of life can be as crucial in forming a personal brand. These are all important personality traits to communicate to a person's audience in order to stand out from the crowd. (Wilson & Blumenthal 2008, 2-4.)

Whenever people see someone in real life or online and hear their name, they get a certain perception of that person and that is their personal brand. Building a personal brand isn't just about spamming their own name or content everywhere and saying all the right things in order to become a celebrity. It is about being authentic and portraying the values and passions that the person truly believes in. In the process of brand building, it is crucial for the person to be comfortable with themselves and who they are in order to have an authentic and holistic brand that others also believe and find value in. (Rampersad 2008, 2-3.)

When the personal brand is authentic, it is also consistent in the eyes of other people. If there are outsiders deciding what to do or wear that isn't necessarily authentic to the individual, it might confuse their audience or peers, since it isn't in line of what they think of the person. However, being only authentic doesn't skyrocket everyone into a successful personal brand, even though it is a great foundation. It is also important to find a passion and highlight that in the personal brand, if the person is passionate about their field where they operate in and being authentic, the personal brand is on the right tracks. (Shea 2016.)

# 5   Sports Marketing and Branding

This chapter discusses sports marketing and branding, and later its application in esports. It will discuss one of the most important subjects regarding this study that is athlete branding and the potential it has in competitive gaming. Marketing and branding will be also examined from the organization's perspective and what kind of value they can gain through their players. As was previously stated, sponsorships are one of the main driving factors in esports, therefore it is necessary establish a knowledge foundation on how these unique characteristics of esports materialize in marketing and branding, and possible influence it has in sponsorships.

In sports marketing you are utilizing all the same tools, ideas and frameworks that would also be used in traditional marketing. Sports branding hasn't been brought up often in the sports industry yet, but it is hard to deny the potential that branding has in sports business. While sports organizations are competing harder and harder for their consumers and sponsorship money, it has become clear how important competitive edge brand actually is. (Chadwick, Chanavat & Desbordes 2016, 5-7, 27-28.) Sports allows outside companies to enhance their brand image and create brand extensions, which can impact a consumer purchase decision. Attaching a companies' brand into a sports organization can result in that the fans associate the brand with the sports team itself and have the same kind of emotional bond for both of them. Especially in sports, teams develop a special bond of loyalty with their fans, which the team can also replicate between their fans and the sponsoring company, resulting in an enhanced brand image for the sponsor. (Gawrysiak, Burton, Jenny & Williams 2020.)

However, in a heavily competitive environment in order to stand out and gain attraction from sponsors, sports organizations need a strong brand, which the sponsor can use to fulfil their own

objectives, whether that is reaching a certain demographic or enhancing their own brand image. As it was mentioned above branding is a crucial competitive edge, therefore managers have started to concentrate more on developing their organizations brand and figuring out how to transfer that brand value to their sponsors. For a sports organization a strong brand equity can bring more opportunities to them most importantly in the form of added revenue. Chadwick, Chanavat and Desbordes (2016, 27-28) described four main assets that a strong and well managed brand can bring: *"regularity of revenue, the possibility of establishing a premium, greater attractiveness to sponsors and opportunity for brand extension".* They also emphasize how a large brand equity can be used in their brand strategy to distinct themselves from competition and position them in the industry accordingly related to media opportunities, brand extensions and sponsorships. (Chadwick, Chanavat & Desbordes (2016, 27-28).

In summary, since the sports industry is getting more competitive all the time the organizations have started to establish themselves as brands and growing their brand equity, which can help in leveraging sponsorships or other revenue streams, that are crucial for a sports organization to succeed financially. A strong organization brand helps in bringing more sponsorship revenue and the core part of a team are the players, which is why the next chapter discusses how athletes' personal brand can impact organizations brand value and the benefits it has.

## 5.1   Athlete branding

In this day and age social media platforms and athlete branding goes hand in hand, when talking about brand building and creating fan engagement. According to studies fans engagement and how they perceive content is directly in line of how athletes have built their digital presence on their platforms. Athlete's brand doesn't build only through them because the organization they represent and the actual league where they play in have also significant impact on their overall brand image. Organization should work together with the athlete to grow the athlete's social media brand, because studies have shown that the athletes follower count and digital media presence can have a positive impact on the organization also. (Su, Baker, Doyle, Kunkel & Thilo 2020, 3-5.) Gary Vee (2016) emphasizes that athletes should engage with their fans more on digital platforms and instead of just feeding their fans with information or requests the athletes should provide value to their fans, as an example simply by just replying to their comments on social media.

For a company, brand image has a direct correlation to purchase decision and the athlete's endorsement can impact those decisions (Wu 2015). Famous athletes and super stars can have an immediate impact on their team's brand equity, which can be leveraged by the team into generating more revenue for them (Brunello 2018, 4). The most famous athletes like Lebron James, Roger Federer and Tiger Woods holds a significant influence on the consumer behavior, through which they can grow the demand of different products and events or impact the impressions of a consumers view on organizations or teams. Some athletes end up making more money from their brand deals and sponsorships, than what they actually get from playing the game during their professional career. (Park, Jun-Mo, Jae-Man, Na & Suk-Kyu 2019, 3.) Adding to that Shank & Lyberger (2015, 10) also states that some athletes are able to leverage their brand image more than their athletic accomplishments, which in some cases means that those sponsorship deals can carry over after their professional career ends. Retaining endorsement deals even after the professional career is over ensures that the athletes are still generating some revenue while retired, which is why it is important for the athlete to understand the value their brand has and how to utilize it.

To put the value of a successful athlete brands into concrete numbers, as an example the combined brand value of Lebron James, Roger Federer and Tiger Woods were estimated to be around 123 million dollars in 2019 (Ozanian, 2019). With successful brands like these there also comes the added responsibility and scrutiny when you are in the spotlight. There have been famous and successful athletes whose brand image was built upon something that was later revealed to be untrue, which ended up in very negative and public incidents. One of the more notorious ones is the scandal involving Tiger Woods.

In 2008 Tiger Woods was one of the most successful personal brands in United States, but in 2009 it all came crashing down when he was exposed to having multiple affairs with other women outside of his marriage. In 2010 he ended up losing rumored 100 million dollars in endorsements, with huge sponsors like AT&T, Gillette, Accenture, Gatorade, and Tag Heuer leaving him. Problem here was, that his brand identity was built upon not only being a great golf player, but also being this so-called perfect human being without any flaws and it didn't really hold up at the end. Although there were multiple things that went wrong in controlling his image during this incident, it is still a great example where an athlete's personal brand came crashing down, because it wasn't authentic and was built upon false foundation. (Adubato 2011, 10-15.) Even though Tiger Woods

would have still received major backlash from this, it probably wouldn't have been as detrimental with a bit more authentic or attainable brand image. To retain a more reasonable brand image Adubato (2011, 15 & 21) issues couple bullet points that are important to remember in athlete branding:

- Remain truthful, athletes shouldn't exaggerate too much of who they are
- Humans shouldn't portray themselves as perfect, since it is an image quite hard to withhold
- In the end athlete is responsible for their brand and the possible failures are also blamed on them
- Always remember the brands vision and goals to ensure that progress is going to the right direction
- Building a successful brand takes significant amount of time and resilience
- Be responsible of the brand and its accountability. If something goes wrong it should be admitted immediately, since the longer the person or company avoids accountability and the media the longer it takes for the brand to start improving their image again

The last bullet point by Adubato, was apparent in a relatively current topic in the Finnish esports scene with the esports organization Ence. They had few incidents involving their players that ended up creating significant amount of negative publicity in the media. These incidents were magnified by Ence's lack of communication and damage control, which was one of the reasons that lead to these situations blowing out of proportions (Partanen 2020). This was most likely the biggest example of massive backlash in the short history of Finnish esports, which probably wouldn't have been so negative for Ence if they would have controlled the narrative as Adubato described it previously.

## 5.2   Marketing and Branding in Esports

This thesis has already discussed the key topics in esports: demographics potential, opportunities that the platforms offer, necessity of sponsorships to organizations and the possibilities that branding offers. This chapter delves bit deeper into the practices and differences that esports has, and what are the potential successes or down falls. Marketing and branding are still relatively new concepts in this industry, and the path to success or the so called "right way" hasn't necessarily been formed yet, therefore it requires a certain skepticism when analyzing material. As it has already been mentioned in this study, the industry is still rapidly changing and evolving, therefore the methods of marketing and branding should also be in a constant evaluation and development. As Overwatch League commissioner Nate Nanzer described it:

> *It's amazing just to see the last three years I've been focused on esports. It's completely different now. It's exciting to work in industries that are evolving and changing that fast. There isn't a playbook for this. We can learn from traditional sports, but it's not a one-to-one copy-paste scenario.* (Takahashi 2018.)

In the same way Gawrysiak, Burton, Jenny & Williams (2020) also emphasizes that the usual approach of marketing through sports might not necessarily work in esports. In their study they mention advertising as an example and how in esports once again the focus is on the digital aspect. The goal is to attract consumer brands and include esports in their digital marketing strategies where they use social media platforms for advertising, instead of in a more traditional sports way advertising in the arenas or events, since esports is mostly consumed digitally.

Although esports offers significant amount of unique growth opportunities and new ways of marketing and building brands a marketer must understand its challenges also. As it was discussed in the chapter 3.2 esports is just an umbrella term for variety of genres and games, which have different demographics. For a marketer it is crucial to understand the fragmentation of esports and have enough knowledge about the industry to know where to find their potential demographic. (Singer & Chi 2019.) Furthermore Allenstein, Gediehn, Lehmann and Singer (2020) also states that since there are different games that attract different segments it is necessary for a brand to analyze the distinct nature of them before investing into a specific esport. On top of specific esports, leagues or teams, companies have just recently started to understand the value of professional players as their brand extensions and how both non-endemic and endemic advertisers can create marketing plans around players with different personality traits that connects to a precise demographic. (Gawrysiak, Burton, Jenny & Williams 2020.)

Even after finding the right personality or a game and the platform that targets the desired demographic, the content itself still has to be measured carefully to bring positive results. As Jaci Hays (2020) the COO of FaZe Clan emphasizes that the esports audience is young and full of opinions that will see through any non-authentic ways of branding or creating content. She also states how valuable it has been for FaZe Clan to create specific content to specific platforms and not distribute the same piece of content to every platform. Highlighting that all of the platforms have different characteristics and audiences, therefore in order to succeed they have to speak to all the different audiences in their own language as authentically as possible.

In esports the star players are more accessible to their fans than what traditional sports has ever been able to offer. Most of this is due to the use of social media and one of the main channels that makes players accessible is social video platform Twitch, where players or entertainers all over the world can stream to their fans, but also where most of the esports competitions are streamed on. (Schultz 2017.) Right behind Twitch in popularity is a video platform YouTube that is also significant part of the esports broadcasting ecosystem (Gawrysiak, Burton, Jenny & Williams 2020).

For fans watching their favorite streamers is free, but they can support them with subscriptions that range from $4.99 to $24.99 on Twitch. On top of the subscription fees, streamers can earn through advertisement revenue or from direct donations from the fans. (Lehnert, Walz & Christianson 2020, 3.) The potential of marketing through a player on Twitch consists of the reach that it can offer in a young demographic and the special relationship players have formed with their fans through it (Singer & Chi 2019). As it has been discussed already, the professional players are much more accessible to their fans, compared to traditional sports, which is something that could be leveraged to endorse products on stream. In fact, Wright (2016) stresses the value that esports players have in their fans, who are very interactive and passionate about the community, which makes them a lot more willing to also support a brand that the player is endorsing.

Organizations and even players have to understand that for companies, sponsorships are purely part of a marketing strategy, excluding charity cases. For a brand to sponsor an athlete or organization they are expecting to see value for their investment, for example improved brand image or accelerated sales. Especially esports organizations are in a crucial role to ensure that the collaboration will be successful, since for some of the marketers esports is an experiment and they might not have essential knowledge about the industry. Organization's responsibility is to provide the other party all the necessary information, to make sure they understand what they are getting into and what are they getting out of it. (Taylor 2012, 155-156.) This part is crucial to understand in the esports ecosystem. Since most of the revenue for organizations comes through sponsorships, it means that most of the players salary are also depended on this same revenue therefore it is necessary that both parties cooperate and ensure the best possible outcome for the sponsors to keep the revenue coming into the industry.

# 6   Results

There were six semi constructed interviews conducted to six different Finnish esports organizations, the interviewees are in some extent responsible for marketing and branding in their organizations. All of the organizations interviewed are operating in esports and have professional players or teams competing in the industry. For this chapter the interviews were transcribed and constructed into readable format with the conversations being divided to six main topics. During these conversations the main goal was to figure the three research questions:

> *How important is player branding for esports organizations?*
>
> *How do Finnish esports organizations view player branding as a topic?*
>
> *How are Finnish esports organizations branding and marketing their players?*

To ensure the reliability of the data gathered from these conversations all of them are done anonymously without any mention of the persons or organizations in these results. Since there aren't mentions about the organizations or the persons, interviewees have been given code names, so that the readers are still able to follow the differences or similarities with the responses. In the next chapters they are referred to as Person 1 - Person 6, mostly in shortened version P1 - P6.

## 6.1   Importance of player branding

As one of the research questions it was one of the essential goals for this research to find out what kind of influence player branding has in esports and how valuable it is for players and specifically for organizations.

All the interviewees unanimously agreed that player brands are very important and has immense value to organizations. Specifically, they emphasized the added value player brands can bring to their organizations. P3 stressed the huge value active social media presence can bring to the organization and its partners, which then directly impacts on them being able to pay salary for their players and other staff. However, P3 also noted that some personalities just aren't suited for active social media presence or a brand, which is completely fine and that is where organizations responsibility is to help keeping those platforms active. At their organization level P1 and P6 saw player brands as crucial aspects in growing their business, with P6 reminding that the game itself

might not necessarily reach mass audiences, therefore you must create that interest through player brands.

> *I see it that being able to function in different medias should even be one of the criteria's when players are being chosen, because playing is important and it enables everything, but at the end of the day what pays their salary is the everything else around it.* - Person 3

All of them agreed that player branding brings significant amount of possibilities for them as an organization. P6 even argued that the esports scene is starting to head into a direction where good player brands might even be more important than just talented players, although noting that the perfect match is a player like S1mple where talent is combined with interesting personality. P3 considered the benefits to be limitless with a good player brand, mentioning that it can positively impact campaigns, content creation, merchandise sales and give them an asset that can be utilized in generating sponsorships. On the other hand, P1 focused more on the brand synergy, with speculating a situation where an interesting player brand comes into a known organization and considered it as intriguing what kind of synergy and possibilities can be generated in the future when a player and organization with existing brand value come together.

All organizations except P6 stated that they have already seen direct value from some of their players brands, especially when negotiating or searching for new sponsorships. Especially P2, P3 and P4 expressed that they have been able to leverage those brands into direct financial gain. Although P6 didn't feel like they've had players yet whose brands impacted their business directly, they recognize that some of their players have personalities that can be utilized in partnership projects.

P2, P3, P4 and P5 also emphasized the value player branding can provide to players themselves, with P4 especially suggesting that it can improve players findability, which means it can improve players chances to get noticed by organizations and increase their career longevity or chances to make a new career after retiring. P4 continued emphasizing the immense role that players brand or character have in the whole ecosystem stating that it isn't enough to be just decent at the game, since if the organization isn't able to monetize players, they most likely aren't able to monetize their business, which basically means that there isn't a future for that player organization.

**Is it better to have one superstar brand or five decent ones?**

This hypothesis was more about understanding how much value organizations place on different situations. When asked about is it better for an organization to have one superstar brand or five decent ones they had mixed answers. P1, P3 and P4 saw it as more valuable to have one or two superstars that can carry the brand. P1 suggested that especially if the team isn't winning major competitions yet it is better to have one or two with a larger recognition, since those can be utilized better in partnership deals. P3 also agreed that from a business point of view it is better to have one or two with a larger following, since in addition to the commercial benefit those can be also leveraged to generate more exposure to the rest of the team and that way grow everyone's brand. P4 saw that one superstar can be bring tremendous value in attracting audiences and fans to the team, therefore creating a stronger bond for them to support the organization. P4 draw the similarities from traditional sports where the superstars attract fans who might not even follow the actual sport and through that large presence, they are able to break into other mainstream medias. On the other hand, P2 and P6 argued that five decent brands are better for an organization with P2 pointing out the other side of coin that when the superstar player leaves or has to be kicked out how much of the overall brand value of the organization vanishes. P3, P4, and P6 also discussed this issue, but didn't recognize it as a problem that should be in the way of building these superstars. P3 sees that their task is to create exposure for new players and focus on the long run, without worrying about if a player leaves and the possible short term negative impact.

## 6.2   What makes a good player brand?

In the interviews different characteristics of a brand were brought up with P2, P4 and P6 stating that a good brand is active. These three emphasized that being active in the brand building process and using social media platforms are very valuable for overall success. P2 also, mentioned that revealing a bit more personal side of the player is always interesting to the fans and impacts the brand very positively.

On the other hand, P1, P3 and P5 saw value in the personal characteristics, and they seemed to be more focused on the reaction or image that the player brand evokes in the audience. P1 thought good player brand as something that generates emotions and preferably from the sports point of view, for example someone who has a clean image, is some ways athletic, has clear ambitions and has played on a high level. P3 focused more on seeing and treating players as humans that all have

different personality traits or strengths, and a good brand is just enhancing those qualities. P3 stressed that whatever the brand is, it has to come from inside the player and pointed out how quick the esports community is at noticing if something doesn't look or feel natural to them.

> *Everyone always thinks that a good player brand is social and can put out a lot of information about themselves to the public. But on the other hand, it is crucial that your player brand is relatable to fans. So, maybe being relatable and bringing out who you are and being authentic is big part of a successful player brand. - Person 2*

P5 was mostly agreeing with P3 and mentioned that everyone has their own thing, but the challenge is to find that unique thing, which makes you stand out and bringing that out to the public. Although P2 and P6 mentioned activeness as one of the keys they also had similar ideas with P3 and P5 that the player brand should be authentic and built upon their own personality traits in addition to being active to create a successful brand. As part of being authentic P2 brought up that the player doesn't necessarily has to be very outgoing in order to become a successful brand, but more so to be relatable to their audience.

## 6.3   Problems and challenges in player branding

Everyone except P5 pointed out unanimously that getting the players involved in the branding and content creation process is one of the largest challenges, although they had different reasoning on why it is difficult to get them involved. P3 described the challenge as to getting the players excited about the process and not seeing it as unnecessary and waste of time. P3 also mentioned that finding time for creating content can be difficult, since the players schedules can be full of competitions or practices, which means that some of the content must be created in a natural way where it doesn't require much involvement from the players. P1 and P6 mentioned the personality traits as part of the problem with P1 describing most players as introverts, where they might be interesting personalities during private conversations, but have a hard time bringing that personality in front of a camera or in public situations. P6 expressed that they've usually a lot of difficulties getting their players involved in branding, since the players are still somewhat nervous in the public spotlight, although they also have had exemptions where it is completely the opposite.

> *When players have been used to that certain culture about the scene where the job description has been confusing or there hasn't been one, which means that they haven't been required to do anything else but play. But when you are expecting them to*

*be on a video or overall do things outside of playing, it's kind of hard to get them used to it or teach them. - Person 6*

On the other hand, P2, P4 and P6 identified the new industry and the players path as part of the challenge. P4 credited the issue to the upbringing and the path of esports players where they have not been involved in a sport like upbringing where there are clear goals or guidelines on how to approach their career, meaning that they haven't been brought up on an idea where they should make a number out of themselves. All P2, P4 and P6 shared the example that some players still don't realize what it requires to represent an organization and to be a professional player. Although, both P2 and P4 agreed that there has been shift to better with younger generations coming in. P2 and P3 saw close interaction and good relationship with the players influencing significantly to getting them more involved for example, in interviews or sponsorship related projects.

P4 and P6 recognized it as a problem that since the esports scene in Finland is so small the players have a feeling that they don't have any interesting things or new things to share or are too conscious on what other people would think about their posts. One of the exceptions between answers were P5 who saw that a player not having any previous following or experience in social media as the hardest challenge in building a brand.

Through the conversation P2 and P4 felt that the problem of getting players involved in marketing and branding will be partly solved just by the esports scene growing and evolving. They stated that with the combination of players starting to have more experience and understanding about professional gaming, and the overall business growing, it is becoming easier to brand younger generations. On the contrary P6, saw as necessary that major star players should set a better example on how to be a professional player for newer players to understand their responsibilities.

In esports it is fairly normal to have professional players at the highest level, who are still young teenagers and all of these organizations have had experience with under 18-year-olds in their rosters. When asked about if the young age provides ethical issues or problems in player branding or bringing them into the spotlight the interviewees didn't think of it as a problem, but more so as just one of the aspects they must take into consideration and give more attention to in their day-to-day operations. Although they didn't see it necessarily as a problem, they all emphasized the organizations' role to provide support for younger players especially. P1, P3, and P5 stated that

obviously it is difficult for young players who are brought into the public spotlight and fame to not let it affect them mentally. P5 mentioned that they've had experiences with younger players who have gained significant amount of fame quickly, which in some cases affected their personality or made them more arrogant. On the other hand, P6 brought up the other side of publicity, how much impact all the negative comments they receive on social media has on a young players mental state and emphasized that even though organization necessarily can't protect their players from it, they should openly communicate about these issues with their players.

> *If you compare esports athlete to a traditional athlete for example, a hockey player has had 10 years to prepare themselves and getting used to people cheering and doing interviews to some local paper before becoming professional.* - Person 1

P1 brought up the professional players path in esports where the success can happen very suddenly compared to traditional sports, which means the players haven't been used to any publicity or media, therefore organizations should be even more responsible to ensure their mental state and other obligations like school stays in order. P2 also noted that players might be still in school while playing, and it is important for organizations to ensure that they are still able to complete their studies. Although the organization have more responsibilities with younger players, P4 didn't see branding these players or growing their recognizability necessarily as a problem, since it can bring the player more possibilities and the fans are always interested in young super stars. However, P4 stated that organizations have additional responsibilities to make sure a young player isn't used as a tool to market things they are not allowed to, for example gambling.

## 6.4   Searching for new players and organization's role in building their brand

This chapter discusses organizations acquiring decisions related to player brands and what is their role in the brand building process. Also, to find out their views on what is the balance between organization and a player on building the player brand and which one is actually responsible of creating it.

All of the interviewees commented that while searching for new players or teams the organization first and foremost concentrates on the competitive capabilities and not their brand value. P2 and P4 saw the small size of esports scene in Finland as part of the problem, because there aren't many potential competitive players to choose from and only a handful has an existing brand value

that could benefit the organization. P5 and P6 brought up that when acquiring streamers or other influencers they focus more on the brand but not much with professional players. However, even though all of the organizations firstly mentioned that the players brand doesn't have much influence in acquisitions, it was later emphasized that they do put a lot of value on what kind of person the player is and specifically stressed that they do not want players who might have negative influence on the organizations brand. Especially P1, P2, P4 and P6 stated that they research the players they are interested in and discard the options immediately that might have shown alarming behavior before or whose image doesn't suit the organizations values, visions, and guidelines.

**Supporting player's brand**

While studying the role that organizations have in branding players, the research should also ask which one actually is responsible to grow the players brand value, players themselves or organizations. The interviewees saw that both should have responsibility in the brand building process, although their views on which one has more differed a bit. P5 saw that players should be more in charge of their brand, since if they are not enjoying the process it doesn't look natural and fans will see through the organizations efforts of enhancing their brand. On the contrary, P6 argued that organizations are mainly responsible for it and should be able to leverage the brands even more and provide the best possible tools to branding players. P4 also emphasized that even though both parties should be interested in the process, organizations at the moment have a pretty huge role in getting the players excited about self-branding and bringing out their stories. P2 agreed with P4 and P6 in that organization should carry most of the responsibility, highlighting that especially in this stage where esports and especially player branding in it is still a new concept and most players doesn't have any brand whatsoever when becoming professionals. Meanwhile, P3 shared some opinions on both sides and saw the responsibility as equal, stating bit similarly as P5 did, that player has to be active in the process to ensure that the brand is a reflection of themselves and therefore authentic. However, also adding that organizations have an important role in finding those personality traits that attracts interest and supporting them in the content creation process.

The responsibility of organizations came up through the conversations with brand building. P1, P2, and P3 all highlighted that organizations have a large responsibility in guiding their players to professionalization whether that is helping them to create content, teaching about values or how a

professional player should behave. All of these three remarked that for the player these might be their first professional organizations, and everything related to it is completely new. P3 brought up that they go bit more in depth about social media usage, mentioning that they will discuss their players previous experience or skills with platforms and how to utilize different aspects to create more interaction with fans.

> *It is the organizations responsibility of course to be there supporting and helping the player to understand the media game. What you should and shouldn't say there.*
> - Person 3

P1, P2, P3 and P4 mentioned that they provide some sort of media training to their players whether that is by someone inside the organization or through an outside source. Some had different variations and focal points of the media training but mostly they were around content, media platforms, communications, and sponsorship relations. However, P1 argued that if the players aren't motivated or interested in creating content then the media training for that part is mostly just waste of resources. P1 added that without the intrinsic motivation of a player wanting to learn these things, it is hard for an organization to enforce certain rules or goals about content creation to players without them getting too much pressure from it, which can lead to negative consequences. P5 and P6 both had more of a hands-off approach where they go through the basic values and processes with the players when they join in and support if needed, but don't necessarily provide actual media training. However, both of them occasionally arrange meetings where they discuss content ideas with the players, specifically P5 detailed that before COVID-19 they used to meet more often.

P1, P2, P5 and P6 noted that marketing and branding players and everything related to involving players in that manner could still be improved in their organization, especially P5 and P6 mentioning that they haven't started that aspect properly yet. Although they had bit different approaches and views, all of the organizations shared the same goal to support players in the brand building process and be there to provide guidance if needed.

## 6.5   Contract's role in marketing and branding players

During this conversation the object was to find what kind of a role should contracts have in getting the players involved in the marketing and branding process, and how these esports organizations are utilizing it with their players.

Everyone stated that they have at least some forms of obligations for players written in their contracts, although with varying amounts. Most were obligations related to collaborations with the organization's partners or events. P1, P2 and P3 seemed to put the most value on contractual obligations from the organizations, although P1, P2 and P6 all emphasized that enforcing obligations can be difficult. They saw that that the marketing and branding activities shouldn't necessarily be forced to players through contract obligations, with P1 mentioning that they try to be there to help and support the process but forcing players can be bad. P3 thought it should be obvious that there are obligations for a player to do media and be part of other productions, since it basically is part of their job description, but didn't think that set amounts of content should be demanded from the player, especially in CS:GO where schedules can be hectic. However, P3 also noted that best results are gotten by supporting players and working together with them in order to reach situations that benefit everyone.

P2, P3, P4 and P6 all provide different extrinsic motivators for their players to get them more activated in creating content or just participating in organization's partnership activities. P4 and P6 revealed that they have a bonus system in their contract where the players will receive a percentage bonus to their salary if they produce a certain amount of content on their own. However, P6 stated that even with money as extra motivator it hasn't been able to really activate their players into creating content. P2 and P3 saw extrinsic motivations as important to activate players and their approach was more so in creating interesting collaborations with different partners for their players from where they would get added compensation for that participation.

## 6.6   How are organizations branding players?

In this part of the interview the study object was to discover how does organizations concretely brand their players, for example what type of content or what platforms do they prefer.

Most organizations didn't seem to have a clear answer or a systemic plan on how to start branding a player when they join in. Especially P2 didn't think they are branding their players like they would aspire to and saw this is as an area where they and other organizations could improve significantly. According to them there is a large demand by the fans to get to know the players backstories, therefore they are putting considerable amount of emphasis at the moment to improve their player branding.

P3 seemed to have the most systemic plan where they build the foundation for a player through involving them authentically in their own content, which from they take the feedback from the audience and figure out what personality traits they liked or were drawn into. After that they will start highlighting those traits or impressions that were formed by the audience, and even over emphasizing some of the characteristics that the fans found interesting. However, even with a somewhat systematic plan P3 also pointed out that in sports business situations are changing constantly, which means creating long term strategies are difficult even for player branding, therefore they see that player branding should be reactive and focus more on what is happening today. P2 agreed that creating long-term strategies are challenging and as an organization they must and should be reactive, since esports is in a constant change and it is hard to predict, what is the teams or industry's outlook even in the near future.

In P1's strategy they try to promote their players on their own platforms with content that relates to professional gaming, but also utilize their partnerships and their platforms, where the goal is to highlight the personalities of players with content that doesn't necessarily relate to gaming. P1 with the addition of P2 pointed out that COVID-19 has made it a lot more difficult to create content around players and build their brand.

P5 and P6 had more of a hands-off approach, with P5 mentioning that their focus is to be there to support if the player himself wants to start building a brand and create content, but they are leaving the decision to players if they want to create content or not. P6 detailed that they have their organizations content strategy where they involve their players, but don't want to make individual strategies, since favoring players differently could lead to unequal situations. P4 approached this topic kind of similarly as P5, firstly discussing with the players what are their own goals and how open they are to creating content or doing other media obligations. However, in P4's case they do

try to push slowly their players into content or media assignments like interviews and build their confidence through that, although ensuring that the players don't feel like they are forced to do something. P1 also stressed that you don't want to put too much pressure on a new player immediately, since most of them might be in a professional organization for the first time and forcing them too much into media assignments can just lead to the player freezing up even more.

> *Branding players is constantly moving more to the direction of profiling and trying to find those personality traits, because it is about authenticity. Even partners don't like if someone looks very artificial and nowadays it isn't something that is very attracting.* - Person 4

P4's organizations content strategy is to organize bootcamps couple times a year where they obviously practice in-game aspects, but also produce most of their content with the players, which can be utilized in either the organizations or players social media. By producing content together, their goal is to create an atmosphere where those situations are as comfortable and instructive as possible for the player. Their object is to discover the interesting personality traits of players and highlight them to the audience in an authentic manner.

**Platforms**

Most mentioned Twitter and Instagram as the most important platforms in esports and building up player brands. P1 and P2 stated that Twitter is definitely the best platform to utilize in esports, although P2 saw Instagram as a close second, both also saw Twitch as a valuable option. On the other hand, P4 and P5 favored Instagram over other platforms. P6 argued that it depends a bit on the game, but YouTube or Twitch are the platforms that can be used as the main channel where an organization or player produces content, which then can be cut to many different content pieces and distributed to other channels. P3 didn't single out any platform but were on the same lines as the others considering all the previously mentioned Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and Twitch as crucial ones.

Couple more newer platforms in the industry were brought up, for example everyone except P6 noted that TikTok is a potential new platform where it is possible to quickly gather a lot of traction, although most acknowledged that they haven't started using it much yet. Discord was also seen as a potential platform, however most saw it as bit challenging still, since they haven't had enough resources or expertise to utilize it properly.

# 7 Conclusions

## 7.1 Importance of player brands

During this research it has become very evident that player brands possess untapped potential and huge value for organizations, players and the whole esports ecosystem.

**Organizations**

This study researched traditional sports literature to reflect on how they approach these certain topics. It was stated that branding has become an important competitive edge for sports teams to differentiate them from others, which can be utilized in creating a stronger brand equity that will lead into that the organization will be able to attract more sponsorship possibilities and through that generate more revenue for them (Chadwick, Chanavat & Desbordes 2016, 5-7, 27-28). It was also argued that athlete's brand can have a positive impact on their organization's social media presence (Su et al. 2020), influence their fans purchase decisions (Wu 2015) and enhance teams brand equity (Brunello 2018, 4). To summarize these findings from traditional sports, it shows that athlete's brand can positively impact the organizations brand, which then attracts more sponsors that leads into more revenue.

Taking into consideration the research findings that esports organizations are mostly relying on sponsorship money (Bose 2018) and majority of the whole worldwide esports market revenue is coming from sponsorships (Newzoo 2021), further highlights that player brands can impact the main revenue stream in esports; sponsorships. Although as Takahashi (2018) and Gawrysiak et al. (2020) noted that every aspect of traditional sports might not be appliable in esports, Bose (2018) still reinforced the hypothesis that in esports being a recognizable brand on top of being successful in tournaments is also one of the most important aspects in attracting sponsorships.

The results from the interviews with Finnish esports organizations clearly backed up the findings stated above. All of the interviewees unanimously agreed that player brands possess immense value and potential for them, that has already showed in as added value in social media presence, beneficial asset in sponsorship negotiations, crucial growth generator or a tool to generate interest for their organization. Almost every one of them had already seen direct value from player brands to their organizations with half of them detailing that some of their player brands have led

into direct financial gains for them. Literature about employee branding furthermore highlights that for a company their employees can work as their brand extension and bring more exposure to the company itself (Castrillon 2019). This example could be applied in esports where players operate as a brand extension for their organizations and further supports the idea of player brands value.

Even though it is still unsure what aspects of traditional sports can be applied in esports successfully, the research can state based on all these findings, that player brands can have a significant impact on the organizations sponsorship revenues and brand equity, and therefore should be at the very least analyzed and experimented thoroughly by organizations. As one of the interviewees stated, a player brands potential is limitless for the organization since it can impact so many aspects of the esports organization. To answer one of key research questions *How important is player branding for esports organizations,* the research can conclude that it is definitely very important.

**For professional players**

Even though organization benefits were the main focus in the interviews and literature review, the findings showed that focusing on their own brand can be very beneficial for players also. Most of the organizations emphasized the value it can bring to players themselves. Players with an existing brand are noticed more easily, and it can increase their career longevity, but also impact the career after retiring from professional gaming. Even though the organizations stated that existing brand value doesn't influence their acquiring decisions yet, they emphasized that they carefully research potential players and exclude the ones whose values doesn't seem to match with their organization or whose image could portray the organization in a negative light.

Similar findings were in the literature review where Castrillon (2019) and Gronlund (2013, 89) stated that personal brand is very important. Castrillon (2019) highlighted that everyone has a personal brand and an online persona, which will be researched by the company when they are applying for a job, therefore is it is crucial for employees to control their brand image. This is in line with what the interviewees stated above, further proving that players should be aware of their personal brand.

The literature highlighted that professional players career can be very volatile and short (Scholz 2019, 67), which makes personal brand a valuable option that could bring more opportunities. In addition, Park et al. (2019) and Shank and Lyberger (2015, 10) stated that athletes can generate more revenue through their brand than they do from playing professionally further supporting its value. It is still difficult to conclude how much potential there is for esports player brands in the future compared to traditional sports, since as Gawrysiak et al. (2020) stated, the value of it has been just recently noticed in the industry. However, there are already examples like Tyler "Ninja" Blevins who leveraged his professional player status into a successful player brand (Malvone 2020, 6), proving that it can provide significant opportunities. In conclusion, literature and interviewees enforced the hypothesis that personal brand has significant value for esports players during and after their career, although it is too early to determine if the potential is as huge as in traditional sports.

## 7.2   Qualities for a successful player brand

Based on the interviews a good player brand is active and has characteristics like athletic, ambitious, relatable, unique and authentic. Most of these characteristics were also brought up in the literature, Wilson and Blumenthal (2008, 2-4) were in the same lines stating that it is important for personal brand to find out what makes the person unique in order for them to either stand out or make them relatable.

Authenticity especially has been emphasized several times in the interviews and literature as a crucial component of player brand. Authenticity's important role was also backed up by the literature findings related to personal branding. Rampersad (2008, 2-3) and Shea (2016) both mentioned authenticity as one the key aspects in a successful personal brand, however they both also brought up passion as a another key element, which wasn't mentioned in the interviews. To speculate passions absence from the interview data, it could be explained by that it might be fairly obvious that players are passionate about their profession, since they have already invested years of hard work into it and as The Meta Report (2017) stated practice rigorously to succeed.

Adubato (2011, 10-15) furthermore supported the findings from interviews emphasizing that an athlete brand has to be authentic and even in the esports context Hays (2020) argued that any

non-authentic attempts will have a hard time succeeding in this industry. Activeness wasn't as apparent in the literature as authenticity, although it was briefly mentioned by Gary Vee (2016) that athletes should be engaging more with their fans. Based on the findings mentioned in this chapter the research can confidently conclude that authenticity and activity are the foundations for a successful player brand.

## 7.3 Challenges

This research was able to discover a new significant research problem that creates challenges in player branding. It was unanimously stated that getting players motivated and involved in the brand building process is the main obstacle for Finnish esports organizations to create successful player brands. Based on the findings there isn't a simple solution for this either, since there were several aspects mentioned with players that impacts this: motivation, lack of time, shy personality, players path to professional and them not understanding professional obligations. As one of the solutions some teams provide extrinsic motivators like salary bonuses if they create content or participate in partnership projects, although with varying results. Existing literature on these challenges and especially in esports are very limited, which makes it difficult for this research to analyze the gathered insights here. Even though some interviewees mentioned that this problem is getting better with time, it is still one of the most significant findings that were brought up by this study and would require a closer look on how to solve this.

## 7.4 Organization's role in player branding

### Roles and responsibility

Based on the data gathered from interviews both player and the organizations are responsible for the player brand. However, most organizations emphasized that since it is still a very new concept for players, organizations should take a larger role in the brand building process. As mentioned, authenticity has a significant role in succeeding, which means that organizations can't all by themselves just create a character around their player, since it might not feel natural for the player and wouldn't appear as authentic for the public. Also considering what Adubato (2011, 15) stated that in the end athlete is the one responsible for their brand and the possible failures, further argues that even though organizations have a huge responsibility in creating those brands, the player must be involved in it as well.

According to the interview's, organizations have a large responsibility in guiding their players in becoming professionals and ensuring that they stay mentally stable. Taking into consideration that players path to professionalization can be very sudden in esports and some of them can still be very young there is clearly an obligation to provide a support structure by the organization whether it is related to content creation, publicity, or branding. In fact, most of them do provide some sort of media training or at the very least support if needed.

In conclusion, these organizations obviously support their players, but it is difficult from outside to evaluate if its sufficient or to find literature that could determine the right amount of support, which is basically impossible since every situation is different. Based on the findings it seems Finnish esports organizations at the very least understand their responsibility in player branding, although the actions itself could most likely be improved, which was also noted by most of the interviewees themselves. However, it is still up to argue, how much effort the organization should put into a player's brand versus how much more active players themselves should be in the process, which was previously mentioned as the largest obstacle in front of a successful player brand.

**Branding**

As it has been mentioned previously, the research object wasn't necessarily to find and provide solutions for better branding, which means that platforms and strategies haven't been studied thoroughly in the literature review. However, the interviews provided some insight to the operations of Finnish esports organizations, even though it cannot be compared to theory.

These Finnish esports organizations didn't seem to have a very systematic or strategic plan on how to start branding their players. The ones that had some sort of a plan it was mostly based on involving players in the organizations own content strategy and providing tools or skills for them to produce content. There were couple reasons stated for this, first is lack of resources, which is understandable since the industry and most of the organizations are still fairly new that might not have large budgets. Secondly, it is debatable how much value is there even in systematic and long-term strategies, especially when two of the organizations argued that in this business the branding should be more reactive.

Authenticity has been brought up multiple times already and its role is crucial and very evident in creating content also. As Hays (2020) COO of FaZe Clan brought up authenticity she went bit more in depth on how to create authentic content. According to Hays the content should be created strategically to match the demand of a specific platform and not just distribute one piece of content to every platform. Comparing this statement to the data gathered from the interviews it seems like this is one of the aspects that is missing in the content marketing and branding strategy of the interviewed organizations, although it isn't necessarily fair to draw comparisons between FaZe and Finnish organizations, since FaZe has vastly more resources. However, based on the findings on how important brand and authenticity is, FaZe like strategic approach to content creation could prove to be beneficial for organizations.

In conclusion authenticity was emphasized in different segments of the literature review and interviews. Based on all the data gathered the research can confidently state that authenticity is one of the key aspects in esports marketing and branding, especially when discussing organizations and players brand.

**Platforms**

Based on the results from interviews, Instagram and Twitter are the most important platforms in esports and building up player brands. Majority mentioned one or the other as the most important one, although YouTube, Twitch and TikTok were seen as potential also. Even though platforms weren't analyzed thoroughly in the literature review, streaming and especially Twitch were brought up in it as this unique mechanism in esports that has made super stars more accessible than ever to their fans (Schultz 2017) and O'Connel (2020) saw streaming as one of the few potential added revenue streams for players. In addition, Singer and Chi (2019) highlighted the potential of players Twitch audience for a marketer, which could be leveraged into endorsements and Wright (2016) further stressed the amount of value that players have in these communities.

To summarize these findings, it is bit of surprising that there wasn't more emphasis on streaming in the interviews. There might be couple reasons for these results, firstly, one of the interviewees mentioned that it is a struggle to find time for players to stream on top of their existing hectic schedules. Secondly, few of them described their players as shy and introverted, which is chal-

lenges in streaming. Thirdly, streaming is in most cases more solitary and mostly relies on the players initiative compared to Instagram and Twitter where organizations can prepare content for the player. When taking that into consideration and the findings that most of the branding related actions are relying on the organization's efforts solely, it might be part of the reason why organizations don't see that much value in streaming, since it might be more challenging for them to support players in. To speculate the potential based on the athlete brand literature and endorsement possibilities brought up, streaming can probably be very beneficial for players, but it requires more of their own initiative and motivation.

# 8 Discussion

This is the last chapter of this research, which will conclude some of the key aspects, challenges and thoughts about this research. It will also evaluate the validity and reliability of the research.

**Validity and reliability**

Reliability and validity measures the quality and trustworthiness of the research. Reliability means that the results showcased wouldn't change if the study would be done again and validity focuses on that the right aspects are studied. In qualitative research the exact reliability of the research can't be measured like in quantitative research, which leads to that, it is upon the researcher to evaluate it. There are different aspects that measure reliability: credibility, confirmability, saturation, lack of contradiction and documentation. (Kananen 2014, 146-151.)

One of the challenges was the research reliability, since the circle in this industry in Finland is so small, which means that the identifiability of interviewed organizations is high. This was also brought up in the interviews that there have been previous theses about Finnish esports where it was possible to identify some of the interviewees based on the descriptions. To ensure the reliability of the data gathered from interviews, organizations were completely anonymous, and the research was very careful that there wouldn't be any descriptive information about organizations or players. However, this led to situations where some of the gathered data and great insights couldn't be used in this study, since it had descriptive information, usually in situations where the interviewee was giving examples of specific players or organizations. In addition, when interviewing people, the opinions can change after time, which means that complete reliability will be challenging to reach when the data is gathered via interviews.

The research can state that the main topics achieved saturation, as the same views were brought up multiple times related to authenticity, challenges, and importance. However, there were still topics that didn't reach similar saturation, although it would be very challenging to even add more interviews, since there aren't many high level esports organizations in Finland that could have beneficial views or expertise related to player branding. To ensure reliable results this study used a wide variety of international sources and current publications that included researches, literature reviews, books and interviews. The information related to the sports industry and especially esports were relatively recent publications, which ensured that the information wasn't outdated. Assuring valid findings, the main conclusions this research stated like authenticity, key challenges and importance of player branding were backed up by multiple different sources.

In conclusion this research succeeded in solving the research problems, explaining esports ecosystem, recognizing key issues and aspects related to player branding that can be beneficial to multiple facets.

**Successfulness of the research**

This research was able to draw a direct correlation from sponsorships significance in esports to all the way to player branding. In a nutshell, organizations rely on sponsorships, sponsorships are depended on the organizations brand and player brands impact organizations brand. Therefore, the study succeeded in solving one of the main research questions *How important is player branding for organizations*, showcasing it is very important, since it can directly impact the main revenue stream that esports organizations rely on. The research was also able to establish authenticity as one of the key aspects in esports and player branding, which was emphasized in multiple occasions and aspects.

The other part of this research was to discuss with Finnish esports organizations and find out about their views on player branding and how they utilize it. All of the arranged interviews materialized and from them this research was able to gather significant amount of valuable data about player branding and establish knowledge foundation on how Finnish organizations view this topic, which is beneficial for several different facets. Interviewees discussed most of the designed topics that were also mentioned in the literature, which enabled this research to reflect most of the data gathered from the interviews to existing literature and come up with well-founded conclusions.

However, since this research had a broad look into player branding and the object wasn't neces-sarily providing solutions and better methods, it led to that some of the in-depth topics that ap-peared in interviews were lacking in the literature review and therefore couldn't be compared. This can't be considered as a failure though, since as it was mentioned in the introduction already, these results and conclusions can be potentially utilized as base for future research that would go more in depth.

In conclusion this research was successful in solving the research questions and providing signifi-cant amount of information about esports. The information included existing knowledge about the esports ecosystem, but also completely unknown insights of Finnish esports organizations views and processes that can be beneficial for years to come.

**Follow up**

Based on the findings, beneficial follow up researchers would be to analyze social media platforms and streaming, figuring out their impact and how they can be applied in player branding. To create specific strategies for branding and marketing that were somewhat lacking in Finnish organizations based on the results. This research suggests as one of the follow-ups a similar approach that Pu-umalainen and Lindeman (2020) had in their case study, where they created a complete content marketing strategy for KOVA Esports, through these sort of case studies organizations would re-ceive more specific information and solutions. One of the key takeaways from this research was also discovering that the main challenge in player branding is getting players actively involved in the brand creating process. Therefore, the research suggests as one of the potential follow-up re-searches to study on how to get players involved in branding themselves which could provide solu-tions and tools for organizations on getting their players active in this process. Since this research had only organizations point of views, it would be intriguing to discuss with players how they view this topic and approach solving this challenge from their perspective.

The opinions about who is responsible for constructing these players brands, player or organiza-tion differed between interviewees, which is also an interesting topic to inspect in the future while the industry grows. The growth could lead to that esports might see more agents or managers coming into the industry that may take more role in player branding, which is at the moment com-pletely relied on the organizations. Considering that Finland has already seen successful players

and teams there is a realistic possibility that Finland could also produce these international super stars. It will be intriguing to follow the progress of how much focus is placed on player branding by organizations in the future and if esports can produce colossal player brands like Roger Federer or Lebron James.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1. Interview structure.

| Research question | Chapters for literature | Concepts | Interview questions |
|---|---|---|---|
| How does Finnish esports organizations view player branding? | 3.2<br>3.3<br>4.1<br>4.2<br>4.3<br>5.1<br>5.2 | Personal Brand<br>Athlete Brand<br>Social Media<br>Marketing<br>Esports | - What is a good player brand?<br>- What challenges or problems are there in player branding?<br>- How important is player branding?<br>- Is player branding depended more on the player or the organization?<br>- What opportunities do you see in player branding?<br>- How much does the players brand affect when you are acquiring new players?<br>- What are the most important platforms or channels in player branding? |
| How does Finnish esports organizations brand their players? | 3.2<br>3.3<br>4.2<br>4.3<br>5.1<br>5.2 | Personal brand<br>Athlete brand<br>Sponsorships<br>Esports | - How do you brand players?<br>- Do you have a specific employee who is responsible for branding?<br>- Do you have contractual obligations with your player related to marketing and branding? Or should there be?<br>- What kind of benefits have you seen from your player brands? |