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"What's next? Calling beer-drinking a sport?!": Virtual resistance towards considering eSport as sport

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Abstract:

Purpose:
The purpose of this paper is to study virtual resistance towards the introduction of Norway's first professional eSport league in the category of sport video games (SVGs), Eserien – the professional FIFA league, and its inclusion in the Norwegian Football Federation.

Design/methodology/approach:
A qualitative content analysis of texts published from the first season of Eserien was launched (December 2018) and during the first season of Eserien (April 2019 to December 2019) in Norwegian online spaces. Based on this approach, a total of 23 texts were subjected to a qualitative content analysis. The theoretical framework for the analysis of the material is Guttmann's (1978/2004) characteristics of modern sport and processes of sportification, as well as conceptualizations of the sport-health ideology in national and international sport policies today.

Findings:
The arguments made against the inclusion of the professional FIFA league Eserien as part of the Norwegian Football Federation revolves around three main themes: (1) eSport as something unhealthy and inactive, (2) issues of cheating and match fixing in professional eSports, and (3) threats professionalized eSport poses for traditional football clubs and players in terms of securing sponsorship and gaining media attention.

Research limitations/implications:
A limitation is the small sample size consisting of data from the first season of the first professional FIFA league organized by a Norwegian governing sport body. More research is needed to support the results found here, and readers should be careful to transfer the findings from this study to other sporting contexts.

Originality/value:
This study is an empirical exploration of resistance towards eSport expressed by traditional sport fans. These insights expand on existing sport management research on spectators, commercialization and professionalization of eSport.

Article Classification: Research paper

Key words: esports, sports video games, virtual sport, digitalization of sport, eFoorball, FIFA

1. Introduction

eSport is one of the most notable examples of radical digital transformation within the sports sector today. In countries across the globe professional eSport tournaments, similar to traditional sporting events, are now conducted (Adams, Devia-Allen & Moore, 2019). For instance, in 2018 more than 20 million people tried to qualify for one of the 32 available places in the FIFA eWorld Cup (Altibox, 2019). Mirabito & Kucek (2019) highlight that sports video games such as FIFA represent the least popular type of eSport competitions. With such high numbers of players and fans even among the most "un-popular" genre of eSport games, it is easy to see why the International Olympic Committee (IOC) wants to include eSport in the Olympic Games at some point in the near future (IOC, 2018; Morgan, 2019). IOC's interest in eSport is a sign that these new and virtually played sports are here to stay, and that it is likely that eSport will continue to represent a central part of digital transformation in sport in the years to come.

Digital transformation has been remarkably overlooked in the sport management literature compared to other management fields. Alongside studies of social media (Thompson, Martin, Gee & Geurin, 2018; Geruin & Burch, 2017; Gillooly, Anagnostopoulos & Chadwick, 2017; Anagnostopoulos, Parganas, Chadwick & Fenton, 2018), one of the few aspects of digital transformation that sport management scholars have begun to explore is eSport, although as yet studies of eSport mainly deal with the fundamental question of whether it can or should be seen as 'real' sport or not (Hallmann & Giel, 2018; Funk, Pizzo, & Baker, 2018; Cunningham et al., 2018; Heere, 2018). Many scholars (Funk et al., 2017; Jonasson & Thiborg, 2010; Mora & Héas, 2003; Taylor, 2012; Thiel & John, 2019; Witkowski, 2010; 2012; Keiper et. Al., 2017) seem to agree that eSport shares enough characteristics with sport that it could be considered as 'real' sport. On the other hand, some scholars argue that eSport should not be considered as sport at all (Drewe, 2003; Hallmann & Giel, 2018; Parry, 2019). In their discussions, Parry (2019) and Hallman & Giel (2018) highlight that eSport lack a level of physicality as well as organisational structures requisite for a competitive activity to be considered a sport. As Parry (2019: 16) notes, through their "non-physicality" eSport do no contribute to "*the development of the whole human*". This arguments relates closely to the belief that video gaming represents

the anathema to athletic competition (Bowman & Cranmer, 2019). In other words, that while sports are healthy and good for us, eSport is unhealthy and bad for us.

These discussions illustrate how the expansion of eSport challenges common beliefs about what sport is and what it is not. Even though the emergence of eSport represents a key part of digital transformation in sport, it has not received the scholarly attention it deserves. There is a need for further empirical studies of eSport in different geographical contexts around the world (Llorens, 2017). As Hamari & Sjöblom (2017:213) notes, research on eSport is '*rare and dispersed*'.

In an early attempt to define what eSport is, Jonasson & Thiborg (2010) describe eSport as organized competitive computer gaming, where individuals or teams try to beat their opponents according to the rules of the game (Jonasson and Thiborg 2010). In a more recent paper, Hamari & Sjöblom (2017:213) define eSports as '*a form of sports where the primary aspects of the sport are facilitated by electronic systems; the input of players and teams as well as the output of the eSports system are mediated by human-computer interfaces*'. Contributing to the broad reach of these new virtually played sports, eSport is generally free of charge for spectators (Llorens 2017), thereby making it widely accessible for audiences around the globe. It is common to organise eSports competitions around specific genres of games. Some examples of such genres are (1) sports video games, or SVGs (e.g. FIFA), (2) multiplayer online battle arenas, or MOBA, (e.g. League of Legends), (3) first-person shooters (e.g. Fortnite), (4) real time strategy (e.g. StarCraft II) and (5) collectible card games (e.g. Hearthstone). The empirical focus of the present article is sports video games (SVGs) – and in particular, FIFA.

A new and notable addition to SVGs eSport research is the work of Bertschy, Mühlbacherb and Desbordes (2020) on how the introduction of SVGs eSport in AS Monaco FC influences the brand of the football club and the football supporters. Bertschy, Mühlbacherb and Desbordes (2020) found that football fans ignore the launch of SVGs and that the lack of fit between the sport brand and the brand extension into eSport creates a tendency towards a development of two sub-versions of the AS Monaco brand. Building on Bertschy, Mühlbacherb and Desbordes' work (2020), the present study makes a modest contribution to SVGs eSport as an emerging field of research in sport management. In this paper, I explore virtual resistance to SVGs eSport expressed in Norwegian online spaces.. More precisely, I investigates the resistance to the first season of the first Norwegian professional FIFA league: *Eserien*. As Eserien is advertised,

communicated and streamed digitally, I also explore this resistance digitally by analysing the comments, photos, blog posts and forum posts that were displayed online during Eserien's first season. Specifically, this research addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the arguments against the inclusion of the professional FIFA league Eserien as part of the Norwegian Football Federation?

RQ2: How does this virtual resistance relate to the theoretical characteristics of modern sport as framed by Guttmann in his work "From Ritual to Record"?

RQ3: How does this virtual resistance relate to the dominant sport-health ideology in European sport policies?

The reason for exploring these research questions is to develop an understanding of which arguments lay behind the resistance to the inclusion of the professional FIFA league Eserien as part of the Norwegian Football Federation's organizational practices and how they connect to theoretical understandings of what characterizes modern sport (Guttmann 1978/2004) and the dominant sport-health ideology in European sport policies (Malcolm, 2018). Hence, this article explores the kind of arguments that individuals raise when boldly claiming that 'eSport is not sport!' What is the line of reasoning behind such strong contentions? What is it about eSport that makes it difficult for some people to consider it as sport? What kind of beliefs about modern sport do these arguments convey? This article aims to shed light on such questions. The theoretical foundation for the study is presented in the next section.

2. Theoretical foundation

2.1 Sportification

Sportification implies that an activity acquires the quality and inner logic of sport (Tjønndal, Hjelseth & Lenneis, 2019), i.e. an activity that has not typically been viewed as sport, such as skateboarding, frisbee or playing video games, gradually becomes regulated and organized in specific ways that increasingly mimic organized sport. The nature of such regulations and organizational processes is conceptualized in various ways, as is apparent in previous studies of the question of whether eSport is sport or not (Heere, 2018; Jenny et. al. 2017; Parry, 2019).

However, for this article, Guttmann's (1978/2004) study of modern sport is used as a framework for understanding the sportification of eSport. Guttmann (1978/2004) sees modern sport as having the following seven key characteristics: secularism, equality, bureaucratization, specialization, rationalization, quantification and obsession with records. In the case of eSport, six of the seven characteristics are particularly relevant and are explored further in this article. Secularism as a characteristic of modern sport is not explored in this study because it concerns the changing purpose of modern sport. Originally, athletic competitions were fundamentally religious enterprises and were meant to show special talents to the gods, express thanks to them, or implore them to take certain action, such as ensuring the earth's fertility (Guttmann 1978/2004: 18). Although it can be argued that modern sport no longer revolves around religious activities, this characteristic is less relevant for this study of resistance to eSport and the professional FIFA league Eserien as sport and is therefore not included.

In Guttmann's (1978/2004) analysis of modern sport, the term equality is connected to two principles. The first is that everyone should have equal access to sport participation, and the second is that the competition framework should be fair for all participants, regardless of background, gender or ethnicity (Guttmann 1978/2004). These democratic principles are adopted by most international sport organizations. However, sociological research in sport has shown that sport participation and competitions are full of different exclusionary practices and discrimination based on gender, ethnicity and sexuality (Spaaij, Magee & Jeanes, 2014; Collins, 2014). In eSport research this has been especially demonstrated in terms of gender-based discrimination and digital maltreatment (Ruvalcaba et. al., 2018; Ratan et. al., 2015; Ask, Svendsen, & Karlstroem, 2016; Arneberg & Hegna, 2018; Taylor et. al., 2009). For instance, Ask, Svendsen, & Karlstroem (2016) highlight that female eSport athletes are often subjected to sexual harassment during gameplay by their male counterparts. Similarly, McLean and Griffiths' (2013) study shows how female gamers use coping strategies, such as voice distortion, to avoid and cope with sexual harassment during gameplay.

Guttmann (1978/2004) describes specialization and professionalization as two overlapping traits of modern sport. He argues that professionalization is not necessarily rooted in economic profit (making money from playing sport), but is rather about how much time and energy a person invests in excelling at a specific sport, i.e. the degree to which an individual specializes in a certain sport. Specialization is partly about the emergence of specific roles in sport. In his work, Guttmann (1978/2004) uses American football as an example of this, with its 22 player positions, in addition to specialized teams that only enter the field of play in specific game

situations. There are also examples of this in eSport. For instance, in the game League of Legends (LOL), team players have specific roles, such as Tank, Split Pusher and Enchanter (Ratnan et al. 2015). Research on eSport also indicates that professional eSport players spend as much time practising and specializing in specific tactical moves and skills as athletes in physical/analogue sports (Hou, Yang and Panek, 2019; Lee & Schoenstedt, 2011). In his study, Martoncik (2015) claims that the social ties in eSport communities can include meaningful relationships between players in the same way as those experienced by players in a football team.

In Guttmann's work (1978/2004), specialization is also related to highly specialized support teams consisting of coaches, doctors, physiotherapists and managers in modern elite sport. With increased professionalization, these people are also required to undergo an increasing number of educational programmes and certifications to prove their competency to act in these roles. Some eSport studies emphasize the institutionalization and professionalization of eSport teams (Mora & Héas, 2003; Lee & Schoenstedt, 2011). For instance, Xu (2012) discusses how the inclusion of eSport in the National Sports Council of China played a significant role in the development of an eSport club management system, a competition system and the cultivation of athletes, coaches and market operations.

Guttmann (1978/2004) highlights several aspects in his description of rationalization as a trait of modern sport. He first of all describes rationalization in the form of standardization of sports equipment, such as rules that define the weight of the javelin or discus in track and field. Guttmann (1978/2004) then discusses rationalization in terms of how athletes train, eat and live their lives. Here he highlights how the relationship between science and sport has evolved and how athletes and coaches today are closely connected to research in fields such as nutrition, physiology, biomechanics, medicine and sport psychology. Taylor (2012) explores this in his work on the professionalization of eSport, where he highlights how gaming now includes agents, referees and coaches in a way that transforms video gaming from play to modern elite sport. This can also be seen in relation to Guttmann's (1978/2004) use of the term bureaucratization. Here, Guttmann (1978/2004) describes a condition of rationalization and specialization through the establishment of rules and standards that can be maintained by a governing body. Bureaucratization also ties into equality, because one of the functions of the bureaucracy of sport is to ensure that competitions are fair and equal for all and that performances are measured in a standardized way.

The need to give performance a quantitative expression is partly due to the competitiveness of modern sport. Quantification allows for the comparison of performances and, therefore, also their ranking. According to Guttmann (1978/2004), this leads to a situation in which modern athletes can compete across time and space: *"Through the strange abstraction of the quantified record, the Australian can compete with the Finn who died a decade before the Australian was born"* (Guttmann, 1978:52). The sportification of eSport therefore involves players' performances being ranked and compared, such as ranking the number of kills per round in Counter Strike, or the most goals scored in a FIFA tournament. Guttmann's (1978/2004) quantification term also relates closely to the sixth characteristic of modern sport, obsession with records, which is clearly linked to technologies of measurement and rationalization. Something that is highlighted in all aspects of professional eSport is an obsession with records, because they can be measured.

2.2 The sport-health ideology

Health is a vital part of most European countries' sport policies. Malcolm (2018) argues that the idea that sport participation benefits physical, social and mental health is commonplace in most of today's western societies. Malclom (2018) uses the term 'sport-health ideology' to describe this. He also argues that the idea strongly connects modern sport to medicine. A main critique of the sport-health ideology is that it promotes a one sided (and in some cases completely wrong) belief that participating in sport is always healthy and good for us (Anderson and White, 2017). In this way, sport is discussed as a single entity, even when it is clear that some sports, like ski jumping or full contact combat sports, have more health risks than benefits in their competitive forms. Through the sport-health ideology, engaging in sport is always seen as something good that we should do more of, regardless of the sport or individual factors (Malcolm, 2018).

Another vital point in Malcolm's (2018) understanding of the sport-health ideology is that it is now so prevalent and dominant in western societies that it has led to a societal socialization where individuals think that there is a linear and positive correlation between participating in sport and good health. This in turn affects health and medical personnel, politicians, public servants and volunteers in sport organizations.

3. Methods
3.1 Research setting: eSport in Norway

Although there is limited research on participation in eSport in Norway, some studies suggest that Norwegian youth spend an increasing amount of their leisure time playing computer games (Bakken 2018). A recent study indicates that 96% of Norwegian boys and 63% of Norwegian girls aged between 9-18 years play videogames (Children and the Media Survey 2018), which is almost twice the proportion of youth regularly involved in analogue/physical sports (Bakken 2019). Additionally, 60% of the Norwegian youths who play videogames do this every day (Children and the Media Survey 2018). Arguably, this points to a development of eSport as a phenomenon that cannot be ignored in the Norwegian sports context.

Even though eSport is already considered a sport in more than 60 countries (Witkowski 2012; Tassi 2013), this is not yet the case in Norway, even though it has expanded greatly in the country over the last four years (NRK 2019b; NRK 2019d). The expansion began in 2016 when secondary schools started to include eSport in their elite sport programmes (Bydelsnytt 2018; NRK 2018c). In 2019, the Norwegian Football Federation (NFF) released a national professional FIFA league called Eserien (Eserien 2019). Eserien is the main example of professionalized eSport in Norway and its introduction means part-way inclusion in Norwegian sport organizations in that it is hosted by the Norwegian Football Federation, which is part of the Norwegian Olympic and Paralympic Committee and Confederation of Sports (NIF). The first season of Eserien was held in the spring and autumn of 2019, with 18 teams divided into four groups. The teams included in Eserien represent elite football clubs in the top two Norwegian divisions for men. In the first season of Eserien, all the professional FIFA players representing these teams were men.

The first season of Eserien was highly professionalized and advertised in social media by sponsors (Altibox and Sparebank1). This is illustrated in Figure 1, which is an advertisement from the social media campaign for Eserien. The professionalization and commercialization of the Eserien's first season led to a number of football clubs starting their own eSport teams (e.g. Driv sports club 2019; Konnerud sports club 2019), thus making football unparalleled to other sports in Norway in terms of integrating the sport simulator category of eSport into Norwegian sport organizations.

3.2 Data collection

As eSport represents a more-than-human world in which people come together through digital technologies, collecting data virtually seems to be a fruitful research strategy for an empirical exploration of eSport. In this study, the data consists of digitally published comments and texts expressing resistance to the introduction of the professional FIFA league Eserien as part of the Norwegian Football Federation. The data is limited to texts (and comments to these texts) published when the Eserien was launched (December 2018) and during its first season (April 2019 to December 2019) in Norwegian online spaces.

In this article, Bratberg's (2017) broad definition of the term 'text' is used, meaning that the material also includes content such as video, images and podcasts. The search for text was conducted in online spaces that were likely carry discussions about the newly introduced Eserien. The online spaces included in the search for texts were: 1) the Eserien's official website (https://www.eserien.no/), 2) digital editions of national and regional newspapers, 3) online forums and social media channels for supporters of the teams included in the first season of Eserien and 4) webpages and social media accounts of Eserien sponsors. Searching these channels yielded a sample of 23 texts expressing resistance to the inclusion of Eserien in the Norwegian Football Federation. Additionally, one fan-forum was included the sample (2 threads, 243 posts). In some cases, the texts themselves do not express resistance to Eserien, but the comments to the texts do. In these cases, the comments are included as data material. An overview of the sample, chronologically categorized by publication date, is provided below in Table 1.

Table 1: Sample of texts expressing resistance to eSports in Norway 2018-2019

Source	Published	Text type	Content/topic/headline
[Soundcloud.com]	16th December (2018)	Podcast/video (including comments)	NFF's eSport involvement
VG	18th December (2018a)	Online article	NFF into a new era
NTB	20th December (2018)	Online article	NOC faces ethical questions regarding eSport
VG	23rd December (2018b)	Online article	NOC president wants eSport included
Fredrikstad Blad	13th February (2019)	Online article	Political party supports eSport
NRK	2nd March (2019a)	Video (including comments)	Dvergsnes sports club includes eSport for youth
[Eserien.no]	6th March (2019)	Online article	Information about the first official Norwegian eSport league in FIFA19
VG	6th March (2019b)	Online article	18 football clubs included in NFF's eFootball league (the eSeries)
Sunnmørsposten	6th March (2019a)	Online article	eFootball league starts this spring. The Norwegian elite clubs are excited
[Brann.no]	15th March (2019)	Online article	This is eSport. Brann football club's eSport involvement
[SpareBank1.no]	5th April (2019)	Online article	SpareBank1 becomes main partner of Eserien
[Altibox.no]	9th April (2019)	Online article	Everything set for the Eserien
[Eurosport.no]	9th April (2019)	Video (including comments)	Summary of the first FIFA game of the Eserien
[Sotahjornet.no]	17th April (2019)	blog post (including comments)	Supporters discussing whether Vålerenga football should promote eSport as gaming is linked to obesity
[Gamer.no]	26th April (2019a)	Online article	Norwegian political party establishes a gaming policy. Gaming is culture, industry and learning
Sunnmørsposten	10th May (2019b)	Opinion piece	Why do elite football clubs promote a video game competition and increase children's screen time?
Bergens Tidende	10th May (2019)	Opinion piece	Why NFF and football clubs should not go into eSport
Josimar	16th May (2019)	Opinion piece	eSport is not sport
NFF	27th May (2019)	Online article	Selection for the national eFootball team
VG Online Forum Sarpsborg Football Club Thread	9th April – December 10th (2019)	Online fan-forum	2 threads, 243 posts
[Eliteserien.no]	27th June 2019	Online article	Launching professional eFootball league in Norway
Aftenposten	29th June (2019)	Online article	Playing FIFA is not the same as playing sports
NRK	30th June 2019b	Online article	Football club aims to introduce eSport to youth

3.2 Data analysis

A content analysis was conducted on the online texts and conversations that followed in the comments by identifying valid categories relevant to the phenomenon of interest (Thagaard, 2018). Content analysis facilitates an impressionistic yet systematic exploration of the current

research questions (Carlson, 2008). I followed an emergent coding process as described by Stemler (2001), where the categories are allowed to emerge from the data. The initial step was to read the contents as a whole to gain a basic understanding of the essence and an overall familiarity with the data. During this process, five thematic arguments against Eserien were identified: (1) health, (2) physical activity, (3) cheating, (4) funding and (5) media attention.

The coding process involved reviewing and re-reviewing the data and identifying the categories for classification. In this way, the coding process represents both an inductive and deductive approach to qualitative analysis, in that the theoretical foundation of the study also informs this process (Thagaard, 2018). Guttmann's (1978/2004) characteristics of modern sport and Malcolm's analysis of the sport-health ideology have guided the formation of the categories in the study. Specifically, the categories, health and physical activity are guided by Malcolm's (2016) work, while cheating, funding and media attention relate to Guttmann's characteristics of modern sport (1978/2004). The coding of the material was done solely by the author.

4. Findings and discussion

This study demonstrates that five recurring arguments appear in the Norwegian online spaces against the inclusion of the professional eSport FIFA league Eserien as part of the Norwegian Football Federation's elite sport activities. The arguments against Eserien relate to health, match fixing and cheating, as well as the professionalization and commercialization of video gaming. In the following section these arguments are explored through the lens of Guttmann's (1978/2004) characteristics of modern sport and the dominant sport-health ideology found in European national sport policies (Malcolm, 2016).

4.1 eSport as something inactive and unhealthy

The most recurring argument against the inclusion of Eserien in the Norwegian Football Federation is that eSport is inherently "*unhealthy*" and "*bad for us*" (Bergens Tidende, 2019) and therefore that being a FIFA gamer is incompatible with the "*healthy lifestyle that playing football is associated with*" (post from VG forum, 2019). As one fan described it in a forum post, "*playing video games makes us lazy, depressed, socially awkward and overweight*". In a way, such arguments can be related to stereotypes about video gaming and the gamers themselves. Research on eSport highlights how playing eSport games is often associated with unhealthy, skinny, white, nerdy men (Paaßen, Morgenroth & Stratemeyer, 2017; Ratan, 2015).

However, such arguments against Eserien also connect to the dominant sport-health ideology in European sport policies as described by Malcolm (2016). According to Malcolm, the linear relationship between sport and good health advocated through the sport-health ideology in national sport policies around Europe has weakened the boundaries between the terms physical activity, exercise and sport (Malcolm, 2016). In this way, the argument that competitive video gaming cannot be sport because it is an inactive activity and one that could negatively impact mental health in that it can easily be played alone in a dark basement clearly demonstrates the prevalence of the sport-health ideology among the users of these online forums and their perceptions of modern sport. The comment sections of these forum/online spaces support similar beliefs about eSport. Some examples are: "*What's next? Calling beer-drinking a sport?*!" and "*lazy, overweight nerds can't be our next Olympic heroes*!" (Sotahjornet.no, 2019; Sunnmørsposten, 2019). Behind these arguments is the prevalent belief that all sport is healthy and good for us (Malcolm, 2018), and that its capacity to promote health is closely linked to physical activity.

While Guttmann's (1978/2004) description of the characteristics of modern sport is not dependent on physical activity or health, the most prevalent arguments against Eserien relate to eSport as unhealthy and inactive. Physical activity is a key trait of sport in the sport-health ideology and is framed as such in many European sport policies (Malcolm, 2018). This is also the case for Norway, where organized sport is considered an important contributor to public health in that it enables people to live physically active lifestyles (Whitepaper 26, 2012). Some of the texts in the data express the connection between sport, health and physical activity, which is framed as an argument against Eserien as follows:

> eSport has nothing in common with sport. eSport does not belong in sports organizations. Sports participation is a means of health promotion. Playing video games is the opposite of living a physically active and healthy lifestyle. It's the opposite of participating in sport. Football clubs that include eSport in their activities oppose the political purpose and goal of sport in Norway.

> Eserien should be cancelled because it is not physical enough to be real sport.

> Promoting Eserien is the same as promoting physical inactivity. Doesn't the NFF see that eFootball is not an ally, but an enemy of sport?

> Sports are healthy. Sport must involve overcoming an opponent through physical skills.

These arguments, like the sport-health ideology overall (Malcolm, 2016), take it for granted that sport is inherently healthy and 'good for us'. Malcolm (2016) and Andersson & White

(2017) have examined such beliefs critically in their work, highlighting that this ideology frames health as an individual responsibility that does not take structural power relations and socio-economic differences between people into account. As Andersson & White (2017) illustrate, such perspectives on sport ignore issues like long-term sport injuries resulting from participation in full contact sports, over training, burn out, eating disorders and other unhealthy aspects of engagement in competitive organized sport. In this way, participating in eSport competitions, such as Eserien, may be healthier than playing elite football, because there are fewer risks of sustaining traumatic long-term injuries.

The arguments against the inclusion of Eserien in the Norwegian Football Federation due to the lack of physical activity involved can also be seen as an expression of the philosophical understanding of sport as competitions that involve physically overcoming another opponent (Drewe, 2003; Hallmann & Giel, 2018). In this way, the arguments against considering eSport as sport, as conveyed by the football fans in these online spaces, reflect the same philosophical belief about sport as, for instance, Parry (2019) expresses in his article when he argues that eSport is not sport because it does not involve "*contests of human physical skill*" (Parry, 2019: 3).

4.2 eSport, match fixing and cheating

While some comments and texts in the material are quite explicit in their argumentation, as demonstrated in the arguments about physical inactivity and sport and video games as incompatible notions of one thing being healthy (sport) and the other unhealthy (video gaming), others are based on principles of *fairness*, or equality in Guttmann's terms (1978/2004). As one text reads, "*professionalized FIFA gaming is a sharp contrast to real sport because the competition is not fair*" (Bergens Tidende, 2019). These arguments describe cheating and match fixing in eSport as the main issue when it comes to including eSport in Norwegian sport organizations, such as the introduction of Eserien in NFF. Some of the comments in the online blogs (Sotahjornet.no) and online forums (VG online forum), express sentiments like these:

> Cheating through manipulation of software is the biggest issue in eSport today. In 2017 a staggering 200 cases of software cheating PER WEEK were registered in a single tournament platform.

> Under performing in order to make money from gambling is common in eFootball. The guys who play in Eserien are not true football fans! Why wouldn't they lose a FIFA match if they could make money on it? It's just a video game.

The illegal gambling market for eSport is massive. How will the NFF control betting in Eserien?

Eserien is full of cheating gamers! Get this shit away from football!

The arguments in these posts relate to several of the characteristics of modern sport described by Guttmann (1978/2004) in his work. Primarily, these arguments relate to the terms equality and bureaucratization. Guttmann (1978/2004) claims that fair competition is a core element of modern sport. Ideologically, this relates to the belief that athletes should have the same starting point and chance of winning modern sport competitions. This is complicated with the introduction of virtually played sports such as eFootball in Eserien. In order to ensure fairness in their competitions, NFF uses the "Fixed 85-rating" on the teams in the league, meaning that all the virtual teams are equal on paper. Altibox (2019) claims that this ensures that "*It is only the players behind the screens that make up the determining factors of which team will win.*" However, in the first Eserien season NFF as a governing body for eFootball in Norway did not implement any regulations in terms of securing equal internet speeds for competitors, doping controls or tests for illegal hacks or software. Therefore, the claims in the material relating to cheating and match fixing could be the most valid arguments against the inclusion of Eserien in the Norwegian Football Federation (NFF).

Additionally, research on eSport has shown that these virtually played sports are not fair, especially when it comes to securing equal opportunities for female and male players (McLean & Griffiths, 2018; Ratan et. al. 2015). Hence, the lack of a framework for securing fair competition from NFF, as outlined in the arguments in the material and in previous research, indicates that in terms of Guttmann's (1978/2004) concepts of equality and bureaucratization, Eserien does not meet the criteria to be considered as sport. Yet, through sociological research on sport (Collins, 2014, Andersson & White, 2017, Spaij, Magee and Jeanes, 2014) we also know that these issues are prevalent in 'real' sports today, which suggests that excluding organized eSport competitions such as Eserien from sport organizations for these reasons may be unfair. Furthermore, these arguments also connect to Guttmann's (1978/2004) concept of rationalization. In the process of making competitive video gaming a sport, such as the case of the introduction of Eserien in NFF, there is also a need for clear rules and standardizations in terms of what kind of equipment (computers, controllers, software etc.) is allowed and effective ways of discovering which equipment falls outside these rules.

4.3 The professionalization and commercialization of Eserien as a threat to 'real' football

The material demonstrates a prevalent resentment that the introduction of Eserien in the Norwegian Football Federation "steals" media attention from the real football teams and players. In the material, this was expressed most clearly in a blog post from one of the football fan webpages of the clubs included in Eserien:

> On the 14th of April, Vålerenga Football Elite tweeted 3 tweets about the match against Tromsø. Yesterday they tweeted 6 tweets about Eserien. In addition they retweeted other tweets about Eserien during the FIFA match. You don't have to be a scientist to see that the media coverage of eSport on a match day was twice as large as the coverage of the real elite football team on match day.

> I guess it's not so important to promote real football then, because everyone should just stay at home and play FIFA on their computers.

> What's next? The elite football team taking a break from playing matches to watch the FIFA-team play?

These arguments are not just phrased in a way that loudly demonstrates resistance to the inclusion of Eserien in the NFF. In some cases, this resistance is also communicated through photos posted in social media (see appendix).

In these types of arguments there is a fear that eSports will become so popular that spectators will follow the virtual eSport version rather than the analogue/physical sport, in this case - football. This is interesting, because recent research indicates that eSport spectators share many of the characteristics of traditional sport consumers (Qian, Wang, Zhang & Lu, 2019). In their recent study, Qian et al. (2019) highlight that just as in traditional sport, experience of the activity and knowledge about the sport are important determinants of spectators' involvement in eSport. Therefore, it is likely that eSport spectators are (or have been) gamers themselves, just as football fans have often played football as children (Ruvalcaba et al., 2018).

This fear of the impact that Eserien will have on '*real football*' extends to sponsorships and funding for elite sport. This was highlighted in a fan podcast included in the material: "*Why would companies choose to sponsor the established, boring, traditional football teams with the new cool and youthful Eserien at play?*" (Soundcloud, 2018). In some ways, these arguments can be understood as expressions of specialization, quantification and obsession with records, as characteristics of modern sport (Guttmann, 1978/2004). Specifically, specialization is often closely linked to the professionalization and commercialization of elite sport (Tjønndal, Hjelseth & Lenneis, 2019) and sporting events.

In relation to Guttmann's (1978/2004) descriptions of modern sport, these arguments relate to what he describes as specialization, professionalization and commercialization, because the fear that "*Professional FIFA gamers and teams will steal funding from real football players*" (Fredrikstad Blad, 2019) implies that eSport, with the introduction of the new professional FIFA league, is already seen as a highly commercialized and professional sporting event that can compete with the traditional elite football league in Norway. This fear also implies that Eserien will make eFootball bureaucratized to the point that eFootball teams and athletes will apply for private and public funding alongside more traditional sports in Norway. While the specialization, professionalization and commercialization of eSport in Norway has taken a step forward with the introduction of professional FIFA players in Eserien, eFootball is still not close to the specialization of real football in Norway. In Guttmann's (1978/2004) terms, eSports are becoming increasingly specialized, but have not yet reached the level of traditional elite sport.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Main findings and limitations of the study

Returning to the research questions posed at the beginning of the article, the arguments against the inclusion of the professional FIFA league Eserien as part of the NFF revolve around three main themes. The first and most prevalent theme found in the material relates to health and physical activity, which connects to the socio-cultural belief that sport is healthy (Andersson & White, 2017) and the stereotype of video gaming as unhealthy (Taylor, 2012). Arguments like these also reflect core aspects of the sport-health ideology that dominate many of the sports policies in European countries (Malcolm, 2018). Thus, they can be understood as expressions of the successful policy implementation of the whitepaper *The Norwegian Sports Model* (Whitepaper 26, 2012). Simultaneously, such arguments are also in line with the philosophical belief that sport revolves around overcoming an opponent through physical skill, which is often highlighted in scholarly works arguing against considering eSport as sport (Parry, 2019).

The second category of arguments in the material revolves around cheating, match fixing and doping in eSport. In the light of Guttmann's (1978/2004) characteristics of modern sport, these arguments are perhaps the most valid , given that the first season of Eserien (spring/fall of 2019) had limited rules and regulations for ensuring equity and fair competition.

The third and final category of arguments against the inclusion of Eserien in NFF is concerned with the potential threats that the new focus on eSport could present for regular Norwegian football teams in terms of loss of spectators at football matches and loss of funding from corporate sponsors. The arguments produced here can be understood as expressions of a belief that with the introduction of a professional FIFA league organized by the NFF eSport has reached a level of specialization, commercialization and quantification that Guttmann (1978/2004) describes as a characteristic of modern sport. Still, it would seem as though eSport in Norway has a long way to go before reaching the specialization of traditional elite sport, especially in terms of coaches, referees, officials and supportive staff around athletes and teams.

The findings in this study illustrates that when it comes to eSport, digital transformation in sport management is still met with scepticism, reluctance and resistance. This is perhaps not so surprising, as the emergence of eSport represents a radical digital transformation in sport management, that some sports leaders and fans might view as a threat to the sports they know and love today. In the future, an important issue to address will be the integration of SVGs (in this case, FIFA) with their established governing bodies of sport. For instance, with the introduction of eFootball and its inclusion in the NFF, several dilemmas emerge. A potential issue for the NFF is the institutionalisation and organisation of Norwegian eFootball in general. While the NFF has the monopoly on organised 'real' football in Norway, it does not have the same monopoly for eFootball. If a major eSports company, such as EA Sports, decides to launch a (Norwegian) FIFA league, it might become more attractive for players than the NFF's eSerien. Another issue is that the NFF has no national eSports federation to support them in such commercial battles.

Any empirical study has its limitations and this study is no exception. This is a small study of the first season of the first Norwegian professional FIFA league organized by a Norwegian governing sports body (the NFF). As Eserien is still in its infancy, the sample of texts is naturally limited. Therefore, the findings from this study cannot be generalized without further explorations of coming seasons in Eserien and studies of the inclusion of professionalized sport simulation eSports leagues in governing sport bodies in other countries. However, I would also argue that because Eserien is such a young league, this also enables me to gain information on more critical positions on eSport.

Furthermore, I acknowledge the validity issues associated with internet research. In this study, data is derived from virtual content and in many cases the comments refer to online news articles or posts in digital public football fan forums. Some of these comments are anonymously

posted, and even with those that are not anonymous it is difficult to determine who the authors are and their intentions. Fake profiles in online communities pose a widespread problem, as does the 'trolling' culture where people seek to incite conflict online. Another validity issue in the research design of the study refers to the coding process of the data material. The coding and analysis of the data was done solely by the author. As Eggebø (2020) argues, when multiple researchers engage in qualitative analysis collectively, this enables a more creative analytical process, as well as strengthen the validity of the findings presented. Multiple researchers working collectively with qualitative analysis might strengthen validity, but only to a certain extent. There are limitations to how collective analysis can strengthen analytical validity. Still, doing qualitative analysis as an individual endeavour, as I have done in this study, could be a potential limitation of the analytical process. Moreover, it was not the goal of this study to generate the best possible validity, but to generate new insights into a novel researched field. Thus, more research is needed to support the results found here, and readers should be careful to transfer the findings from this study to other sporting contexts.

5.2 Theoretical and practical implications

This research offers theoretical and practical management contributions for sports organizations. Firstly, the findings allow for a more nuanced understanding of the resistance to eSport amongst traditional sports fans and adds to the growing literature of empirical studies on eSport in Europe. More specifically, the study sheds light on the kinds of arguments that are put forward by traditional sports fans when expressing their resistance to the digital version of their sport (in this case football) in online spaces. These insights expand on existing sport management research on spectators and the commercialization and professionalization of eSport, thereby helping to make the research gap on digital transformation in sport a little smaller.

For football club managers wishing to integrate eSport as part of their club activities, the study provides insights into the resistance that they are likely to encounter in the process. Consequently, these findings can help club managers to know what to expect. More importantly, the results show some of the weaknesses and start-up problems of introducing professional sport simulation eSports leagues into sport organizations. Particularly, the arguments found in the material pertaining to cheating and match fixing are valid concerns raised by football spectators. In the case of Eserien, in season one the NFF did not have a soundly established set of rules and regulations to ensure equity and fair competition among the new professional FIFA players.

Particularly, it raises concerns that in the most popular sport amongst Norwegian girls (football), not one single female FIFA player was recruited for season one of Eserien. This remains unchanged in the second season of Eserien in 2020. Managers of clubs and governing bodies can learn from Eserien's start-up problems and use this knowledge to ensure that a plan for doping control and rules and regulations for equipment and gender equity are in place before starting new professional eSport leagues as integrated activities in already established sport organizations.

A core aspect of digital transformation in sport is the complexities that sport managers face in their work to digitalize their organizations and businesses. From this study sport managers can gain new perspectives on why it can be complicated to implement new digital products, tools and services. As these findings show, when radical digital transformation is introduced in an organization - such as Eserien in the NFF, leaders, fans and players are likely to resist the disruptive changes that digitalization brings. This finding is transferable to other sport management contexts where radical digital transformations are imminent. Hence, sport managers who face such transformative situations should prepare for such negative reactions, while simultaneously considering the associated risks, should the introduction of the new digital product fail to accomplish its set goal.

5.3 Directions for future research

Empirical research on eSport is both rare and fragmented, and while empirical research on eSport in growing, most of this body of research has focused on topics such as gender equality (Taylor et al., 2009), doping among eSport athletes (Holden et al., 2017), the sociality of gaming in terms of social integration (Eklund & Roman, 2018), and motivation among eSport athletes and spectators (Bjørner, 2014; Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017). Yet, there is limited empirical research on the development of professional SVGs eSport leagues in different parts of the world.

The findings in this study aligns with Bertschy, Mühlbacherb and Desbordes (2020) findings in their study of SVGs eSport and the AS Monaco FC brand. In both cases, traditional football fans oppose the incorporation of SVGs eSport in traditional football clubs. Collectively, the findings from this Norwegian study and the findings from Monaco (Bertschy, Mühlbacherb & Desbordes, 2020) only represent two limited sporting contexts of the incorporation of football SVGs eSport in established football organizations. Hence, there is need for further studies of the introduction and development of professional eSport leagues, both football SVGs, other

SVGs and other genres of games, in other countries and socio-cultural settings. Especially, future research in this domain should investigate the merging of professional SVGs leagues with their national governing bodies of the specific sport, as this study has done with the introduction of eFootball in the activities of the NFF. Still, such organizational processes needs to be studied over time. Therefore, we need research designs that span over more than just the introductory season of such new leagues, as the case is in the present paper. Additionally, this study as well as the study of Bertschy, Mühlbacherb and Desbordes (2020) are set in a European contexts. Therefore, future studies on these issues from other continents would be particularly relevant.

Additionally, future studies on the development of professional SVGs eSport leagues should be mindful of the arguments against the introduction of the NFF's Eserien that is found in this study. Building on this, research on the expansion of professionalized SVGs eSport leagues can identify both novel ways to handle such challenges and dilemmas, as well as new possibilities for sport managers faced with similar processes of digital transformation.

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