Chapter 6

Soccer Esports in Europe:
Brands, Partnerships, and Business Opportunities in Professional Football

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ABSTRACT

The commercial playing field of association football (soccer) has radically changed due to the professionalization of soccer simulation games into soccer esports. This new phenomenon is woven into the international soccer culture as global communities arise in the interconnection of professional soccer clubs, esports players, and fans. Global brands explore the opportunities to engage with these communities through partnerships. This chapter examined soccer esports cases in European soccer to (1) clarify the rise of soccer esports based on four stages of globalization (digital, social, geographical, and commercial), (2) categorize the brands involved in this complex ecosystem, and (3) identify business opportunities in brand strategies, attractiveness of the game, and sponsorship partnerships to improve the value co-creation processes for the soccer industry. This current state and future pathways support decision-makers in the sports industry and serves as a reorienting perspective for scholars to bridge the gap between business practice and academic inquiry in research and education.

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INTRODUCTION

During the FIFA (fifa.com/fifae) 21 Challenge, some of the best professional soccer players from around the world were paired with the best FIFA esports players to battle in the soccer computer game FIFA 21. This unique promotional event turned out to be the most watched soccer esports event in history to date, with more than 250,000 viewers on average per minute and a total watch time of over one billion hours (Parker, 2020). During the last decades, the developments of soccer esports accelerated and consequently, traditional soccer clubs face new challenges and opportunities. What is the impact of the developments of soccer esports on brands, partnerships, and business opportunities of the soccer industry?

This chapter contributes to bridging the large gap between academic inquiry and business practice on the impact of the rise of esports on the sports business ecosystem. In order to understand these developments, this chapter, first, clarifies the rise of the phenomenon of soccer esports. Second, to examine the dynamics in the ecosystem of soccer esports, the different brand categories were identified from a business perspective to clarify the actors involved in this playground of soccer esports. The interaction of these brand categories were, thirdly, applied to the value co-creation process by diverse business cases of partnerships between brands in the domain of soccer esports. These defined tendencies in the changing commercial landscape of soccer esports resulted in new business opportunities for corporate community involvement and pathways to improve the value co-creation process within the soccer industry. In contrast to previous studies on sports marketing and sponsorship, this study explored international soccer esports cases to define the actual state of corporate community involvement, the differences with the traditional sports industry, and new value co-creating opportunities for brands and their partnerships within the European soccer context. The resulting series of pathways on the chances and challenges incudes (a) implications for research directors for scholars, (b) serves as reorienting perspective for educators and universities to define future career paths in sports marketing and sports management, and (c) supports practice by providing managerial insights for decision-makers in the sports industry.

THE RISE OF SOCCER eSPORTS

With various interpretations of what the esports industry actually encompasses, distinction is made between amateur participation in tournaments (i.e., focus on participation not on entertaining viewers), competitive games in general (i.e., non-organized live-streaming market, also known as game streaming), and esports (Newzoo, 2020). Esports is defined as professional and semi-professional competitive gaming in an organized format, such as a tournament or league, with a specific goal or prize such as winning a championship title or prize money (Newzoo, 2020). Esports in the context of video simulation games of traditional sports refer to the virtual esports as defined by the International Olympic Committee (International Olympic Committee, 2021). As the history of soccer videogames has a playfield that is by default international, it is important to define the growth of brands, partnerships, and business opportunities in relation to the processes of globalization. In this rise of soccer esports and the formation of its ecosystem, new business models have been created as more densely networked patterns and brands positioned themselves within global networks (Little et al., 2017). Previous contributions defined the stages of globalization in soccer, including geographical, commercial, digital and social globalization (Beek et al., 2018). These globalization stages enabled understanding the historical developments and the current state of the ecosystem, although these phases and patterns are continuous processes without evident origin or expected ending. Traditional professional soccer grew, first, by their physical attendances of fans in ever-growing stadiums and the migration of players started thereafter a *geographical* movement. The involvement of *commercial* organization in these local communities and *digital* improvements in broadcasting subsequently enabled linkages of regional clubs with wider international audiences that added a *social* engagement aspect.

The growth of soccer esports represents significantly different patterns, as the *digital* software improvement was the starting point for the market of videogames. Due to the in-game technological abilities, the establishment of online social networks and the global outlook of this domain, these *social* interactions occurred in inclusive and exclusive places and, especially, spaces that impact the engagement and conversations with stakeholders (Go & Van Fenema, 2006). As the virtual space enabled gameplay without boundaries in place, the *geographical* globalization became subject in soccer esports with player migration to physical team training facilities and, second, by in-stadium tournaments connecting both physical events and virtual experiences. Finally, the *commercial* globalization is a more recent phenomenon as commercial brands entered the playfield because of the incredible growth of the industry among especially new generations. Building on these globalization patterns, what could be learned from the similarities and differences of the global ecosystem of traditional professional soccer and soccer esports to better understand the future commercial value for brands, partnerships, and business opportunities?

SOCCER eSPORTS BRANDS

The ecosystem of soccer esports substantially differs from the traditional soccer ecosystem, which deserves further explanation to understand the chances and challenges from a business perspective. There are many similarities of soccer esports with traditional soccer, like fan activity, attendance, viewership, talent, and superstars. Nevertheless, the esports industry reflects a diverse and independent ecosystem (Murphy, 2020a). Finch et al. (2019) defined fifteen different stakeholders and components in the esports ecosystem. Using their categorization as a starting point, contributions from marketing and management perspectives were made to define the brands in the ecosystem of virtual sports. This resulted in eighteen brand categories, which are briefly described and applied to the context of soccer esports in Table 1.

Game Publishers

Game publishers are the owners of the games and responsible for all aspects associated with the game, including development, production, marketing and sales in addition to production and dissemination of media content and organizing events. In soccer esports, soccer associations and national competitions cooperate with American Electronic Arts (FIFA), Japanese Konami (Pro Evolution Soccer, PES hereafter, efootballpro.konami.net), and English Sports Interactive (Football Manager, footballmanager.com).

Game Genres

Video simulation games were categorized in real-time strategy, first-person shooter, simulated professional sports, and fighting games (Arsenault, 2009). Currently, the simulated professional sports game in the context of soccer concentrates on FIFA, PES eFootball, and Football Manager. FIFA is, contrasting to other video simulation games of EA Sports, not one of its own trademarks as it is a property of its owners and used with permission of worldwide soccer association Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) and the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) (Electronic Arts, 2020). EA Sports' FIFA historically sought to monetize its advantage through the acquisition of official licenses, recently picking up rights to the UEFA Champions League and Europa League (Connolly, 2019). FIFA '96 marked an important momentum of the interrelationship between traditional soccer and soccer esports, as it was the first version under the FIFPRO license, meaning that professional players' real names were used in the game (BBC, 2020a). In the 21st century, the EA Sports' FIFA Series and Konami's PES dominated the soccer video games worldwide and these market forces shifted over the years. The FIFA series is one of the most popular video game franchises in the world since, with selling more than 260 million copies as of 2018 (Pritchard, 2020). It makes FIFA one of very few actual sports simulations with a serious impact in the world of esports (Connolly, 2019).

As PES rarely challenge FIFA in terms of sales nowadays, it has challenged the industry based on its creativity and is the basis for selected esports competitions (e.g., national leagues, individual clubs and international partnerships with UEFA), therefore a threat to counter for the soccer simulation supremacy for the past quarter of a century (Connolly, 2019). Football Manager, developed by Sports Interactive and published by SEGA, carefully modeled and recreated the professional world of soccer with all the managerial power and tools (Football Manager, 2021). This simulation game transcended its humble roots and became an integral part of soccer as it is not only played by millions of people around the world, but also used by traditional soccer clubs and media as a scouting and research tool (National Football Museum, 2015). Based on their accolades in Football Manager, successful gamers were even hired by professional soccer clubs as soccer analyst or the club's new general manager, without real-life managerial experiences at a professional soccer (Varley, 2019).

Hardware Manufacturers

In addition to the developers and publishers of soccer simulation games, the manufacturers of hardware enabled further technological developments and global market penetration. Although other popular esports genres were played on personal computers (mainly on Windows devices), the soccer simulation games were concentrated on consoles dominated by Sony's PlayStation and Microsoft's Xbox. As the soccer simulation games developed to mobile devices as well, additional platforms became relevant to meet their software requirements (e.g., Google's Android, Apple's iOS). Remarkable in this category is the involvement of Sony in the soccer business. The Japanese consumer electronics company is official sponsor of the UEFA Champions League since 1997. During this long-term sponsorship, Sony changed its brand strategy and activated Sony's PlayStation in this sponsorship, explicitly promoting its products and releases during this prestigious international soccer club tournament.

Events

Central to esports are events and tournaments, both at a local and global level, to win championship titles and prize money. Competitions created alongside corresponding traditional sports leagues and events is a growing segment within the esports landscape (Nielsen, 2019). These events could be clustered by tournaments on individual players (e.g., FIFAe World Cup), teams (e.g., FIFAe Club World Cup), and representation of nations (e.g., FIFAe Nations Cup) from all around the world (FIFA, 2021a). With the announcement of the new structure of three competitive divisions involving players, clubs, and nations,

Table 1. Brands in soccer esports

Category	Description of brand category	Brands in soccer esports[1]
Game publishers	Owners of the games responsible for all aspects associated with the game.	Electronic Arts, Konami, and Sports Interactive.
Game genres	The video game as esports title, categorized in real-time strategy, first-person shooter, simulated professional sports, and fighting games.	FIFA, PES eFootball, and Football Manager.
Hardware manufacturers	Manufacturers of gaming platforms and hardware peripherals.	Sony's PlayStation and Microsoft's Xbox.
Events	Tournaments, both at a local and global level, to win championship titles and prize money.	FIFA eWorld Cup and UEFA eChampions League.
Professional esports athletes	Professional esports players, competing individually or as part of teams.	Former FIFAe World Cup winners Thiago Carrico de Azevedo (Brazil, 2004) and Mosaad Aldossary (Saudi Arabia, 2018).
Esports teams	Distinct from traditional sport teams, a single 'team' may have franchises in different esports.	Former FIFAe Club World Cup winners KiNG eSports and Complexity Gaming.
Professional soccer athletes	Professional soccer players as simulated character, investor in esports, or individual gamer.	Simulated characters like Daniel Sturridge and Zlatan Ibrahimović. Professional soccer and esports players Wendell Lira and Mesut Özil.
Professional soccer clubs	Traditional soccer clubs incorporating esports as new division of their business model.	FIFAe Club World Cup winner Brøndby IF (Denmark) and the gaming division of FC Barcelona.
Associations	Mainly existing soccer associations, as there is a lack of an independent and recognized global esports governing body to manage compliance, rules and regulations.	National soccer associations (e.g., LaLiga), international associations (e.g., FIFA, UEFA), and players associations (e.g., FIFPro).
Investors	The esports industry has attracted a diverse array of investors, including private holdings, (former) professional soccer players, and soccer clubs.	Ruud Gullit (Team Gullit Academy), David Beckham (Guild Esports), and Antoine Griezmann (Grizi Esport).
Facilities	Dedicated esports facilities, including soccer stadiums, with the capabilities to facilitate live fan attendances, live streaming and broadcasting.	Wembley Stadium in London (England) facilitator of the UEFA eEURO 2020 Finals.
Media	Esports is primarily viewed on online streaming platforms where the audience interacts with spectators and participants in real-time.	Twitch, YouTube, and broadcasting television companies.
Sponsoring brands	Distinguishing endemic sponsors and non-endemic sponsors.	Sony, Adidas, and Coca Cola.
Merchandise manufacturers	Merchandise to visualize the identity and enable further fans' associations with favorite teams.	Adidas and Robey Sportswear.
Education	Universities offering esports scholarships, esports college championships, integrated courses and dedicated studies on esports, and research contributions by scholars.	Bachelor eSports Business (KUAS) and Expert Class in eSports Management (VUB).
Consulting organizations	Knowledge partners and advisory organizations for sports organizations and its stakeholders.	Nielsen Sport, KPMG, Blauw Research, and Newzoo
Networks	Service providers facilitating the growth of networked gaming.	Proximus, KPN, and Ziggo.
Government	Place branding by host cities of esports events and other governmental bodies incorporating esports in their sports policy to integrate gaming, esports, and traditional sports.	Host cities of events during FIFA eWorld Cup (e.g., Zurich, London, Paris, Milan), and cities integrating physical and virtual soccer activities (e.g., Rotterdam).

[1] *These brands are examples of brands in soccer esports, therefore not exhaustive and merely descriptive.*

the prize pool for these events to over $4.3M (Hitt, 2020). First, the FIFAe World Cup is an annual tournament organized by governing soccer body FIFA in partnership with EA Sports, with at the Grand Final the best players who qualified via the EA Sports FIFA Global Series battle for the title, cash prize and trip to The Best FIFA Football Awards (FIFA, 2021c). Second, in the FIFAe Club World Cup, established in 2017, esports players compete as part of a team, including representative of traditional soccer clubs and other independent soccer esports teams. Since 2018 the clubs competed as two-player teams, with chemistry and team spirit as essential ingredients for teams that have been successful in this competition (FIFA, 2021d). Third, the FIFAe Nations Cup is the FIFA's official inter-nation competition with players representing their nation in a 2v2 format, with the best participating member associations to find their eNational team to the final event, with the inaugural event in 2019 (London host city) won by France (FIFA, 2021b). The organization of the esports events relies on the governing soccer association or on the game publishers. Illustrative is that soccer association FIFA is running the FIFA eWorld Cup Grand Final, the FIFA eClub World Cup, and the FIFA eNations Cup whereas EA Sports is taking care of the FUT Champions Cups (Connolly, 2019).

Professional Esports Athletes

Contrasting to traditional sports, the casual fans and professional players compete in soccer esports uniquely on the same platform, resulting in individuals being both a fan and a participant with a particular social bond between casual gamers and professionals. FIFA is the biggest virtual sports game, played across the world by 35 million users (Murphy, 2020a). An important aspect in the FIFA strategy is the 'couch to champion', or 'amateur to champion', to enlarge recognition of the fans who move forward and to enable all passionate players of the FIFA game the opportunity to make it to the very top (Connolly, 2019). Interesting patterns arise in globalization processes when comparing the origins of the champions in traditional soccer (FIFA World Cup) and the finalists in the most prestigious soccer esports tournament (FIFAe World Cup). The origins of the soccer esports champions range from former soccer World Champions (e.g., Brazil, Germany, France, England, Spain), finalists in soccer esports of whom their nations had reached the finals in traditional soccer before (e.g., Netherlands, Hungary), and esports athletes who reached the finals even though their nations had participated but never made it to the finals of the World Cup (e.g., Denmark, United States, Portugal, Saudi Arabia) (FIFA, 2021c). Relating these globalization tendencies to the continuing growth of popularity and representation of nations in soccer esports might suggest a remarkable shift in dominance of nations and star players' origins that affect the soccer communities.

Esports Teams

Professional soccer esports athletes compete individually or as part of teams in global tournaments. Distinct from traditional sport teams, a single 'team' may have franchises in different esports genres. In traditional sports there are multi-clubs as well, like FC Barcelona (Spain), with separate professional teams in soccer, basketball, and handball. In esports teams, some individual players represent the team in multiple esports genres. Esports teams in soccer esports grew independent from traditional soccer clubs. For example, esports teams KiNG eSports and Complexity Gaming, both not part of the traditional sport structures, won the FIFAe Club World Cup in 2018 and 2019 (FIFA, 2021d). Although esports teams represent mainly domestic players (e.g., Complexity Gaming with both champions from the United

States), esports teams are increasingly a representation of several nationalities from the global soccer esports communities (e.g., KiNG eSports with its British and Argentinian champions) (Sacco, 2019b). In addition to this globalization process in esports teams, another interesting dynamic is that esports teams will continue to broaden their horizons and diversify their operations. Esports teams increasingly position themselves, in addition to the existing business models of traditional sports clubs, as a lifestyle brand with their marketing approach shifting toward content-creator strategies (Rietkerk, 2021).

Professional Soccer Athletes

Professional soccer athletes are involved in the soccer esports industry as (a) a simulated character in the simulated videogames, (b) an investor in esports teams, or (c) an individual esports player. Concerning the latter, the first case of a former professional soccer player who subsequently became a professional esports player has already occurred. Wendell Lira, a former professional Brazilian striker, scored the best goal of 2015 and won the FIFA's Puskas award beating Lionel Messi and Carlos Tevez (BBC, 2016). He became champion of one of the most prominent FIFA leagues in the world, having his popular YouTube channel, played for Portuguese sports club Sporting CP Esports with several additional sponsorship signed, and claimed to have multiplied his monthly income by factor three or four in relation to his time as a soccer player (Frascarelli, 2020). Furthermore, Mesut Özil created his popular Fortnite community on Twitch. Five years after being the most expensive German player, he also started his professional esports team M10 Esports even during his active professional soccer career (Needham, 2019).

The simulation of professional soccer athletes in soccer video games has developed into increasingly realistic reflections of reality. This increasing interwoven of virtual and physical soccer announced impactful dynamics between the simulation of the reality and the new reality of simulations. For example, several professional soccer athletes mentioned in European professional soccer that they just played against star players they 'only know from the FIFA game' (ESPN, 2021). Moreover, EA Sports released every week the Team of the Week, which contains a full squad of players who have performed well over the last seven days in real-life soccer. These players received an upgrade to their regular ratings in FIFA Ultimate Team with a special back In-Form card that is only available in packs for that week (Murphy, 2020b). Although EA Sports obtained the reputation to get the ratings of its players quite realistic in FIFA, several cases indicated rumors among professional soccer athletes. Like the downgraded pace in FIFA 18 of Liverpool's striker Daniel Sturridge, despite being one of the fastest players in the English Premier League, resulted in global media attention (Bristow, 2017). Another remarkable case is the criticism on the image rights of global soccer icon Zlatan Ibrahimović (Sweden), who questioned its seven million Twitter followers who gave permission to use his name and face in FIFA (Pritchard, 2020). His blame on the incredibly complex licensing system was supported by other professional soccer players and soccer agents, although EA Sports countered this as an issue between FIFPro, the players within their association and their representatives (Badenhausen, 2020).

Professional Soccer Clubs

Soccer clubs Sporting Clube de Portugal (Portugal) and VfL Wolfsburg (Germany) made esports history on 30 July 2016. It was the first time in the history of esports that the FIFA representatives of two established soccer clubs played against each other (Bräutigam, 2016). Other traditional soccer teams have hired esports players to represent them on domestic and international tournaments, like twenty teams in the Premier League (England) (BBC, 2019). Professional soccer clubs connect the power of their brands with the most popular games in the world. First, professional soccer clubs recognized the opportunities to attract new audiences to their traditional sports teams and vice versa. FC Barcelona (Spain) launched a gaming division to infiltrate into the entertainment industry to expand their fanbase and its brand in different target markets, especially in the Asian-Pacific region (Esports Insider, 2020). Second, the esports divisions of professional soccer clubs applied a brand diversification strategy and expanded their esports activities also to other titles, like France's Paris Saint-Germain competing in the League of Legends (leagueoflegends.com) competition in a partnership with Talon Esports (Paris Saint-Germain, 2020). Thirdly, professional soccer clubs collaborated with other esports genres, like Epic Games, the publisher of Fortnite, to create in-game appearances in one of the most popular games worldwide (Chalk, 2021). Several prominent soccer clubs have signed up to have their kits in the game, including Manchester City (England), Juventus (Italy), Sevilla FC (Spain), and VfL Wolfsburg (Germany). Fourth, the representatives of traditional soccer club Brøndby IF won the first two editions of the FIFAe Club World Cup in 2017 and 2018 (FIFA, 2021d). The case of Danish club Brøndby IF illustrated that on-screen successes in soccer esports contributed to position themselves among the international soccer communities (Bysouth, 2018). Parallel to the differences of origins of the world's best individual professional athletes in soccer and soccer esports, the professional soccer teams involved in soccer esports will impact the club's reputation that might shift fan engagement and commercial value in soccer, especially when soccer esports will obtain a more equal part in the business model of soccer.

Associations

Associations in soccer esports include mainly existing soccer associations, since the esports business model differs from traditional sports with the games as exclusive property of publishers. There is a lack of an independent and recognized global esports governing body to manage compliance, rules and regulations although the Global Esports Federation intends to bridge this gap (Global Esports Federation, 2021). In addition to worldwide soccer association Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) and its FIFA eWorld Cup, other sports organizations such as National Basketball Association (NBA2K League), National Football League (Madden Club Championship) and Formula One (F1 Esports Series) began to build major competitions and leagues around their sports. In soccer esports, the structure is mainly about qualifying events attached to regional leagues (e.g., LaLiga, English Premier League) continuing into the Global Series for the FIFA eWorld Cup (Nielsen, 2019). Domestic esports leagues were initiated by national soccer, including the Bundesliga, Ligue 1 and Major League Soccer (Electronic Arts, 2020). Moreover, the UEFA eChampions League kicked off in 2019 as the virtual counterpart and complement to prestigious international soccer club tournament Champions League with obtained coexistence of virtual and real competitions (Needham, 2019). As a consequence of these tendencies, a new generation of soccer fans associate the word FIFA not with the governance of the sport, but with gaming (Connolly, 2019).

Investors

The soccer esports industry has attracted a diverse array of investors, including private holdings and soccer clubs. After Manchester United (England) licensed its own soccer video game series which was highly popular in the early 1990s (Lee, 2015), other soccer clubs and professional soccer athletes became involved as investors in esports teams more recently. Ruud Gullit, the Dutch former World Soccer Player of the Year, launched the first professional and independent FIFA-academy in the world in 2018. Through the Team Gullit Academy, promising talents in FIFA were supported, in addition to FIFA-related coaching, to combine school and gaming and to start building a personal brand on social media (Team Gullit, 2020). Furthermore, it was Christian Fuchs, defender of Leicester City, who became the first soccer player of the English Premier League who started his own nine-player FIFA esports team (NoFuchsGiven) (Needham, 2019). Multiple former and active professional soccer players invested in soccer esports teams, like British soccer legend David Beckham (Guild Esports) and Real Madrid's Garath Bale (Elleven Esports) (BBC, 2020b). Even partnerships were arranged between active players with other professional soccer teams to reach the ever younger and connected audience, like the partnership of French professional soccer club Olympique de Marseille with Grizi Esport, formed and owned by FC Barcelona's striker Antoine Griezmann and his brother (OM, 2020).

Facilities

Due to technical demands influencing the outcome of competition, dedicated esports facilities are being built within existing arenas, including soccer stadiums, with the capabilities to facilitate live fan attendances, live-streaming and broadcasting. Facilities of global soccer esports tournaments changed in scale and, for example, the FIFA eWorld Cup was relocated to the O2 Arena in London (England), demonstrating the growing popularity (Connolly, 2019). Moreover, the integration of soccer facilities in the domain of soccer esports could be illustrated by iconic soccer playfield Wembley Stadium in London (England) facilitating the UEFA eEURO 2020 Finals (Sacco, 2019a).

Media

In the beginning of 2021, Team Gullit and media company RTL launch the first ever TV show for FIFA players 'The Next E-Talent: Team Gullit' for a unique spot in the selection of this esports team (RTL, 2020). This illustrates the impact of influencer marketing and the involvement of professional soccer players in the domain of soccer esports, which contributes to the changing agenda setting and further affect the ecosystem of brands and partnerships. These shifting media powers by new ways of interactions and sharing of content between consumers and organizations enables new dynamics in the reality-reputation gap. As younger audiences are continuing to move away from traditional TV towards viewing experiences on online soccer esports communities, the non-gaming content (e.g., music concerts, live shows) will flourish on streaming platforms like Twitch and YouTube (Rietkerk, 2021). Esports content includes live professional gaming matches and pre- and post-game analysis, counting for 10.7M hours watched for FIFA19 and FIFA20 in 2019. The non-esports content includeing streamers, influencers, and talk shows were watched even 111M (FIFA 20) and 94.9M (FIFA 19) on Twitch, YouTube, and Mixer in 2019 (Newzoo, 2020). This makes FIFA the only sports simulated videogame in the top-25 most-watches games on these three streaming platforms worldwide by live esports hours and non-esports hours. Second, additional media platforms arose by media companies to provide insights on the business of esports, including Esports Observer and Esports Insider. Thirdly, the gaming media landscape will be substantially affected by changing the game distribution to mobile devices (Gu, 2021), which also might affect the soccer industry whether through the actual titles or with new games. Dutch soccer club Ajax already explored the opportunities of mobile gaming, which is substantially growing in China, Southeast Asia and Latin America (Wijman, 2021). In cooperation with cable network provider Ziggo, sportswear company Adidas, and technology company Azerion, the club launched the Ajax Gaming Academy app (Ajax, 2020). As the first FIFA Esports team with its own dedicated app, it hosted the Ziggo eBattle with unique real-life prizes and tutorials to engage with its fans and further increase its global reach (Nicholson, 2020).

Sponsoring Brands

The esports fans around the world include some of the hardest-to-reach consumers for brands through traditional media, since they are mainly characterized by young, digital natives familiar with cutting cords and blocking ads (Nielsen, 2019). By means of sponsorship relationships, global brands intend to connect with their target audiences, especially Gen Z, within this new domain. In the total global esports market, three-quarters of the total revenues in 2020 ($822.4M in 2020) came from sponsorship ($584.1M) and media rights ($163.3M) (Newzoo, 2020), with consumer electronics brands as the most active industry in esports sponsorships followed by IT-software/hardware, apparel and accessories, office furniture, telecom, non-alcoholic beverages and energy drinks, retail, and lottery and gaming (IEG, 2019).

In the soccer esports context, it is relevant to distinguish endemic and non-endemic sponsorships. Endemic sponsors include brands that create products that are used in the production or playing of esports, like software and computer component manufacturers (Nichols, 2017). Moreover, the familiarity of brands as sponsors in soccer is relevant to further distinguish sponsoring brands in soccer esports. Therefore three groups of sponsors were recognized in soccer esports across the classification of non-endemic and endemic, including (a) brands involved in sponsorships with traditional soccer industry (i.e., competition, clubs, players) and expanding these with additional soccer esports sponsorships, (b) sponsors involved in esports and not involved in the traditional soccer industry, and (c) commercial brands with no history as sponsor in traditional soccer nor other domains of esports.

For brands unfamiliar with the broader esports landscape, sports titles often are a comfortable entry point as the majority of assets for partners of the league and team activating in these events mainly mirroring assets sold in the actual sports (Nielsen, 2019). Electronic Arts recognized an exponential growth through the multiplier of sports and esports as brands can activate their sponsorships similarly to how they approach traditional sports marketing (Nielsen, 2019). These sponsoring brands used esports as an extension to their programs and to engage both existing and new audiences. For example, FIFA's sponsors made experiments in the virtual space as Coca-Cola and Adidas have appeared in the FIFA video game's story mode 'The Journey' (Connolly, 2019). Moreover, Adidas created as FIFA sponsor the official digital match ball for the FIFA 20 Global Series which could be unlocked in packs and by watching soccer esports in FIFA 20 tournaments (Adidas, 2019).

Merchandise Manufacturers

Similar to the traditional professional sports, merchandise entered the ecosystem to visualize the identity and enable further fans' associations with favorite teams. These merchandise manufacturers mainly focused on customized gaming hardware of esports teams and team wear, like the official jersey and off-pitch merchandise of Team Gullit by Robey Sportswear (Team Gullit, 2021) or Adidas as official sports apparel provider of G2 Esports, one of the world's leading esports brands, which is suggested to shake up the esports industry (Gardner, 2021). These soccer esports objects recently even entered the

FIFA Museum collection, including teams wear and the controller from Sporting Club de Portugal as used during its representation in the FIFAe Club World Cup (FIFA Museum, 2020, 2021). Merchandise became illustrative for the influence of soccer video games on the wider soccer culture. In 2016, the world's first soccer gaming exhibition 'Pitch to Pixel: The World of Football Gaming' took place in the National Football Museum in Manchester (England) (National Football Museum, 2015). As a partnership of EA Sports, Sports Interactive, the Arts Council England, and the National Football Museum, the relationship between soccer and gaming has been explored with unique objects, artworks, and interactive gaming experiences to illustrate the increased blurred line between simulation and reality.

Education

Universities face the challenge to bridge the gap between business practice and academic inquiry in research and education. Universities became part of the soccer ecosystem by, first, offering esports scholarships and sponsor soccer esports athletes to study (NCSA, 2021). Second, esports college championships arose with competing universities and its students on several game genres, including FIFA games. Third, universities integrated courses on esports in their curricula, mainly related to bachelors of Business Administration with sports and esports (e.g., GBSB), or esports events and media management (e.g., Breda University of Applied Sciences) (BUAS, 2019). The Kajaani University of Applied Sciences (Finland) (2021) already created a Bachelor's Degree in eSports Business to prepare students as electronic sports business experts since 2018 (Cooke, 2018). From another discipline, the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Belgium) and its faculty of Physical Education and Physiotherapy with the department of Movement and Sports Sciences launched in 2020 the 'Expert Class in Esports Management', including a series of continuing education seminars aimed at juniors and seniors with ambitions to grow into esports experts (Vrije Universiteit Brussel, 2020). In 2021, the Chartered Management Institute, a professional institution for management based in the UK, has accredited England's Birmingham City University's Esports Management course, to further validate its links to the industry and create a future generation of esports management professionals with academic expertise in the field (Hyrliková, 2021). Similar to the existing educations on sports marketing and sports management, there are hardly any full courses in bachelor or masters at university focusing on the soccer industry and a dedicated study or course on soccer esports lacks. Nevertheless, the postgraduate course in International Football Business at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (IFBI, 2021), the Master in Football Business of Bucks New University (UCFB, 2021), and the UEFA Certificate in Football Management (UEFA Academy, 2021) were expected to integrate the soccer esports business into their programs in future academic years. Fourth, previous research on soccer esports is limited to some research papers on consumers' perceptions of the domain (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017), specific case studies on the influence of the parent sport brand (Bertschy et al., 2020) or on traditional sport organizations (Huettermann et al., 2020). Literature lacks understandings on brands, partnerships and competitions in soccer esports, even in the more general virtual sports domain (Reitman et al., 2020). Opportunities arise for scholars and universities to distinguish themselves in the sports business industry on their expertise of soccer esports.

Consulting Organizations

Consulting organization became involved in soccer esports as knowledge partners and advisory organizations for sports organizations and its stakeholders, to provide insights in the developments of the playfield and the impact of esports marketing (Singer & Chi, 2019). These organizations include McKinsey (mckinsey.com), a general consulting and research company, Nielsen Sports (nielsensports.com), an advisory partner of sport organizations, KPMG Football Benchmark (footballbenchmark.com) and Deloitte's Football Reviews (Deloitte LLP, 2021; Deloitte Sports Business Group, 2020), dedicated soccer consulting departments, Blauw Research (blauw.com) research partners of esports league sponsors, and Newzoo (newzoo.com).

Networks

Resulting from the demanding technological requirements for competitions and tournaments, service providers facilitating the growth of networked gaming became increasingly relevant in the soccer esports industry. Several cases indicated the alignment of service providers in partnerships with soccer esports brands. For example, Dutch landline and mobile telecommunications company KPN became official partner of the eDivisie, the official FIFA esports league in The Netherlands (Poole, 2020). As KPN was also title sponsor of the first domestic league in Dutch professional soccer and partner of the national soccer association KNVB, an additional partnership was arranged as launching partner of E_Oranje, the national soccer esports team of The Netherlands (Sponsorreport, 2021). The strategic agreements of mobile telecommunications company Proximus indicated similarities with their partnerships in the Belgian esports community. Proximus and the Belgian Football Association developed the eDevils, the national soccer esports team representing Belgium during the UEFA eEURO 2021 in addition to a new international channel dedicated to esports on its television packages. Remarkable is the unique partnership of Proximus to support the Expert Class in Esports Management of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, to share its experiences and contribute to take the esports environment in to a professional level (Proximus, 2020).

Government

Several cities embraced the rising esports community and profiled themselves as the esports city like mid-sized cities Jönköping in Sweden (McCauley et al., 2020) and Katowice of Poland hosting the world's largest esports events (Ashton, 2018). Esports events offer cities a cost-effective alternative to connect with a younger audience, exposure their city brand, and attract young workers in the fields of science and technology as part of their place branding strategies (McCarthy, 2019). Nevertheless, these esports events were not perceived as competitor to traditional sports event (TSE Consulting, 2017). Esports' relationship with cities are changing and the host city process is a new phenomenon in an industry across the popular esports genres (Newzoo, 2020). In soccer esports, the FIFAe World Cup was hosted by cities like Zurich, London, Amsterdam, Barcelona, and Madrid (FIFA, 2021c) and the FIFAe Club World Cup organized in London, Paris, and Milan (FIFA, 2021d).

In addition to place branding opportunities, other governmental bodies included esports in their sports policy to integrate gaming, esports, and traditional sports. For example in Rotterdam (The Netherlands), where children competed against each other at their local grassroots soccer clubs in a FIFA tournament and where physical soccer exercises based on the simulated video game were trained as part of leisure gaming activities (Van der Meer, 2019). These activities enable to inspire the next generation and encourage them to work together, stay fit and interact with each other in a sportive manner (AD, 2020).

SOCCER eSPORTS PARTNERSHIPS

The collaborations between the various brand categories unfold in the domain of soccer esports. These patterns of commercial globalization resulted in the creation of valuable soccer esports partnerships between brands as marketing opportunities. The interaction between traditional soccer and soccer esports is remarkable and differentiates this esports domain from others, since the virtual esports serves as a unique enrichment of the sports industry. In addition to the several cases used as illustration before, the following soccer esports partnership in the case of GMR serves as an excellent case to illustrate the integration of professional soccer and soccer esports.

The Ultimate Game of Physical and Virtual Soccer

In collaboration with Adidas and Jacquard by Google, EA Sports created GMR, a game-changing insole with a smart Jacquard tag to take the players' real-world soccer skills into the gaming world (Adidas, 2021). The specially designed insole slip fitting on any footwear is able to detect the player's on-pitch moves, which unlock digital rewards and build the Ultimate Team in the EA Sports FIFA Mobile app. Using machine learning, the technology is able to measure shot power, distance travelled, running speed, and number of kicks, and provides feedback to improve the player's skills and compete in weekly challenges. In the activations, Portuguese professional soccer star Joao Felix is the attractive influencer challenging fans around the world to put their soccer skills to the test and compete against him in the app and through social media channels (Adidas, 2020).

As this Adidas GMR case shows, soccer esports holds unique fan engagement, commercial value, and business opportunities in the interplay of real professional soccer players and its simulated equivalent in the game. FIFA's director of gaming and eFootball, Christian Volk, announced that the soccer association intents to further bring the physical and virtual games together (Connolly, 2019). The question also rises whether the simulated sports game can operate as a gateway to engage new fans in the traditional sport. In the always-emerging tech environment, new tech elements or new technologies will enable new gaming and viewing experiences, which makes soccer esports a growing intrinsic part of soccer's commercial landscape (Connolly, 2019). Over a very short period of time, competitive soccer gaming has transformed into the global phenomenon that is soccer esports. It became much more than gaming by creating links between sport, gaming, amateurs and professionals, and the virtual and physical world (FIFA Museum, 2020). It is the further connection of places and spaces that will unlock the potential of business opportunities in soccer esports.

BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES IN SOCCER eSPORTS

The current state of play is explored by the rise of soccer esports based on four stages of globalization and the categorization of brands in this complex ecosystem. According to these dynamics in the soccer esports industry, business opportunities arise to improve the value co-creation processes, clustered in opportunities on (a) brand strategy, (b) attractiveness of the game, and (c) sponsorships partnerships. These future pathways support decision-makers in the sports industry, and serve as a reorienting perspective for scholars to bridge the gap between business practice and academic inquiry in research and education.

Brand Strategy

First, the developments on the brand strategies of the involved brands will substantially change the soccer esports ecosystem. The initial decisions for arranging sponsorships and the subsequent decisions on renewal or termination of the brand-event relationships were affected by the overall marketing strategy and brand management. The alignment of the brand strategies of various brands positively influence the impact of sponsor impressions and consumer expressions on brand equity (Jensen et al., 2015). Since sponsorships were recognized as powerful mutually beneficial ingredient in the soccer marketing mix (Yang & Sonmez, 2005), the changing media landscape affect the impact of sponsorships. As brand strategies obtain to leverage engagement with fans through meaningful content, business opportunities arise in the nexus of branded content and user-generated content in soccer esports (Beek et al., 2018). Moreover, market circumstances influence the involvement of organizations in sponsorships to distinguish themselves from their competitors, leading to new business opportunities for brands to become involved in the soccer esports industry. The further rise of soccer esports, the growth of women's soccer, and the established popularity of men's soccer have the potential for spillover effects accelerating aspiration by the next generation of soccer fans and, consequently, have a substantial impact on the commercial value of future sponsorships within the changing playfield of European soccer.

Attractiveness of the Game

The attractiveness of the game concerns, first, the future opportunities to engage consumers in the global soccer esports community and, second, to further stimulate their sense of belonging as individual grassroots gamers and provide spectacle for dedicated fans during the professional tournaments of their favorite players and teams. This attractiveness refers to the brand identity and value proposition of the brands involved in this domain. The gaming community is expected to further expand experiences like fashion shows, music concerts, and movie showings with brands and artists continuing experimenting these opportunities for engagement (Wijman, 2021). In the meanwhile, traditional sports spend accelerating their esports efforts and these expansions of activities in the esports space will further innovate traditional sports organizations (Rietkerk, 2021).

The reputation of soccer esports to attract new esports talents, commercial sponsors and media broadcasts is an important intangible as part of the complex soccer business and its direct influence on business activities. Since the major soccer brands will be subject to further examinations on its immediate sporting sphere of activity in social and environmental contexts (Dietl et al., 2009), the attractiveness of soccer esports is also about the developments on the social-cultural and ethical essentials of the involved brands that will develop the community fundamentals and its sponsorships. The bright and dark sides of traditional soccer are often also found in soccer esports. As seen in European soccer clubs, the attractiveness of the game is both enhanced and limited by the commercialization processes. The competitive balance at all levels is a crucial aspect to obtain a sustainable game, both sportive and financial. Consequently, the future of soccer esports is around growth of fan engagement and deepening the sense of belonging through authentic and valuable interactions in the global soccer communities by connecting physical places with virtual spaces.

Sponsorship Partnerships

Sponsorship partnerships reflect the business opportunities of interplay between brands in soccer esports. The level of involvement in sponsorships includes the characteristics of the cooperation and the degree of engagement between the soccer esports communities and its sponsors. Building on Seitanidi and Ryan's (2007) typology of corporate community involvement, sponsorships developed from ad hoc projects into integrated structures that were influenced by agency effects in a philanthropic approach, a performance driven transactional approach, or an integrative legacy approach. This level of involvement substantially affects the characteristics of the agreements, the degree of power asymmetry in the relationship, and the level of exclusivity, both industrial and geographical, of the sponsorship rights.

Because the soccer esports industry offers many different sizes and types of sponsorships for brands to consider, navigating the business opportunities in this domain can be a challenge. It is therefore relevant for decision-makers to comprehend this complex ecosystem, which can impact the timings of brands and industries becoming involved in this community. In traditional soccer, sponsorship eras were identified in which certain industries dominated the sponsorship relationships for a period of time during the past decades. This periodization of sponsorship was, first, related to industries that accounted for a substantial share of the total sponsorships. Changing representation of sponsoring industries in soccer esports is related to endemic and non-endemic brands. Although the ratio of involved endemic and non-endemic brands in soccer esports sponsorships is nearly equal, it is expected that there will be an increase in non-endemic brands becoming involved in the soccer esports domain. These brands will have additional barriers in decision-making and a potential lack of knowledge about the industry compared to endemic brands of which related products or services are already part of the activities in soccer esports. Moreover, within the group of non-endemic sponsors there will be a further shift of represented industries since (a) the soccer esports community continues to grow globally, (b) the professionalization and commercialization of the market is increasingly attractive to society and economy, and (c) decision-makers in commercial organizations will become more familiar to the potential of the esports industry.

Second, the further rise of geographic foreign sponsorships in traditional soccer and its globalizing soccer communities enabled a periodization of national and global sponsorship eras as well. Sponsorships of European soccer clubs had its origins by national sponsors and due to commercial globalization these patterns shifted towards North America, Asia, and Middle East. In addition, these globalization sponsorship eras were affected by the degree of intertwining and interdependence of ownerships, sponsorships and soft powers by nations pursuing political and industrial strategies in sport. The substantial representations of foreign sponsors suggest a parallel shift in sponsorship representations in European soccer esports on both representation of industries and geographical origins. Decision-makers face the challenge of balancing maintaining fidelity to local roots with their considerations of globalization brand strategies.

Since the sponsorship impact on brand equity is questioned in other sponsorship domains in literature (Cornwell & Kwon, 2020), the rise of soccer esports will also request further insights into patterns of sponsorship awareness, brand image, and purchase behaviors with suggested differences of these commercial dynamics among fan segments in global sports contexts. As commercial relationships are an essential source of income in the soccer esports, it is important to further optimize the value and comprehend the dynamics of sponsorship impact on consumer-based brand equity of the involved brands in the soccer esports industry.

CONCLUSION

The chapter provided remarkable patterns on the rise of soccer esports based on four stages of globalization (digital, social, geographical, and commercial) to understand the changes and the current state of play of corporate community involvement in the radically evolving commercial playing field of soccer in Europe. The various cases demonstrated growing tendencies of the engagement in soccer esports competitions, which is on the agenda at all levels of the sports industry and its partners. The brands involved in this complex ecosystem were categorized to define the interactions of brands exploring the opportunities to engage with global soccer esports communities. These insights contribute to the defined gaps in literature on corporate community involvement between academic inquiry and business practice. The indicated dynamics of soccer esports and the related business opportunities might be used (a) as valuable insights to assist decision-makers in the sports industry, (b) as reorienting perspectives for educators and universities teaching sports management, and (c) as starting points for scholars for further investigations in the complex ecosystem of sponsorships. Soccer esports serves as a valuable case in virtual sports to support decision-makers in the global sports industry in their marketing strategy and brand management. The world's most popular sport is still growing with new and different ways to enjoy the game in which authentic branding and co-created value in partnerships suggest a bright commercial future for soccer esports. As the developers of EA Sports best described this in the opening tune of FIFA: *"It's in the game"*.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Community: Groups of individuals who are collectively engaged in a domain and share activities and experiences in this group. In this chapter this is mainly related to the domains of soccer and soccer esports.

FIFA: The soccer simulation game by Electronic Arts Sports (FIFA in soccer esports) and the abbreviation of the worldwide soccer association Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA in soccer).

Globalization: The process of the integrations of international markets with the benefits and disbenefits of changing economic relationships with four stages (digital, social, geographical, and commercial globalization) in the context of soccer and soccer esports.

Soccer: Association football (soccer) is the physical team sport played with a spherical ball between two teams of 11 players and the world's most popular sport.

Soccer Esports: This virtual sport developed from soccer simulation video games to professional and semi-professional competitive gaming in an organized format (tournament or league) with a specific goal such as winning championship titles or prize money.

Sponsorship Partnerships: The involvement of corporates in a community, developed from ad hoc projects into integrated structures. In this chapter, it is referring to the alliances and interplay between brands in the soccer and soccer esports ecosystem.

Value Co-Creation: In perspective of the service-dominant logic, dominant in behavioral economics, it is a form of collaborative innovation and development. This process is about the application of humans' competences to benefit others and reciprocally benefit from others' applied competences through service-for-service exchange.