Esports fandom in the age of transmedia: the reception of the overwatch league

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Abstract

In our article, we analyse the ways audiences engage with *Overwatch* esports and construct their fan relationships. We situate our research into several intersecting theoretical frames. To understand how *Overwatch* esports audiences engage with the esports through different media and media related practices we apply the framework of transmedia studies in our examination. To better understand how meanings related to esports are constructed through these practices we also draw from research on fandom and fan engagement. We reflect these findings on earlier research on sports fandom and esports viewership, enabling us to identify how *Overwatch* esports communities relate to traditional sports communities. Our study reveals how esports is intertwined with the everyday lived reality of the esports audiences, and how meanings are constructed through (mediated) audience practices. Our article contributes to the study of esports transmedia and to the understanding of the similarities and differences of esports and sports audiences.

Keywords: esport audiences; fan studies; transmedia; overwatch; thematic analysis.

1. Introduction

Esports is a phenomenon that has increased greatly in visibility, financial investment, and the sheer number of games played, amount of players, and size of audiences in recent years (Scholz, 2019). It has become a constant presence in our socio-cultural landscape, growing from niche-phenomenon to multimillion industry and quasi-mainstream activity. Deriving its name from the combination of the words electronic and sports, esports bears similarities to traditional sports and is often likened to it, both because of the structural similarities as well as the ongoing sportification in the field esports (Jenny et al., 2017; Turtiainen et al., 2020). As a consequence, some esports tournaments and leagues are knowingly designed to both resemble

traditional sport leagues and tournaments, and they also seek to foster fan and audience engagement in a similar manner to traditional sports.

One of the important aspects both esports and traditional sports share is the significance of audiences. The importance of spectators for esports has been recognized from early on (Taylor 2012), but the questions of esports fandom and its similarities to sports fandom remain largely unaddressed. In this article, we tackle this question in regard to one particular esport, *Overwatch* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2016).

Overwatch esports is an intriguing case for examining esports fandom and its relationship to fandom in established sports. When looking at fandom around teams of established sports, tradition is often an important factor in both how practices are transferred from one fan generation to another, and even in how fandom can run in the family (Wann & James, 2018). Conversely, *Overwatch* is a new esport where there has been little time for strong traditions to be born. While its main franchise, the Overwatch League (OWL) follows traditional sports in fostering fan engagement, namely through locality, as all the teams represent cities rather than established esports organizations, not all followers come from the cities being represented.

Given the short history and limited locality of the OWL, we ask in our article, how do audiences choose their favorite players and teams and what factors play part in forming the affective attachments typical for fans? We attempt to answer these questions by situating them in a larger framework of the OWL reception and by utilizing two years of multi-sited ethnography as well as extensive survey data. We study how the audiences and fans of *Overwatch* esports construct their engagement with the esports through different practices and articulations using two complementary studies, a survey study and a case study.

The survey study focuses on the reasons the audiences of the OWL give for their choice of favourite teams and players and how having favourite teams and players affects their engagement with the OWL. Through this data we furthermore examine, if engagement with traditional sports has any bearing on one's engagement with the OWL. This study utilises survey data and a mixed-method approach where data was collected and analyzed concurrently using qualitative and quantitative methods

The case study focuses on one OWL match and the reactions of the viewers to one particular player, "Jerry", who was playing his debut game in the league. Through the reactions and comments displayed in subreddit r/competitiveoverwatch we examine the ways the viewers and fans narrate and conceptualize their relationship to "Jerry" and what themes emerge as important for forming a fan relationship. We situate our examination in a theoretical frame constructed of earlier research on esports viewership, sports fandom, and fan studies but also ask if esports in general and *Overwatch* in particular differs from these. We furthermore utilize the concept of transmedia to understand the contemporary esports landscape.

2. Research aim

Whilst by now there has been a number of studies about spectatorship of esports (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017; Rambusch et al., 2017; Qian et al., 2020), esports fandom remains a rather

uncharted territory. It is this gap this research seeks to address. Our research aims to chart some of the terrain of esports fandom and explore how fandom is present in esports and how this shows in the motivations for and forms of engaging with esports. As such, this research is not meant to build a new theory but rather explore a fairly new phenomenon.

For the purpose of this research, we distinguish between spectators and fans, following the way these two are often understood as different ways of engaging with sport in the study of sports audiences. Wann and James (2018) explain this distinction by noting that a sports spectator is someone who spectates the game and the sporting event, be it mediated or on situ, while a fan is someone who is invested in a particular team or players. These investments tend to be long-lasting. In this study, we identify the OWL spectators who have a favorite team or a favorite player as fans. While doing so, we follow this distinction of fans and spectators, and we understand it not as a dichotomy between the two positions, but rather as two, sometimes overlapping, positions which audience members occupy in different times and places (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998, pp. 138-141).

3. Earlier research

Previous research on esports audiences has largely focused on esports spectators and on motivations to follow esports, rather than addressing esports fandom as such. For instance, Hamari and Sjöblom (2017) have examined the motivations to watch esports, noting that escaping everyday life, acquiring knowledge from esports, novelty, and the enjoyment of aggression emerged as important factors. Qian et al. (2020) found in their research that spectating esports in order to improve one's skill was an important motivation, as was "vicarious sensation", enabling a strong sense of immersion and involvement. They also discovered, contrary to study conducted by Hamari and Sjöblom, that socialization opportunities were a big motivation for the spectators. Xiao's (2019) study suggests that a sense of drama, escapism, and aesthetics play a central part for spectating motivations. A study conducted by Rambusch et al. (2017) alike brings forth improving one's own gameplay as an important motivation for spectating esports, but also highlights the finding that viewers follow certain casters, players, and teams.

Perhaps the most known study on esports fandom is the work of T. L. Taylor (2012). She notes that while not much has been written about the spectatorship of games, studies about game (and esports) fandom are practically absent. She notes that what distinguishes esports from traditional sports, is that fans within esports are usually also active in playing the games themselves. She also highlights the importance of fandom in the play experience and the importance of fans in constructing and maintaining the esports culture. Fans often participate in organizing esports events and even when they are not professional in the field of esports, they actively partake in negotiating meanings through different activities and across multiple media.

4. Theoretical framework

The central concept for our approach is the concept of fandom. As stated earlier, we do not understand fandom as a strict category, but understand it as regular affective interaction with the object of fandom (Sandvoss, 2005), that here is *Overwatch* esports. In order to understand the phenomenon of esports fandom, it is important to consider the everyday practices of fans. Fan studies has from early on emphasized the active and participatory dimensions of fandom (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Fiske, 1992; Jenkins, 1992). In his study of football fandom, Cornel Sandvoss (2003, p. 17) found that consumption practices related to football, especially media consumption, were more regular and structured for fans than more casual audiences. We understand fan engagement as a combination of both affective investments and these everyday practices within a social context.

Everyday practices of fans and audiences have become all the more important with the rise of transmedia (Kinder, 1991), which has become a dominant form of media production in the 21st century (Harvey, 2015, p. 1). Henry Jenkins, who introduced the term 'transmedia storytelling' (2006) has described it as "systematic unfolding of elements of a story world across multiple media platforms, with each platform making a unique and original contribution to the experience as a whole" (Jenkins, 2013). Transmedia approach has since been applied to areas ranging from journalism (Alzamora & Tárcia, 2012; Gambarato & Alzamora, 2018) to education (Pence, 2011; Scolari et al., 2019) to, indeed, sports (Tussey, 2019; Vann et al., 2020). The Overwatch League, and several other esports, are situated in a larger transmedia universe consisting of the game itself and its fictional world, all of its transmedia expansions, as well as the non-fictional elements, which include the esports and all the expansions deriving from it (Koskimaa, Välisalo, Ruotsalainen, & Karhulahti, 2021, p. 152). Engaging audiences in multiple ways is an essential feature of transmedia productions, and these transmedial user practices (Koistinen, Ruotsalainen, & Välisalo, 2016), practices that are somehow transmedial in nature, are increasingly shared with others through digital platforms, including social media, and are an integral part in both interpreting and constructing the transmedia text (Tosca & Klastrup, 2020, pp. 18-41).

5. Data and methods

The research consists of two studies on *Overwatch* esports fandom. Choosing these particular methods is a result of two-year multi-sited ethnography (Hine, 2000) during which we have constantly engaged with the *Overwatch* esports, through watching matches online and on site, interacting with audiences, following streams from professional players, and reading news articles and discussion forums about *Overwatch* and *Overwatch* esports.

The first study utilizes survey data. The data was collected using an online survey aimed at *Overwatch* players and *Overwatch* esports audiences. In our survey, we had in total ten questions related to the OWL. Eight of these were multiple choice questions and two were open-ended questions. In addition, in three of the multiple choice questions the option "other" allowed adding a written response. For designing the survey and formulating the options for multiple

choice questions, we utilized earlier research on esports (Hamari, & Sjöblom, 2017), and audience studies (Välisalo, 2017).

The mixture of closed-ended and open-ended questions was chosen to give the respondents an opportunity to articulate their own meanings in addition to those conveyed by the researchers through survey design (Barker et al., 2021, p. 16). This proved to be a particularly fruitful approach in questions regarding the "reasons for favorite team" and "reasons for favorite player". In formulating these questions, we utilized previously collected data from discussion forums r/competitiveoverwatch and the official *Overwatch* forums, which indicated what kinds of reasons the fans and viewers generally brought up. In addition to giving the respondents preformulated options from which to choose, we also had an option "other" which allowed a written answer. Having this option was important: after analyzing the data from the pilot version of our survey (which consists of 136 respondents, combined here with the rest of the respondents), we ended up adding two more options to the "reason for favorite player": sexual orientation and gender, as these were brought up multiple times by respondents in the written responses (Välisalo & Ruotsalainen, 2019). However, after being added, these options were chosen rarely, which in turn can be an indicator of reaching different kinds of respondents in different stages of the survey.

The survey responses were collected between August 2018 and November 2019. The link to the survey was shared on different social media services, such as Twitter (using relevant hashtags #Overwatch, #OverwatchLeague, #eSports), Facebook (related groups such as "Women in Overwatch", "Overwatch people" and "Overwatch Finland"), and Reddit subreddit (i.e. forum on Reddit website dedicated to a particular topic) r/overwatch. The survey resulted in 428 responses (excluding 12 empty survey forms). Of all respondents 92.8% (397) had watched the Overwatch League games. Those are the responses we focus on here. The surveys' collection strategy targeted game communities online and thus the final sample can be considered representative of the fans and active online players.

Our survey data consists mainly of quantitative data, with a few open-ended questions alongside the multiple-choice questions. We have opted to read the quantitative data through a qualitative lens: we are not that interested in *how much*, albeit we do mention numbers and percentages, but are more interested in the *how* and consequently in the *why*. Nevertheless, the use of descriptive statistics gives us directions and a roadmap, particularly when analyzed in conjunction with the other, open-ended questions in the survey. This approach is also compatible with our method of recruiting respondents, which was opportunistic - we can thus hardly claim our data is representative of OWL fans and viewers as a whole (our data is also for the most part limited to the reception of the OWL in the Western world, given the language of our survey as well as the places it was shared). We have, however, when possible, taken steps to target often underrepresented groups, such as women, in recruiting respondents. Nevertheless, our data at best reveals pockets of subcommunities and their ways of engaging with *Overwatch* esports, whilst suggesting more general tendencies.

Our case study focuses on fan responses to a particular player. We chose discussions centered around a particular event, a debut game of a player by the name of Min Tae-hee, better known as Jerry. In these discussions, one can trace "becoming a fan" narratives (Harrington & Bielby, 2010). We have been familiar with the kinds of events which most visibly induce "becoming a

fan" narratives - and of course, the end of the fan(dom) narratives. This particular case was chosen as it allows us to examine the first steps of affective attachment to a new player, essentially, the formation of a fan relationship. The data corpus for this case consists of discussion threads from the subreddit r/competitiveoverwatch, which is the biggest subreddit devoted to discussion about *Overwatch* esports. In total we collected 12 discussion threads. To collect these, we used the search word "Jerry" with the reddit search engine, specifying we are searching within the subreddit r/competitiveoverwatch. As supplementary data we used Twitter feeds and an OWL match recording (Overwatch League, 2020) of Jerry's debut game. To analyze this data, we have used reflective thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2019). By tracing the ways fans and viewers conceptualize their fan relationships we have aimed to understand the way they forge and maintain affective engagements with the teams and players and the ways this is done and articulated.

6. Overwatch esport fandom

The data analyzed here is based on 397 survey respondents who reported having watched the OWL games. Of these respondents 82 identified as women, 306 as men, and 9 chose the option "identify differently". The respondents were from 24 different countries, most being from France (210), Finland (66), the United States (32), and Switzerland (26). Most of the respondents (57.0%) were from 20 to 30 years of age. We focus our analysis on those respondents whom we identify as fans, that is, the respondents who mention a favorite team or a favorite player.

The OWL is a relatively new esports league, launched in 2018, and it largely borrows its model from traditional North American sports leagues. The OWL is thus a franchised league with a purchase of team slots and the teams represent cities, rather than established esports organizations. This has a number of consequences: firstly, one cannot find the easily recognizable names of known esports organizations just by looking at the names of the teams – even though some of the teams are owned by them, such as Dallas Fuel by EnvyUS and London Spitfire by Cloud9. Secondly, the city-based teams can offer different points of attachment, such as nationality and locality, and as such, different reasons for being a fan in comparison to many other esports which do not have a city-based league.

The majority of the respondents (327; 82.4%) chose a favorite team. Which teams are chosen by most respondents naturally tells more about who answered our survey than the actual popularity of any particular team. For example, the team Paris Eternal was mentioned most often as a large proportion of our data came from French respondents. When observing the reasons for choosing a favorite team (Figure 1) the most common reasons chosen by the respondents were the nationality of a player or the players in the team and the city that the team represented. Thus, the city-based league structure clearly has an effect on how spectators construct their engagement with the OWL. Nevertheless, from the multitude of options we provided, ranging from those already mentioned to reasons such as liking a particular player, enjoying the team's performance in-game, or enjoying the narratives, media content, or visual

aesthetics related to the team, all were chosen by at least dozens of respondents. This shows how attachments to a favorite team in the OWL were formed through multiple different routes.
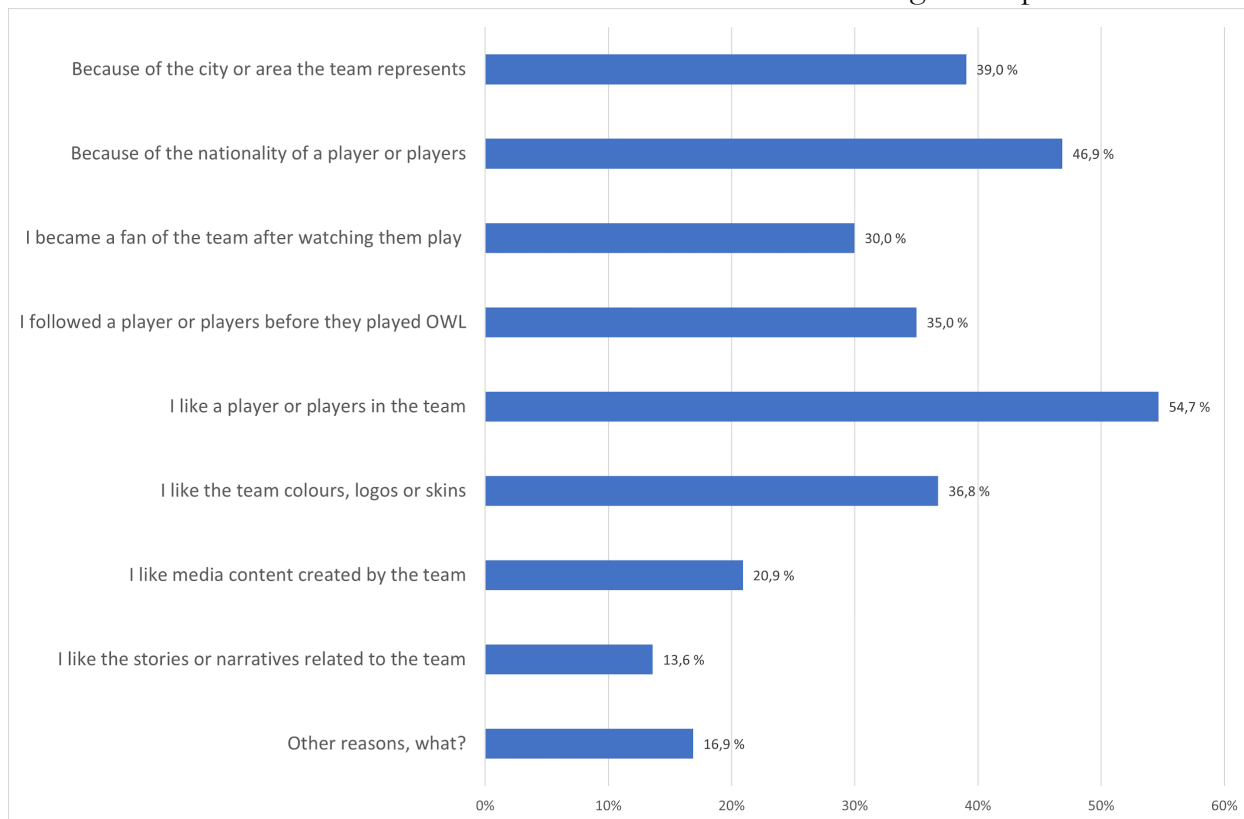

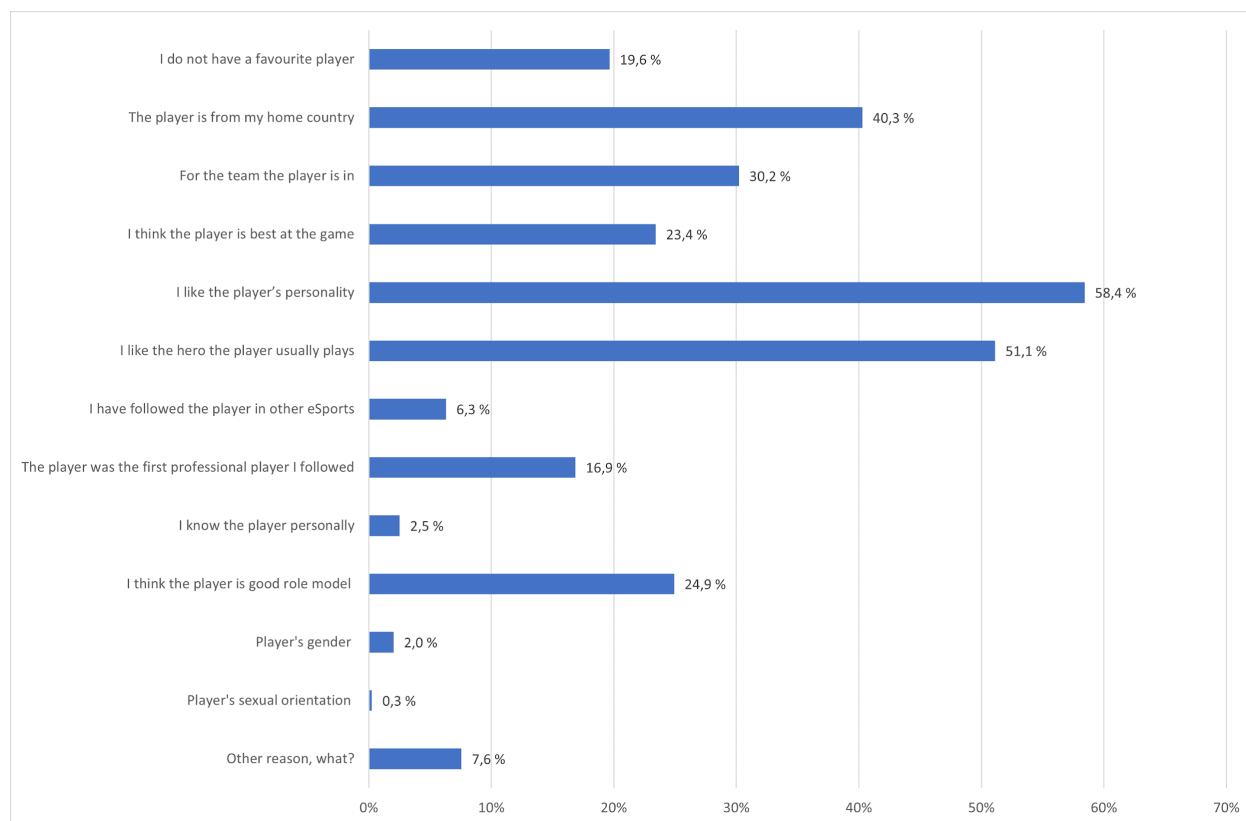Figure 1. Reasons for choosing a favorite team

Figure 2. Reasons for choosing a favorite player

In the survey, we also asked whether the respondents had a favorite player. The majority of respondents (305; 76.8%) mentioned a favorite player, and they named 80 different players altogether. They could also choose all the relevant options from a list of options. The three most common reasons were the personality of the player, the hero the player plays, and the player being from the respondent's home country. More importantly, all of the options provided were chosen by at least some of the respondents, which illustrates how there indeed are multiple possible points of attachment to a particular player, as well as a particular team.

When looking at the "other" option (open-ended responses), the respondents brought up matters like skill - saying that while their favorite player might not be the best player, they could have a particular thing they are very good at, which makes them a favorite player for them. Some respondents mentioned how well the player plays a particular role or hero, some even mentioning how well a player uses that hero's signature mechanic. Some elaborated on why they liked the player's personality, or celebrity persona (Dyer, 1979), even pointing out they are funny in their stream or mentioning: "His wholesome relationship with his wife and doggo!" Some brought up following the player for a long time (similar to the option "the player was the first professional player I followed"). There were also mentions of the player being the best player of their nationality. Thus, these responses did not deviate drastically from the available multiple-choice options - unlike in the pilot stage of the survey where gender, sexual

orientation, and importance of representation were brought up, as described in the methodology section previously.

We wanted to find out if there were, firstly, differences between those having a favorite team, a favorite player or both, and those who did not have favorites, and, secondly, differences in engagement between smaller segments of respondents. In order to do this, we segmented the respondents (Figure 3) based on whether they mention (1) a favorite team and a favorite player (274 respondents; 69.0%), (2) a favorite team, but not a favorite player (53; 13.4%), (3) a favorite player, but not a favorite team (33; 8.3%), and (4) neither a favorite team nor a player (37; 9.3%). Since the majority of our respondents belong to the first segment, these results cannot be generalized, but should rather be understood as representative of this particular group of respondents. We use these segments throughout our analysis and report here the key findings.
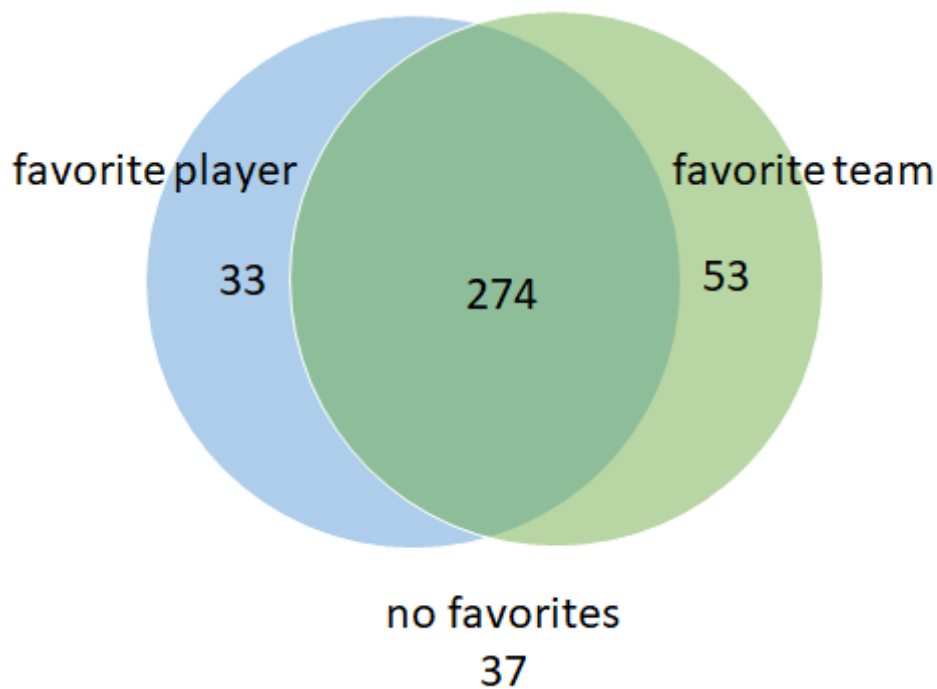

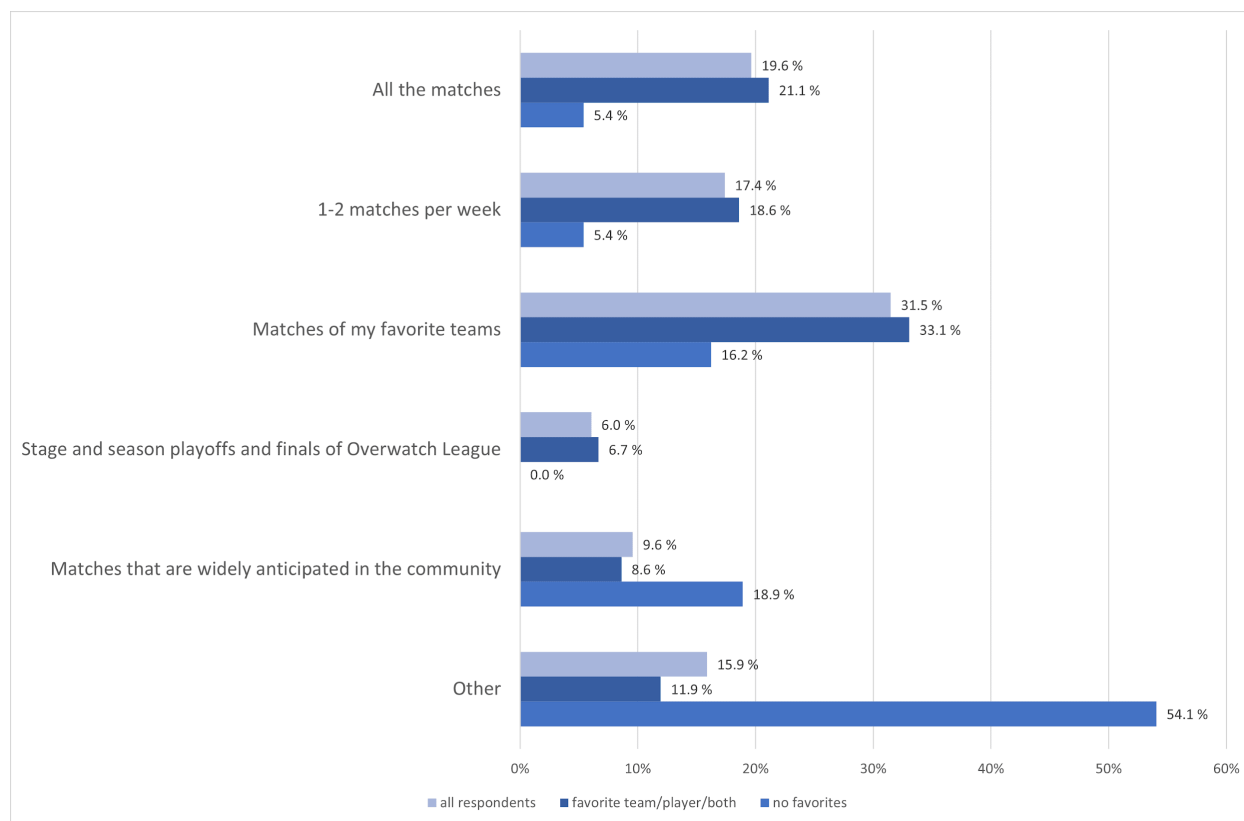Figure 3. Respondents segmented based on their choices of favorite player and favorite team

Figure 4. Viewing patterns in watching Overwatch League matches

While not all our respondents chose a favorite team or a favorite player, having a favorite team was connected to how the respondents watched the OWL: when asked about their viewing patterns, the most commonly chosen option was "matches of my favorite teams" (119; 30.0% of the respondents; Figure 4). Moreover, the respondents who chose either a favorite team or a favorite player or both also showed more intensive engagement with the Overwatch League: they more often responded watching "all the matches" (33.1%) or "1-2 matches per week" (18.6%) than the respondents not mentioning any favorites (16.2% and 5.4%). Meanwhile, those without a favorite team or player were most likely to watch "matches anticipated by the community" (18.9%) or choose "other" (54.1%), where they explained only watching occasional matches, or only watching socially. Those with a favorite team, player, or both, who chose the option "other", often mentioned watching several matches per week, though not all the matches. Even though these results cannot be generalized to all OWL audiences, they do indicate a possible difference in viewing practices between fans and spectators of the OWL.
Several European respondents brought up scheduling challenges: matches are often streamed when it is very late at night for European audiences; the first and second season of the OWL (during which our survey took place), were mainly played in the United States. It is furthermore often discussed in the subreddit r/competitiveoverwatch how hard it is to watch recordings of the matches without spoilers, as, for instance, the length of the broadcast can reveal the outcome of the match. Also, live viewers are eligible for "drops", in-game currency

that can be spent in *Overwatch* to buy OWL related skins for the heroes and watching recordings does not have this same advantage. Thus, the possibilities of participation are different for viewers based on where they live.
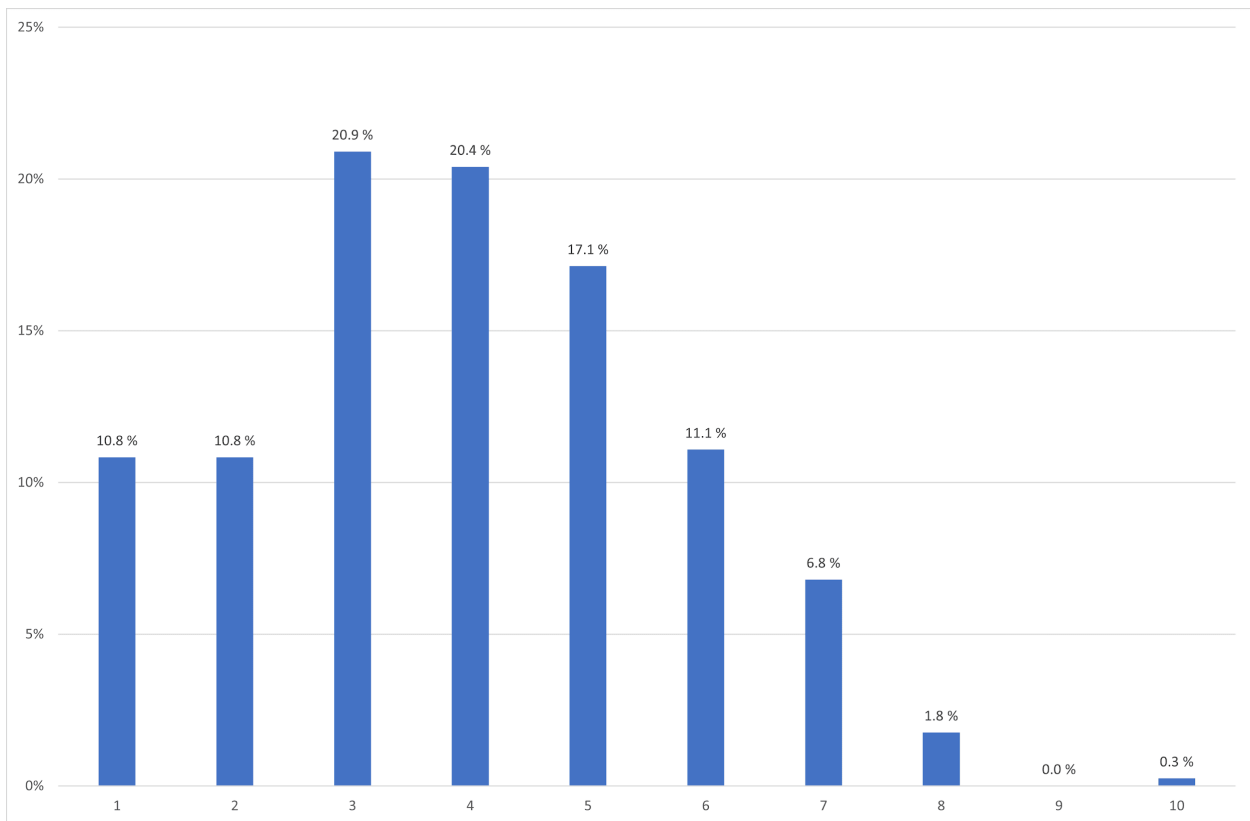

Figure 5. Number of transmedial user practices

Transmedial user practices related to the OWL include accessing the OWL through different media platforms and different activities. In our survey, all respondents mentioned at least one transmedial user activity and the majority (78.3%) mentioned at least three different OWL related activities they participated in (Figure 5). The most common practices related to the OWL were "watching matches online" (97.7%), "following OWL related content in media" (76.3%), and watching streams by professional players (75.8%), and fairly common was also buying OWL cosmetics in the game or in Twitch (44.6%) (Koskimaa et al., 2021).

Table 1.

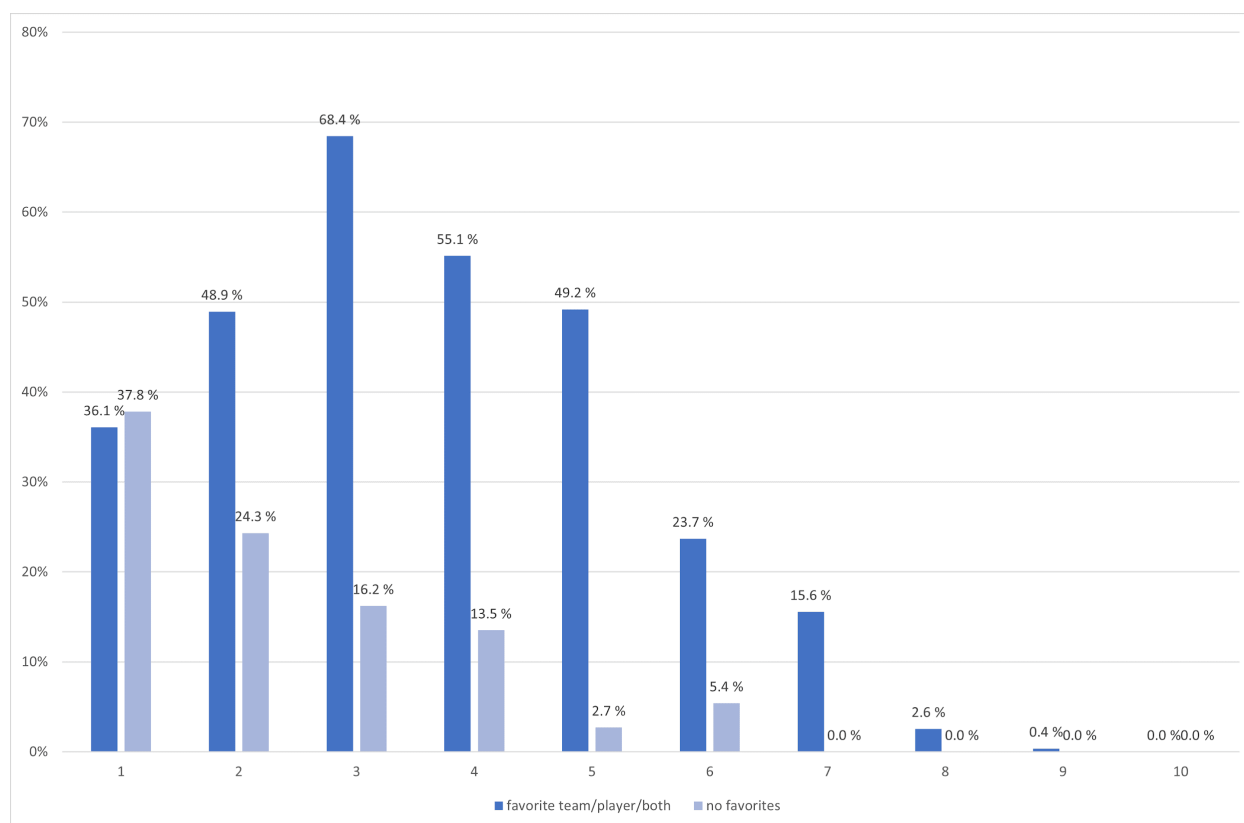| Respondents	f	Median of transmedial user practices reported
No favorite team, no favorite player	37	2
No favorite team, favorite player	33	3
Favorite team, no favorite player	53	3
Favorite team, favorite player	274	4

Figure 6. Number of transmedial user practices and having a favorite team, player or both.

When comparing the diversity of different practices with whether the respondents mentioned a favorite player or a favorite team, clear connections emerge (Table 1). Those reporting neither a favorite team nor a favorite player typically reported two (2) OWL related practices. Those

mentioning either a favorite player or a favorite team reported on average three (3) user practices they engaged in, and those who mentioned a favorite team and a favorite player, reported on average four (4) transmedial user practices. Thus, those who mentioned a favorite team, a favorite player, or both, reported engaging with the OWL over more different kinds of practices than those without any favorites (Figure 6.) The combination of being able to choose a favorite team and/or player along with engaging with the OWL in diverse ways indicate an intense relationship with the OWL beyond that of mere spectatorship.

Furthermore, the results indicate that certain practices, such as buying OWL merchandise or participating in discussions on forums and in social media, are far more common for those who have a favorite player or team (Figure 7). Creating fan art and engaging with other people's fan creations were mentioned only by those with a favorite player or team. Those without a favorite player or a favorite team most often chose "watching matches online" (91.7%) and in addition to that either "watching streams by professional players" (44.4%) or "following OWL related content in media" (38.9%).
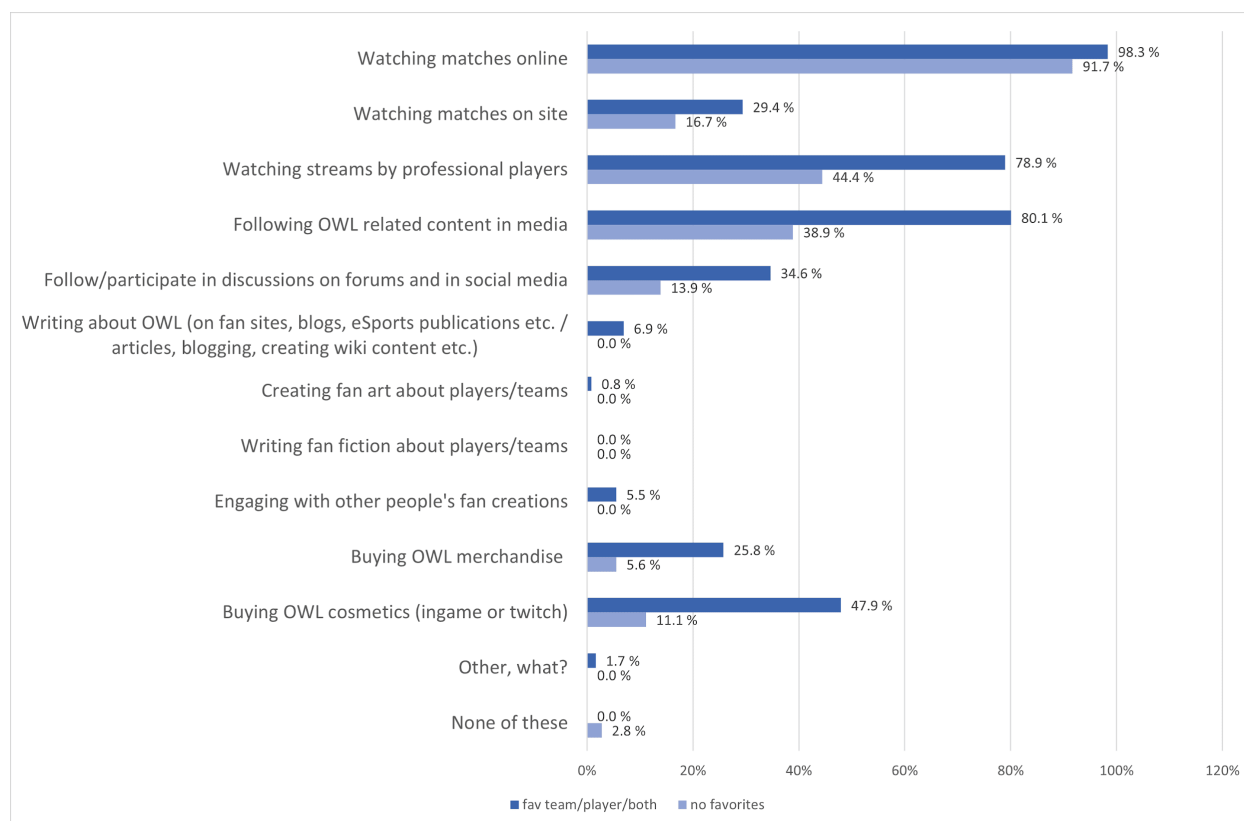

Figure 7. Transmedial user practices related to OWL.

We also asked if the respondents watched other *Overwatch* esports. The most popular were Overwatch World Cup (79.1%) and almost half of the respondents also watched Overwatch Contenders, which is a series for those aspiring to be in the OWL. Overwatch Open Division, which is open for all players, was chosen by 14.6% of respondents. In addition to this, the

respondents mentioned regional tournaments and series as well as LAN events in their written answers. One in six respondents (16.9%) did not watch any other *Overwatch* esports. Unsurprisingly, those with a favorite team or player were also more likely to watch other *Overwatch* esports besides OWL. Interestingly, those with a favorite player, but no favorite team more often reported not watching any other *Overwatch* esports (Figure 8).
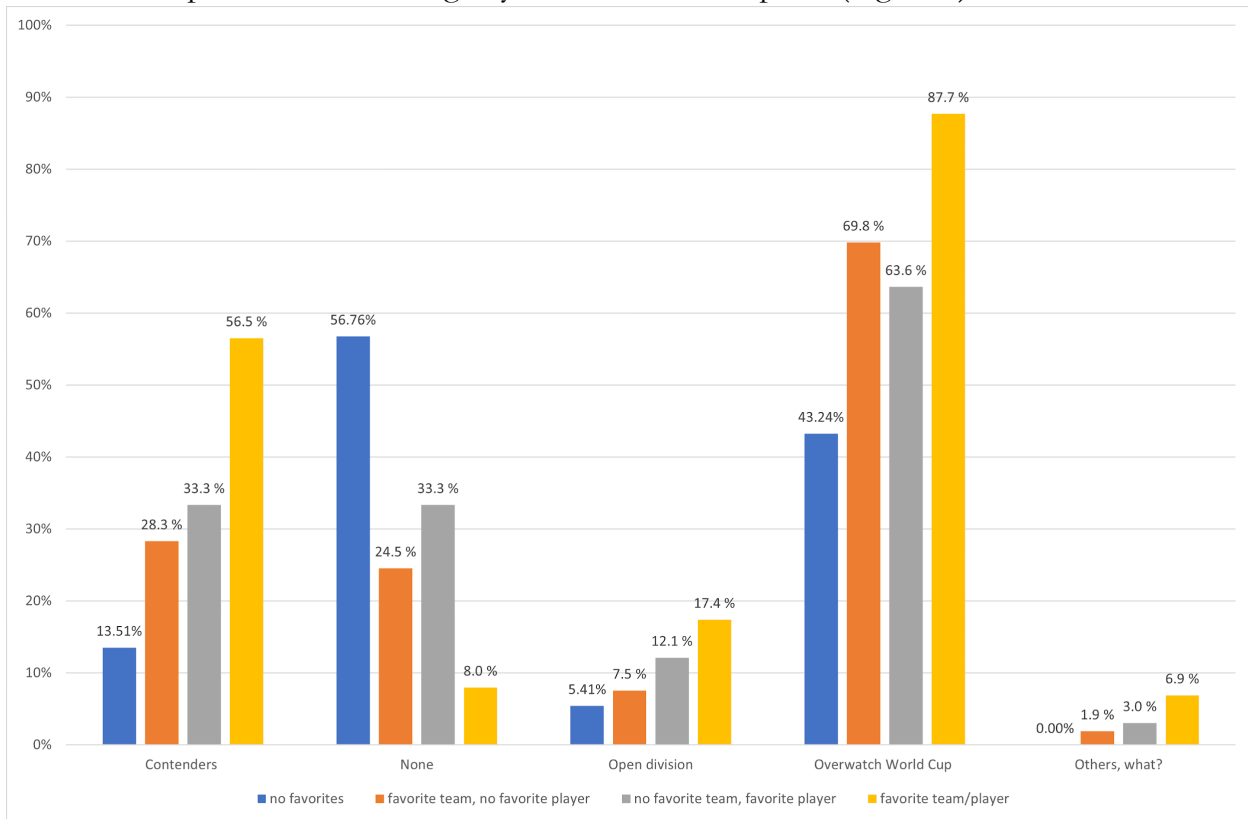

Figure 8. Watching other Overwatch esports

Little more than half of the respondents (215; 54.2%) also followed other esports. Those with a favorite team, a favorite player, or both more often reported following other esports (59.5%) than those without any favorites (25.0%). Similarly, to watching other *Overwatch* esports, those with a favorite player, but no favorite team more often reported not watching any other esports (Figure 10). Together these results indicate that a strong engagement with an esports player structures the experience and practices of following esports differently from a similar engagement with an esports team.
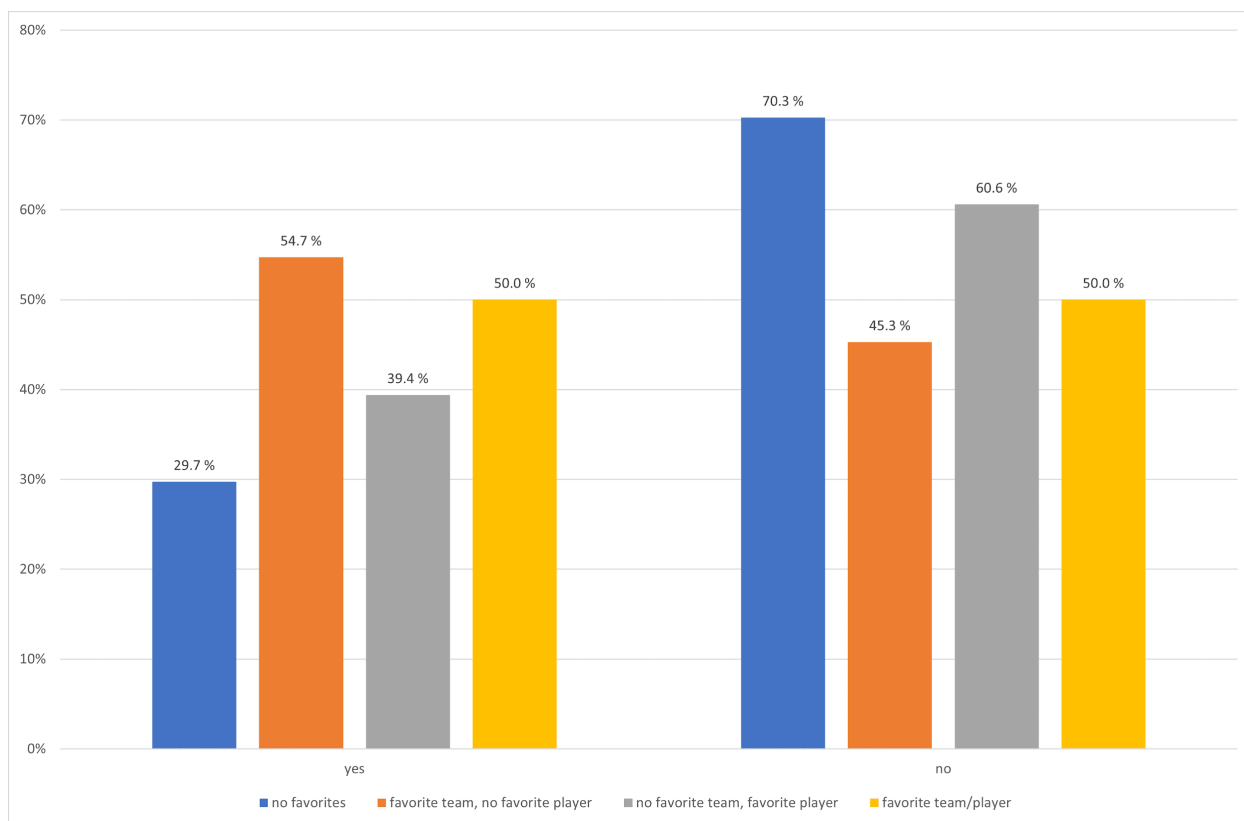
Figure 9. Following other esports in relation to having a favorite team or player
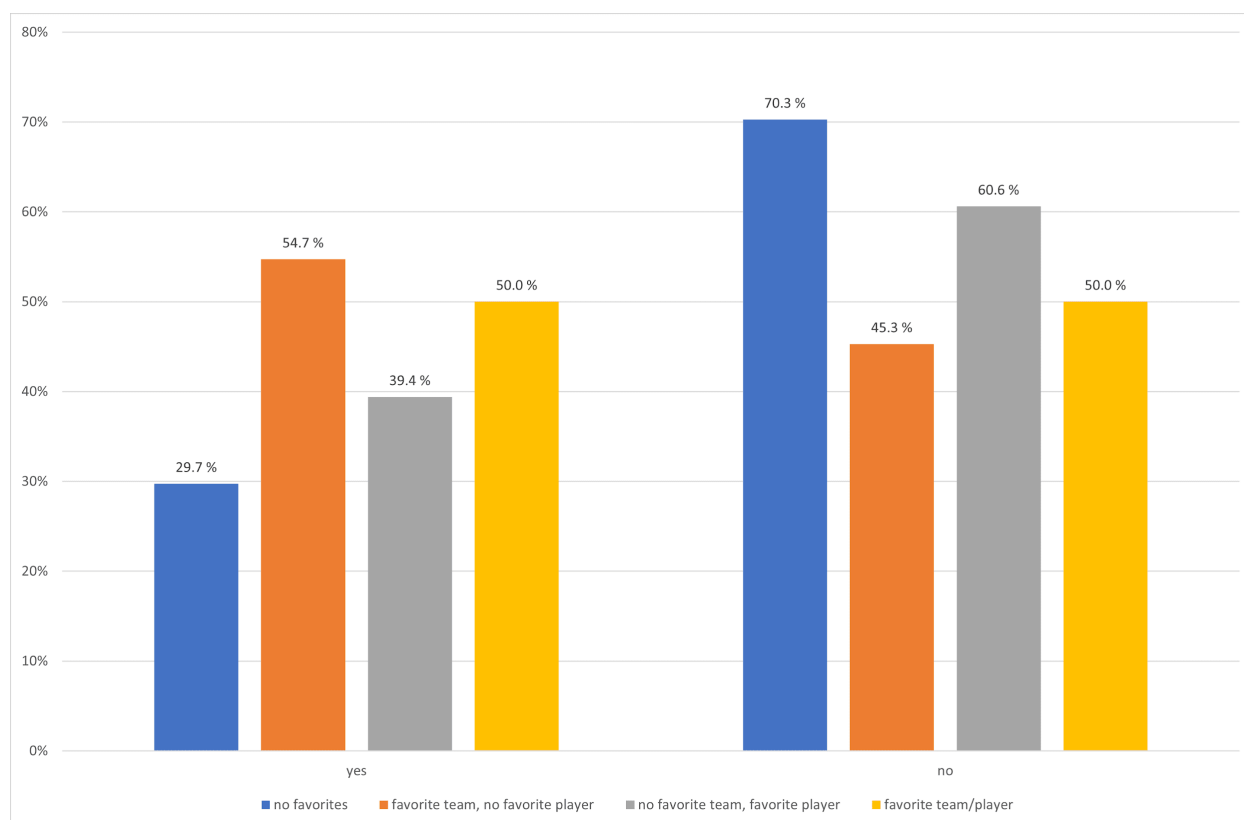
Figure 10. Following traditional sports in relation to having a favorite team or player

Almost half of the respondents (47.9%) reported watching traditional sports as well. Having a favorite player or a favorite team was also connected to following traditional sports, with only 29.7% of those without any favorites following traditional sports (Figure 10). Particularly having a favorite team was connected to watching traditional sports among the respondents.

We analyzed more closely the segment of respondents who chose a favorite player and their relationship with traditional sports. We found that those with a favorite player who followed traditional sports more often mentioned "the player is from my country" as a reason for choosing them (47.5%) in comparison to those having a favorite player and not following traditional sports (28.7%). Similarly, the reason "for the team the player is in" was more common for those also following traditional sports (31.8%) than other respondents (24.8%). These results indicate that nationality and loyalty to a team, which are important factors of traditional sports fandom (Crawford, 2004; Wann & James, 2018), were something that these respondents applied to following esports as well. Interestingly, there was a similar preference to choose "for the team the player is in" (41.0%) among those following other esports in comparison to those who did not follow other esports (33.1%), but the player's nationality did not have a similar connection to following other esports. This indicates that certain meanings, such as nationality, are transferred to esports with the viewers who are familiar with following traditional sports, but are not important for those without that same cultural capital.
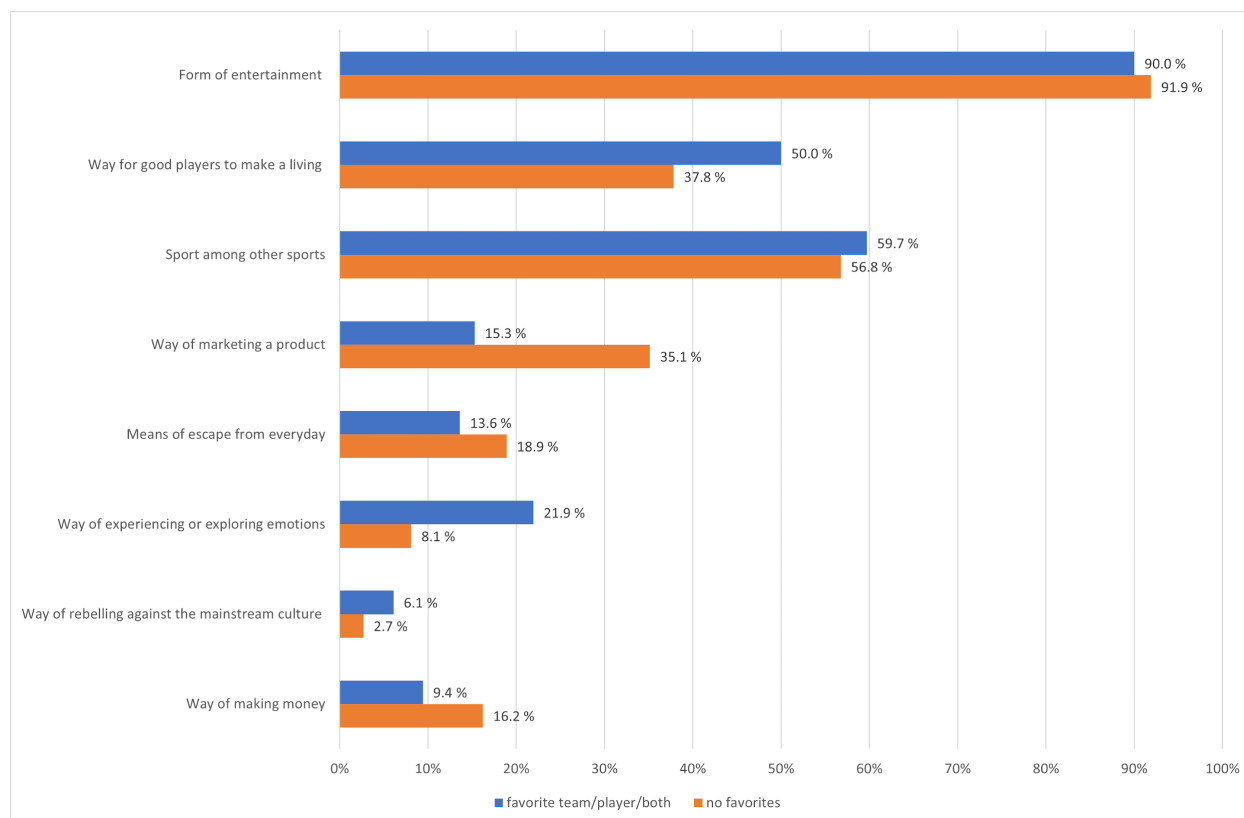
Figure 11. Role of esports in contemporary society in relation to respondents having a favorite team, player or both.

We also asked our respondents to consider the role of esports in contemporary society and choose one of the options provided. By far, the most popular response was "form of entertainment" (89.4%), with "sport among other sports" (57.7%) and a "way for good players to make a living" (48.8%) being fairly popular choices as well. Differences emerge when comparing the responses based on whether the respondents had a favorite player or team. "Marketing a product" was chosen by only 15.3% of those with a favorite player or team or both, but by 35.1% of those without any favorites (Figure 11). Conversely, those without favorites were less likely to consider esports as a way of experiencing or exploring emotions (8.1%) than those who had chosen favorites (21.9%). Exploring or experiencing emotions was particularly common for the segment of respondents who chose a favorite player but not a favorite team (30.3%). Affective engagement is central to fandom and fans of teams or players evidently identified with exploring or experiencing emotions as an articulation of this engagement.

7. Case study: Becoming a fan

The crowd is chanting systematically "Jerry Jerry Jerry" and hitting their thunder sticks or their hands together. A young player on the stage, Jerry, smiles shyly and seems startled by all the attention. A few minutes later there is a video of the event on his team's Twitter, with a caption "A star is born". Jerry has made his debut in the Overwatch League and it has been a success.

Some players and some teams seem to capture the esports audiences' imagination the way others do not. Min Tae-hee, or Jerry, as his stage name goes, is an example of this. It is his debut game in the Overwatch League, and he becomes an instant audience favorite. Also the discussion board r/competitiveoverwatch is gushing over Jerry, calling him "wholesome" and "precious". One discussant, somewhat out of the loop, asks what the hype around Jerry is. As a response, someone links a video from Boston Uprising's Twitter account, where Jerry sees snow for the first time in three years and makes himself shoes out of foil[1]. Another discussant points out that Jerry has been really successful in Contenders, the tier below the OWL. A third one says they just love the name - and they are not the only one, as any Twitter feed mentioning Jerry seems to contain pictures and GIFs of the cartoon mouse Jerry. Thus, while Jerry's skill in the game is part of his fame, it is not the only thing that matters. Meanwhile, the former professional player and popular *Overwatch* streamer "xQc" comments "Jerrymania" in his stream, noting that people might be fans of Jerry, but nobody wants Boston Uprising (his team) to win. Clipped and circulated in Reddit, commentators, par few lonely Boston fans, largely seem to agree: Jerry is indeed precious and wholesome, but Boston Uprising is none of that.

As *Overwatch* is a new esport, it is possible to continuously witness its fans creating fan relationships with players. With this second data corpus for this research, we examined the way fans and viewers discussed the player Min Tae-hee, or Jerry as his player name goes, during and closely after his debut game in the OWL. For this we looked at discussions on the Reddit subreddit r/competitiveoverwatch, the largest subreddit dedicated to *Overwatch* esports. In total we analyzed 12 different discussion threads, looking at the way the fans and viewers express, conceptualize and narrativize their (fan) relationship to Jerry. The most prolific source for this was the discussion thread which had an ongoing discussion during Jerry's debut game, but the themes touched upon there were further explored and contextualised in other discussion threads. Moreover, we also watched the recording of the game the discussion was related to and also studied Twitter messages connected to the game. The game in question was a match between the teams Boston Uprising and Houston Outlaws and took place on the third week of season three of the OWL. The game was played in front of a live audience in Washington, D.C., United States.

By using thematic analysis, we were able to discern seven distinct themes in the discussion forum data in regard to Jerry:
1. Jerry's player name
2. Jerry's skill as a player
3. Storylines about or around Jerry

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[1] https://twitter.com/BostonUprising/status/1219396992000057345

4. Expressions of sentiment about Jerry
5. Jerry's personality or his celebrity persona
6. Copypastas
7. Chants

Comments on Jerry's player name were surprisingly common and suggested that his name played a significant role in his newly found popularity. The name was seen as "inherently funny" and as "such a nice name". One discussant commented that "there is something inherently funny about talking about jerry" and another user started a discussion thread asking if Jerry's popularity was because of his name and the way people used to chant "Jerry" in *The Jerry Springer Show* - to which another user responded to suggest that viewers and fans connotate Jerry more with Jerry Mouse from *Tom and Jerry* than Jerry from *The Jerry Springer Show*. The name "Jerry" was also constantly shouted by the casters throughout the match, often repeated multiple times in a row.

Another common way to comment on Jerry was to comment on his skills as a player. Whilst most of these comments were positive and praising ("Jerry greatest owl player ever"), there were also a few negative comments, which would express doubt towards Jerry's skill as a player. However, by and large these comments were positive and often had almost grandiose tones, talking about Jerry in superlatives: "the greatest OWL player", "Jerry is the best player in the league" and "Is jerry the greatest player of all time?". Research on traditional sport athletes suggests that athletic performance, alongside physical attractiveness, plays a pivotal role in their popularity of athletes (Mutz & Meyer, 2014). For esports players this athletic performance is essentially their gameplay skills.

The third theme were stories and storylines. In these comments Jerry was inserted into existing storylines or stories but new ones were also created around him. The terms 'story' and 'storyline' are commonly used in the subreddit r/competitiveoverwatch and they can refer to multiple things. Firstly, these terms can refer to the official content purposefully produced by the Overwatch League, such as videos highlighting players and teams. Secondly, they can refer to storylines that arise organically, even though these can be highlighted and sustained by the production (an example of this is the rivalry between two teams from Los Angeles which both occurs organically but is also often played upon by the production). A third way the r/competitiveoverwatch subreddit uses the terms 'story' and 'storyline' is to playfully refer to an idea that matches are "scripted". This does not necessarily mean an actual belief that the matches are fixed, but rather exemplifies the playful approaches the fans and audiences take towards *Overwatch* esports (Ruotsalainen & Välisalo, 2020). In relation to Jerry and his debut match, a few storylines were evoked. One viewer suggested that Jerry is "ruining a good story line", presumably by leading his team to victory against the opposing team, Houston Outlaws, which many wanted to win the match. Another viewer drew attention to how Jerry's debut match was spawning so many storylines, mentioning Jerry becoming a fan favorite and the viewer themself becoming a Boston Uprising (Jerry's team) fan. This is related to Jerry's own (constructed) story arc, which is further expanded in comments on his personality or celebrity persona.

Comments on Jerry's celebrity persona and appearance would note that "Jerry just radiates chad energy" and "Jerry the absolute alpha male", and "Jerry very large penis" but also "I'm rooting

for Boston purely because Jerry is too damn cute". Earlier research has shown that comments with homoerotic undertones are common in both esports and traditional sports, and they often function to affirm the masculinity of the star players (Kian et al., 2011; Klugman, 2015; Newbury, 2017). Furthermore, as noted before, research on traditional sports has demonstrated that physical attractiveness plays a key role in the popularity of athletes (Mutz & Meyer, 2014). However, it is worth noting that only comment in regards of Jerry's physical attractiveness was one referring to him as cute, which suggests that the hegemonic masculinity within esports or at least within *Overwatch* esports might significantly differ that found in traditional sports. Earlier research has suggested that central to the predominant masculinity in *Overwatch* is anime or kawai masculinity, where cuteness and "boyisnhess" play pivotal roles (Ruotsalainen & Välisalo, 2020).

The comments on Jerry's celebrity persona, appearance, and (outside) game action would continue in other threads, for example in one which focused on a video from Boston Uprising's Twitter account, titled "Snow day resourcefulness". In the video Jerry can be seen making shoes out of tinfoil for a sudden snowy day. In the Reddit discussion thread Jerry is described as "gift from above". This also exemplifies how Jerry's celebrity persona and storylines surrounding it are constructed not only in the game broadcast, but transmedially through multiple mediums, such as Twitter and Reddit. Through these comments Jerry is constructed as a hero for his team, giving him a quasi-classic hero story arc, where he faces the adversities of moving to faraway land and faces his oppositions from the underdog position, eventually defeating them and finishing at the top. These kinds of hero narratives are popular in traditional sports (Ryan, 2006).

Another way to narrativize Jerry as a player was inserting him into an existing copypasta. Earlier research has shown that in the construction of esports transmediality, copypastas are central (Koskimaa et al., 2021). These copypastas can originate from a number of locations: from *Overwatch* esports themselves, from other esports, or from traditional sports, and are often not so different from discussions that are heard throughout stadiums in traditional sports.

A strong sentiment can be detected throughout the discussions analyzed here, and, indeed, some comments were almost solely about expressing this sentiment or an affective stance towards Jerry. One user commented that "I've only known that Jerry exists for a day and a half, but if anything were to happen to him I would kill everyone in this room and then myself", whilst other comments included ones like "Dude I love Jerry" and "Jerry is the greatest." Chanting Jerry's name can be seen as part of expressing this sentiment: many of the comments in the discussion thread were simply textual formats of chanting, repeating Jerry's name. These often-echoed moments in the broadcast where the live audience chanted Jerry's name or the casters got excited by the play Jerry made in the game, shouting his name.

When examining the ways fans engage with Jerry and the kinds of reasons they articulate for their fondness of him, there are similarities and differences to what our survey results suggest. Firstly, Jerry's personality or the celebrity persona are important factors in engaging with him. Secondly, Jerry's skill as a player is brought up multiple times. A few users also mentioned being fans of Jerry's team, Boston Uprising, but some explicitly mentioned disliking the team, even though they liked Jerry. The reasons for disliking Boston Uprising were mentioned as well, users talking about questionable treatment of players (minimum salaries) and dislike for the

owner of the team, Robert Kraft, who is also the owner of the American football team New England Patriots.

However, Jerry's nationality did not seem to play a big part in the "becoming a fan" narratives. This can be partially because Jerry is South Korean and the subreddit r/competitiveoverwatch is in English and likely mainly used by Westerners. Our survey result suggests that nationality is an important factor when the player is from the same country as the respondent. In a similar manner, regarding another factor important for some respondents in our survey, the player's history before the OWL, Jerry's player history rarely came up in the discussions and Jerry appeared to be a somewhat unknown player before his debut, at least for the majority of Western audiences.

8. Discussion and conclusion

In our article, we have explored esports engagement focusing particularly on fandom, a topic which has been scarcely researched. By analyzing two different types of data, we have traced reasons behind fan engagement with the OWL, the way it relates to *Overwatch* esports and esports engagement in general, as well as how this engagement is formed. We have furthermore traced similarities with engagement with traditional sports.

Our survey results demonstrate that a city-based league structure clearly has an effect on how spectators construct their engagement with the OWL, as locality is an important factor when examining the reasons for a favorite team, similarly to traditional sports. Our survey results suggest that having a favorite team or a favorite player considerably increases the intensity of one's engagement with *(Overwatch)* esports: those respondents who chose a favorite player and/or a favorite team followed matches more often, engaged in more diverse transmedial user practices, watched other *Overwatch* esports besides OWL more likely, and were more likely to create or engage with fan art about *Overwatch* esports. Moreover, these respondents were also more likely to watch traditional sports. It is possible that following traditional sports makes viewers more likely to engage with esports on a deeper level and there is a connection between following competitive activities regardless of the sport or the platform.

We also traced similarities and differences between esport fandom and the fandom of traditional sports. The survey results suggest that it is possible that following traditional sports affects how one engages with esports as players' nationality was more important for those who also followed traditional sports. This suggests that certain meanings, such as nationality, are transferred to esports with the viewers who are familiar with following traditional sports but are not important for those who do not share that same cultural capital. Our case study demonstrates that there are, in some cases, similar underlying reasons for the popularity of athletes and e-athletes, namely athletic performance and physical attractivity.

Finally, our data suggest that when examining how viewers engage with the players and form fan relationships, affective dimension appears to play a central role. Those who chose a favorite player, or a favorite team were much more likely to choose "experiencing emotions" as a role esports has in contemporary society than those who did not have a favorite team or a favorite player. Our case study furthermore demonstrates that "becoming a fan" narratives are often

coloured with expressions of sentiment. In addition, the affective structures surrounding them are constituted transmedially, in multiple locations: when examining the way Reddit users discuss Jerry and express fan sentiment about him, we find the sentiment to be constructed through multiple sites simultaneously, including Reddit, Twitter, and the match itself, where both casters and the live audience contribute to the construction of this sentiment. In a similar manner, Jerry's celebrity persona is constructed through collective narratives which are similarly transmedial, created through the interplay of audience (both offline and online), casters, as well as the team's promotional material (in this case published in Twitter).

Future research on esports fandom should further explore the affective side of esport fandom and the role affect plays in the construction and reception of the players' celebrity personas. Furthermore, studies across different esport titles could reveal interesting facets of esports fandom, for instance, the role of locality and nationality in differently constructed esports.

Acknowledgments

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