Real and Virtual Sports –
Identity Dynamics Induced Through the Introduction of Esport by a Sport Brand

Abstract

Professional football clubs need to build, maintain, and enlarge their fan base. To do so, some well-known clubs have introduced esport activities under their brand name. Such decision might influence the social and individual identities of fans of the incumbent sport brand as well as the identity of the extended brand perceived by these fans and the fans of esport. Academic marketing and sport management research concerning such strategic moves and their impact on fan and brand identity is missing. By answering the question: "How does the development of an esport brand influence the identity of the parent sport brand?" this research aims at making a contribution to the literature on brand identity dynamics and on esport marketing. The researchers analyze the case of AS Monaco to find out if the social mechanisms described by the literature on brand identity co-construction apply in the same manner in this new field of research.

Key words: esport, football, brand identity, sport brand

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1. Introduction and Objectives

Brand identity management is an important issue for professional football clubs because they need to build, maintain, and enlarge their fan base. Some well-known clubs have introduced esport activities under their brand name. Such decision might influence the social identity of fans of the incumbent sport brand as well as the identity of the extended brand perceived by these fans and the fans of esport. Marketing and sport management literature concerning such strategic moves and their impact on related identities does not exist.

An increasing number of publications advocate a stakeholder- and process-oriented perspective on brands (Merz, He, & Vargo, 2009; Wider, von Wallpach, & Mühlbacher, 2018). Brands are no longer conceived as the exclusive product of managerial efforts (da Silveira, Lages, & Simões, 2013; von Wallpach, Voyer, Kastanakis, & Mühlbacher, 2017). A continuous multiplicity of stakeholders (Hillebrand, Driessen, & Koll, 2015) who themselves become part of the brand (Hemetsberger & Mühlbacher, 2014), engage in networked co-creation of brand identity. Consequently, brand identity is "dynamic, reciprocal, and iterative in nature" (Scott & Lane, 2002, p. 45; Gioia, Price, Hamilton, & Thomas, 2010). It emerges from continuous dialectic interaction processes in social contexts (Csaba & Bengtsson, 2006). By disseminating brand knowledge, expectations, evaluations, and experiences fans involved in the process contribute to a sport brand's identity development (Mumby & Clair, 1997) and simultaneously engage in the construction of their own identities (Scott & Lane, 2002; Black & Veloutsou, 2017).

Academic research on esport is rather recent and very much limited to specific physiological (Mora & Heas, 2003), social (Mora, 2014), motivational (Reeves, Brown, & Laurier, 2009), informational, communication (Van Ditmarsch, 2013; Buzy, Di Filippo, Goria & Thevenot, 2016), and sponsoring aspects (Taylor, 2012). Researchers interested in the dynamics of brand processes have rather focused on value co-creation of fan communities (Seo, 2013; Seo & Jung, 2014; Woratschek, Horbel, & Popp, 2014) and the relevance of sport brand communities for team loyalty (Popp, Wilson, Horbel, & Woratschek, 2016). The impact of the launch of esport activities under the name of a sport brand on the identity of that sport brand has not been investigated yet.

By answering the question: "How does the development of an esport brand influence the identity of the parent sport brand?" this research aims at making a contribution to the literature on brand identity dynamics and on esport marketing. The researchers present the case of AS Monaco to find out if the social mechanisms described by the literature on brand identity co-construction apply in the same manner in this new field of research. AS Monaco is an interesting case to study because the football section of the club lacks a large fan base and - since rather recently - wants to extend that base via the introduction of esport. The researchers analyze the impact of this decision on identity dynamics by longitudinal content analysis of online exchanges of fans of real and virtual sports and by semi-structured interviews with their opinion leaders concerning their perceptions of both offers of the club, the resulting perceived identity of the brand, their own social identity, and the identity of "the others". Managers of sport brands can profit from the findings in terms of a deepened understanding on what are the risks encountered by their brand when adding a virtual product and how they can potentially influence the ongoing brand identity-related processes in such a case.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Esport

Looking at current market figures, the originally "niche past-time" (Taylor, 2012, p.33) called esport has become a mainstream leisure activity, attracting millions of participants and online/offline spectators through events, competitions, and conventions worldwide. Up to 2018, the esport economy grew to 906 million dollars. Brands contributed 696 million dollars, to achieve an expected 1.4 billion dollars in 2021. Games evolve quickly. Esport is more and more broadcasted on TV, not only on dedicated channels. More and better views will increase the global esport audience to an estimated 380 million in 2018 (Newzoo, Q2 figures 2018).

Esport is part of "sport 3.0" (Loret, 2012). It does not replace sport 2.0 (the slide sports) and sport 1.0 (Olympic sports) but increases the world sport system. Sport and esport are intrinsically linked. The virtualization of sport activities (Loret, 2003) re-creates the sport sphere in virtual reality. In parallel, the "sportivization" (Parlebas, 1999, p. 379) of video games (re-)introduces gaming into the sport sphere (Suchet, 2011). Esport is becoming a new socio-cultural ecosystem with specific stakeholders, rules, codes, and language. Even if the majority of players are amateurs (Besombes, 2016), increasing professionalization of esport is a key marker of the esport scene. The number of actors multiplies: sponsors, event organizers, broadcasters, team owners and coaches, pro gamers, and fans (Taylor, 2012).

The esport enthusiast is mostly a man (70% versus 30% of women) between 10 and 35 years old (58%) and a millennial (SELL, 2017). Spectators follow events and competitions on the Internet (Twitch.tv, Youtube gaming) or on TV channels, or enjoy live experiences during LAN parties in sport arenas such as the Sang-am stadium in Seoul. Fans communicate directly with their team and the best gamers through websites, forums, podcasts, video on demand or esport chats (Taylor, 2012). Game journalists and commentators provide "powerful explanatory work" (Taylor, 2012, p.32) that influences the fans' perception of teams.

Professional football clubs, such as Paris-St-Germain, FC Schalke 04, Real Madrid, or Manchester United increasingly sponsor esport. For club management, esport is a new area for branding activities. Esport can be considered as a merchandised activity of a new business unit for the club (Chanavat, Desbordes, & Lorgnier, 2017; Chadwick, Chanavat, & Desbordes, 2015; Desbordes & Richelieu, 2018; Desbordes, Aymar, & Hautbois, 2018). The football clubs initiate - more or less consciously - potential changes of the identity of their brand by creating their own esport teams (Besombes, 2016).

If scholars accept (Wagner, 2006) and justify (Brougère, 2005) the study of computer-games in general, academic research regarding competitive computer gaming, esport, is still sparse and recent. Early research studies movements of players and the techniques of physical and sports activities (Mora & Heas, 2003). Taylor (2012) and Witkowski (2012) investigate the esport phenomenon and discuss if esport contains sport. Wagner (2006) advocates a proper academic treatment of esport as an academic field of research. Researchers such as Rambusch et al. (2007) analyze esport under the gaming angle, and discuss cognitive, cultural, economic, and technological aspects of people's game play activities (Reeves et al., 2009). Mora (2014) is first in studying esport from a sport sociology point of view. Later work researches esport audiences (Van Ditmarsch, 2013), and the value co-created through the esport consumption experience of the various stakeholders (Seo, 2013; Seo & Jung, 2014). More recent research focuses on information and communication aspects (Buzy, Di Filippo, Goria & Thevenot, 2016) and on mediatization of esport events (Hamari & Sjoblom, 2017).

2.2 Brand Identity

Since its introduction to the literature on brand management by Kapferer (1986) the brand identity construct has helped overcoming reductionist views of brands as a branded product, a name, design, or symbol (Kotler, 1991). According to Kapferer, a brand encompasses materializations, personality characteristics, and culture, speaks to the

customer's self-image, is a relationship, and reflects its prototypical users. Kapferer´s (2008) differentiated conceptualization of brand identity has contributed to a more elaborate view of brands, but by becoming more encompassing has also blurred the concept of "brand".

Literature on brand identity conceives brands as either manageable objects such as corporations or organizations (Balmer, 2001) or as social constructs. Viewing brands as organizations or objects with certain values and behavior entails that brands are independent, real entities, the identity of which can be crafted and managed. In contrast, Csaba and Bengtsson (2006) propose that brands are not definable by brand strategists but rather discursively constituted and articulated in different contexts and relationships. If brand identity is seen as merely ascribed, brands are malleable entities, perceptions produced by human minds, constructions of some collective. Instead of enduring and stable, brand identities are dynamic and fluid. The sources of brand identity are multiple, brand essence is subject to reflexive processes, negotiated and sometimes also contested.

The approach of Csaba and Bengtsson (2006) is in line with literature on individual and social identity that conceives identity as individually or socially constructed, based on social interaction (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995; Stets and Burke, 2000). Identity is always related to actors. Viewed from this perspective if brand management and research uses the identity concept, a brand must be a person, an organization or a product/service that is ascribed a person-like existence. A brand is an "actor" engaging in social interaction with relevant others who contribute to the identity development process by supporting, reflecting, ignoring, questioning, or opposing the self-reflected view of identity.

Social identity is the knowledge of persons that they belong to a social category or group (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). Social identities result from ongoing processes of self-categorization (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) in line with perceived or intended group membership. According to social identity theory, the social identities individuals derive from group memberships form an important part of their self-concept (Taijfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, 1982). Social identity leads to a contrasted view of "we" as compared to others. Social brand identities derive from knowing who is "we": consumers, employees, other stakeholders such as retailers, bloggers or journalists, a network of actors creating, generating, and consuming value(s). This view of who "we" are also entails abandoning others, who belong to the 'out-group' (Durkheim, 1973). Brand identity contrasts with who and what the brand is *not*. As social identities brands are ascribed identities and serve as sources for self-categorization through the enactment of stakeholders (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2010). Brand management as well as brand stakeholders are active and mutually co-creating brand identity in an ongoing process of social interaction (Black & Veloutsou, 2017; von Wallpach, Hemetsberger & Espersen, 2017).

Individual identities consist of multiple roles that become salient depending on contexts (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995). Individual identities uphold self-esteem, authenticity, and the potential of self-reference helping to remain identifiable and distinguishable as an individual in a group. Individual identity is reflexive. Individuals can take themselves as objects and categorize, classify, or name themselves in particular ways in relation to others who belong to the same group (Stets and Burke, 2000). Individual brand identity serves brand management to differentiate their brand and stakeholders to play specific role. Brand and stakeholders can identify with relevant others in a context specific manner.

Brand managers can deliberately develop the *intended* individual and social identity of a brand (Hemetsberger & Mühlbacher, 2009). Whereas most brand identity theorists referring to Aaker (2002), Kapferer (2008), or Buhrmann (2008) maintain the perspective of a stable identity communicated by management from which an "image" of the brand arises in consumer minds, Csaba and Bengtsson (2006) propose a dynamic perspective of brand identity *enactment* through stakeholders interested in the brand. Stakeholders, such as employees, customers, journalists, retailers, and brand antagonists do not have an image of

the brand. These stakeholders perceive social and individual identities of the brand that fluctuate with context. The stakeholders ascribe meaning to brands and consistently communicate about the joy or disappointment of working for, owning, consuming, using, trading, or feeling to be part of a brand. Thus, brand identity is fluid with situation-specific group and role identities that resonate with the expectations of their stakeholders, and make up the overall identity of a brand. *Enacted* brand identity continuously emerges from an active, reflexive process of social interaction of brand management, staff and external stakeholders. Brands need to expose themselves, accept norms of the group they want to belong to, and link their action to social structures. This view of brand identity implies that brand identity cannot be adequately defined in terms of brand *characteristics* but rather in terms of brand *processes*, such as brand discourse, behavior, and activities. Brand management's important role consists of determining and influencing these processes at the crossroads of intended and enacted brand identity (Hemetsberger & Mühlbacher, 2009).

2.3 Research gap and research question

The review of literature shows esport to be a dynamically emerging new field of research. Sport brand management research has not taken much notice of this field and of the dynamics in sport brand identity development so far. Esport activities represent new brand materializations (Mühlbacher & Hemetsberger, 2013) of sport brands that become subject to sense-making discourses of interested stakeholders. Sport and esport fans interact not only with brand managers and each other (Seo, 2013; Seo & Jung, 2014; Woratscheck, Horbel, & Popp, 2014) but also with other stakeholders such as staff, athletes, and journalists. Individuals and representatives of organizations contribute brand-related information, opinions, and share experiences (Healy & McDonagh, 2013). The identity of a traditional sport brand may change when management launches an esport section. There is no empirical evidence available concerning that case. To understand the dynamics of brand identity in case of the launch of esport activities by a sport brand, analyses of the communicative interaction of stakeholders are needed. The empirical study presented in the following makes a first contribution to fill the gap by answering the question: How does the development of an esport brand influence the identity of the parent sport brand?

3. Empirical study

3.1 Study context

The empirical research analyzes the identity dynamics resulting from the launch of an esport product by AS Monaco, a French football club, Football clubs have been the first sport organizations to develop esport products and many people play and watch football. Football clubs have strong fan communities who actively communicate about their club in the real and the virtual world. Researchers can observe their discourse on the web via archives and in real time. Sports media very actively inform their readers about any news concerning football clubs, players, and their activities. The launch of esport activities does not stay unnoticed, and the emotionality of media reports might influence the way fans and staff perceive the launch. This study focuses on AS Monaco because the club is at the infancy stage of its esport development. Recency of the phenomenon helps avoiding the risk of biased memory concerning the past due to intermediate events.

3.2 Method

The researchers conducted netnographic analysis as suggested by Kozinets (Kozinets, 2015) who takes up the idea of networked consumers as co-producers of brand identity. Netnography is digital ethnography (Füller, Jawecki & Mühlbacher, 2007) based on fan posts

and threads on the Internet. The method allows unobtrusive observation of the discourse between people interested in a subject matter.

The researchers gathered relevant posts and threads before and after the creation of the AS Monaco esport product. A double data mining approach covered the period from June 2016, before the creation of the AS Monaco esport team on October 26th, until July 2018. The researchers made a global online request on Internet applied to AS Monaco (www.asmonaco.com/fr) in French language. For the period of June 2016 to May 2018, 6259 URL appeared on 164 different websites which posted a link on the website of AS Monaco. Among those 6259 URL only 8 are related to esport in 2016, 1 in 2017, and 0 in 2018. None of these contributions include content of interest for the study.

For the period of February to July 24th, 2018 the researchers made a global online request without any source limitation applied to esport using all its variations in spelling in French language and lower or upper case, that is (esport~ OR "sports électroniques" OR sportélectronique OR sportselectroniques OR "sport électronique" OR Confesport OR esport OR esports) AND ("AS Monaco"). 416 URL resources could be identified: 192 on Twitter, 206 in online news (forums, blogs, on-line sport newspapers including L'Equipe the leading sports newspaper in France), 9 on Instagram, and 1 on Facebook. To counteract the lack of data, the researchers additionally analyzed the activities on AS Monaco, AS Monaco esports, AS Monaco FC Fanatik, Ultras Monaco 1994, CSM (Club des Supporters de Monaco) websites, Facebook pages, Twitter accounts and ASM Foot forum from June 2016 until July 2018. The researchers analyzed AS Monaco football and AS Monaco esports individually. No online interaction occurred with any of the influencers, fans, or other participants in the discourse.

4. Findings

AS Monaco launched their esport team on October 26, 2016. A special Facebook page has been open since August 2017. An AS Monaco esports Twitter account was created in September 2017. The majority of persons who communicate about AS Monaco esport are young adult (25-34 years old) men (77.3%). 45-54 years old men represent another significant portion of communicators. This age group contains journalists and experts having a professional interest in the fact of AS Monaco investing in esport. The discourse concerning AS Monaco esport takes place mainly on Twitter (46.7 %), on online news (22.2%) or blogs (21.5%). Newspaper communication represents 3.6%. The remaining 6% are distributed between Instagram, TV/radio, Magazines, Forums, Press releases, and others. Globally, Twitter represents the major channel to talk about esport (Bziiit, 2018). Esport, being a rather new subject in France, general information media talk about the subject, too. That is why there still is a sort of balance between different media sources.

The researchers analyzed AS Monaco football and AS Monaco eSports Twitter, Facebook pages, websites, and Foot Forum individually. The Twitter accounts of AS Monaco football fans, that is Ultras Monaco 1994 and AS Monaco FC Fanatiik did not discuss the creation of the AS Monaco esport team in 2016 and do not discuss esport in general. Two million members follow the twitter account managed by AS Monaco management. The account generated 51.400 tweets. The account re-tweets AS Monaco esport tweets, like the one about the partnership with Konami, a game editor on PES (Pro Evolution Soccer) starting in 2019, which generated 61 comments, 469 re-tweets and 1.808 likes by esport gamers, esport fans and AS Monaco fans.

The Facebook pages of AS Monaco FC Fanatik, Ultras Monaco 1994, and of CSM (Club des Supporters de Monaco) are not active every day. Their major subjects are information about football games and news about Mercato. The fans post fans' pictures from Louis II

football stadium during football matches. The creation of the AS Monaco esport team in 2016 remained unnoticed by posters on Facebook pages. No members of these communities took notice or deemed the launch worth commenting. Engaged posters did not change their way of communication. The researchers could not detect any evolution of the subjects discussed, nor did the emotional tone of ongoing communication change.

Among football fans, the brand identity of AS Monaco is strongly linked to the specific situation of Monaco. The website of ULTRAS Monaco 1994 particularly highlights two criteria that have to be respected by fans who want. to be part of the community: a very strong personal affection to Monaco, to the country, to the city, and an unconditional love for the AS Monaco football club as showcase of Monaco. The fans perpetuate the values of a purely *monegasque* culture: the spirit of the Principality, the language (*Munegascu)*, respect and honor to the Grimaldi family, and pride of what has been accomplished in Monaco. These values are part of their moto:

Notre foi est de ces feux que nul ne peut eteindre
[Our faith is of these fires nothing can put out]

Fans 'posts and pictures posted illustrate these values:

Toujours là! Par amour et par devoir!!! Fier de vous! DAGHE MUNEGU...
[Always ther! For love and duty!!! Proud of you! Go Monaco...]

Source - Ultras Monaco Facebook – June 5 and September 3 2018

Members of the Club des Supporters de Monaco and AS Monaco Fanatiik post similar pictures showing fans during games in Monaco and abroad. The fans express the same attachment to their team, their city, their colors (white and red), and the same passion for their club. On the AS Monaco Fanatiik facebook page, the fans express what the club means to them:

Tout d'abord c'est mon lieux de naissance ^^ Mais surtout c'est un club avec une histoire, des joueurs légendaires mais c'est aussi un club qui nous créée des émotions au fil es années. Et ce sont ces émotions qui nous permettnte de supporter ... Que dis-je ???De vivre au coter de ce fabuleux club! Donc pour moi Monaco est une grande pare de ma vie !
[First it's my hometown. But it is a club with a history, some legendaryl players but also a club which creates emotions year after year. And these emotions allow us to support....what am I saying? To live close to this fabulous club!so for me, Monaco is a big part of my life!]

The cloud of key words in fan posts (Figure 3) shows the strong positive representation that fans have of their club (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Word cloud of football fans in 2018

In April 2018, the Ultras Monaco 1994 question the team management of AS Monaco football about their results and the impact on their values in a public letter posted on Facebook and Twitter. The letter talks about shame, abandonment of title, the fans' title, the respect of club values, dignity. A great number of following posts reinforce the message:

Honte à eux. Ils ont salient notre maillot.
Ils sont rentr dans l'histoire en reculent

[Shame on them. They spoiled our football jersey.
They made it into history by loosing ground.]

Les joueurs n'on aucune fierté a porté ce maillot car on es pour tous ceux qui signe un club tremplin , donc ne considère pas notre club comme grand et je pense que c'est une erreur !!!!
[The players are not proud to wear this football jersey because we are a springboard club for all who sign, they do not consider ou rclub to be great and I think that this is an error!!!!]

Beaucoup sot des mercenaires et nous à Monaco c est une passion avant tout, une fierté de porter nos couleurs rouge et blanche un privilège d'être sur le rocher.
On veut des joueurs qui se saignent pour le club pour notre principauté. Daghe Munegu 🔴⚫⚪🇲🇨

[A lot are mercenaries and we, in Monaco, it's a passion before anything, a pride to wear our colors red and white, a privilege to live here, on the Rock. We want players ready to sacrifice themselves for the club for our principality]

The fans consider the club as an extension of their self, as a human being who has to have strong moral values. The business model and the strategy the team management decided to follow is unacceptable for the fans. Their values are in conflict with those of management. For fans, it is nt an option to sell the team and destroy the club jut for personnal financial interests.

Shame on AS Monaco. Sell all their big players just because of money.

But even when the fans are disappointed or angry against the team management, they stay positive about their team, their club. In all social media fans defend their club against everyone and everything. Fans are supporters for ever and in any case and not footix, who support their team just when it wins:

> *Malgré ce début de saison on continue à croire en vous. On vous lâchera jamais !*
> *[Despite this beginning of season, we continue to believe in you. We will never let you go!]*
> *Daghe munegu* 🟥 *malgré la déception actuel, faut continuer à vous soutenir*
> *[Go Monaco. Despite the deception, we have to support you]*

On the ASM Foot Forum, AS Monaco fans started only 2 conversations about AS Monaco esport, In the first conversations on the day of the launch of the AS Monaco esport team the football fans commented the launch of the esport team and the new partnership with Epsilon. Fans identified this collaboration as a good way for AS Monaco to be well known abroad and to further develop the club:

> *Cool for the development of the club!*
> *So that the brand Monaco is a little more visible in the world, I think.*
> *It is not very important but it is not bad this partnership, for the development etc. Step by step to extend the club.*
> *In fact this young guy, he will travel around the world to participate in tournaments of video games with the shirt of Monaco on the back?*

The second conversation occurred on March 6th, 2018 and commented the partnership between AS Monaco esport and Konami on PES2019 in a quite positive manner:

> *Not bad. Let's see the figures now.*
> *It is just for the e-sport section, the soccer section will not benefit from it and it is certainly a small amount.*
> *E-sport, that is visibility to some circles which are richer than we can imagine. And it is also a way to develop a better image.*
> *That's clear, hope that it will bring plenty of money. That is a global sponsor, so who knows? It comes certainly from the network of the new sales manager who came from Barça.*
> *The e-sport section was created to make the club more visible and to draw benefits for the development of the club.*
> *You can't know for e-sport. There are amounts that exceed what we think. I do not know any more if it happened one or two years ago, for a national competition (in the States or in China) I believe, ten millions have been invested. E-sport is the youngest sports sector and the most in development. The fact that the broadcasting platforms like Twitch or YouTube exist, where the geek community is very active, allow the clubs, who want to play the game by respecting the codes of media, to catch a public which is not interested by sport. But if we talk about e-sport with them, maybe they could be attracted by the football world.*
> *Yes, we agree pcelly, it is not directly.*
> *In any case, the E-sport attracts a lot and that improves the visibility. The proof is that we have a big sponsor who just arrived for the e-sport branch. Who knows, maybe it will want to write his name on the shirt?*
> *Now it's time to create pages on Chinese, Korean social media….and make the Korean gamer Kwon to come from Dijon, it would be cool.*

Esport fans communicate mainly on the AS Monaco eSports Facebook page and Twitter account. These fans do not talk about the club and its strategy concerning football.

The esport fans are positive about the brand particularly in connection with AS Monaco esport players. The AS Monaco esports Twitter account tweets about the activities of the AS Monaco esport team and its gamers: "Sneaky","Vinch" and "RayZiaaH" on FIFA, Slimane Saada on NBA 2K, and Enzo Philippau and Tomamas on Gran Turismo. Two million people follow the account that generated 51.400 tweets. Some followers re-tweet AS Monaco esport tweets, like the one about the partnership with PES which generated 61 comments, 469 re-tweets and 1.808 likes by esport gamers, esport fans and AS Monaco fans. As detailed in the report *Listening on talks AS Monaco esport*, the subject of AS Monaco esport created increasing engagement in 2018, from 13 tweets during May and June to 6.800 in July.

The early posts on AS Monaco`s own esports Facebook account received very few likes. On October 1st 2017, a young AS Monaco esport fan posted but did not receive any comment:

> *Bravo AS Monaco (Like emoji) you know how to accomplish big stuff, you have grasped the potential of E-Sport (;) emoji).I can´t wait for the 11 vs 11 in Monaco ^_^ let´s get serious :D.*

The traffic on the account increased from January 2018 on in consequence of the development of the esport team from FIFA, to NBA and Gran Turismo. A posted video on July 20, 2018 announced the partnership between AS Monaco and Konami. The video attracted 39.839 views and likes. Only one facebooker expressed anger about the partnership.

Important influencers, publishing on Twitter, on-line news, and Instagram are experts in football like Dahbia Hattabi, esport journalists like Alix Dulac, esport event organizers like SFCO, or esport pro gamers like Sardoche (Table 1). Gamers like Walid Rachid Tebane@Usmakabyle new PES player at AS MC (PES world champion 2015-2016) relate to the football club in a respectful manner:

> *Très heureux de vous annoncer mon retour sur la scène #PES et qui plus est au sein d'un club aussi mythique que l'AS Monaco. Un honneur et une immense fierté de représenter un des plus beaux palmarès du football français, d'intégrer un projet esports prometteur.*
> *[Very happy to announce I am back on PES and in such a mythic club of AS Monaco. An honor and a huge pride to be the representative of one of the best French football teams, to be part of a promising esport project]*

AS Monaco football and AS Monaco esport did not appear on the list of highly active influencers in the ongoing discourse until the Spring of 2018 when AS Monaco management decided to strongly increase the intensity of communication in social media.

Table 1: Major Influencers of the ongoing discourse

THE INFLUENCERS

Auteur le plus actif	**Auteur le plus influent**	**Site le plus actif**	**Site le plus influent**
SFCO Twitter 10 Publications	Dahbia Hattabi Actualités en ligne 5.2K Engagement	xitfilms.ru Actualités en ligne 6 Publications	footmercato.net Actualités en ligne 5.2K Engagement
Best active author	Best influent author	Best active website	Best influent website

INFLUENCEURS An influencer generates interaction, is the one who has engagement, who makes people react with comments, likes...

Influenceurs		Publications	Sentiment	Portée	Portée par mention	Engagement	Engagement par mention
Dahbia Hattabi, footmercato.net		1		4.1M	4.1M	5.2K	5.2K
Yannick Sagorin, sports.fr		1		1.4M	1.4M	197	197
inside_asmonaco, instagram.com		1		0	0	144	144
Indépendence Gaming @Independence_IG		3		3.2K	1.1K	118	39.3
kinguinofficial, instagram.com		1		0	0	111	111
Sardoche @Sardoche_Lol		1		102.2K	102.2K	86	86
alix dulac, rmcsport.bfmtv.com		2		4.6M	2.3M	71	35.5
SFCO @SFCO_eSport		10		571.1K	57.1K	71	7.1
Alix Dulac, gameblog.fr		5		7.5M	1.5M	56	11.2
edu suliano, we.brothers.net		1		14.3K	14.3K	52	52

The cloud of key words appearing in the ongoing discourse (Figure 2) shows the strong identification of discourse participants with the city of Monaco related to football and esports on the same level of importance. The dominance of Monaco resonates in the number of hashtags where Monaco and DagheMunegu appear in prominent place. Together with the team and the stadium in Fontvielle the city of Monaco constitutes the most important parts of AS Monaco football´s physical manifestations. Football is more related to sport, entertainment, players (Falcao), and the stadium in the contributions of communicators than esports that is more connected with marketing, business, esport gamers, and the director of Konami Jonas Lygaard. The enacted brand personality is pretty much the same for football and AS Monaco esport: an ambitious challenger who successfully evolves and earns increasing European and international visibility.

Figure 2 – Cloud of key words

An analysis of the emotionality of contributions based on the context of complete sentences instead of a simple analysis of keywords shows that the AS Monaco brand generates mainly positive emotional reactions around the key words Monaco, football and esports (Figure 3). Some words related to football such as *football, joueur, championnat, league, finale, stade, radamel, or falcao* are similarly important in the expression of emotions than words endogenous to esport, such as *Konami, playstation,* xbox, *PES, or lygaard*. There is an overall positive feeling about the brand, the new esport partner Konami, players, and entertainment together with successful evolution. 76% of expressions represent joy. 8.8% of posts express positive surprise. Negative emotional expressions are split between 6.6% sadness and 8% of anger and disgust. The emoji used by contributors confirm the feeling analysis with a large majority of positive emotions.

Figure 3: Key factors driving emotions

NEUTRAL   POSITIVE

5. Discussion

The goal of this research is to produce some first empirical evidence on brand identity dynamics due to the launch of esport activities by an incumbent sport brand. It appears from the presented findings that the football fans of AS Monaco are not or only very peripherally interested and touched by the club´s new esport activities. The football fans seem to ignore the new business, except when it can be interesting for the club, by bringing money, increase international visibility and the image of the club. The newly gained AS Monaco esport fans do not intrude and disturb their ecosystem. AS Monaco football fans seem to consider esport fans not belonging to their in-group. Esport is simply an add-on to what they consider important potentially increasing the international visibility and financial strength of the brand. When football fans become active on their preferred sites they tend to act in an emotionally positive manner. The social identity of the brand has not changed. Individual brand identity has gained one more role to play that does not disturb the former existing roles.

The newly won group of esport fans communicates in a rather enthusiastic manner. These fans identify with the newly acquired gamers and do not care about the football section. The fans identify with the esport role of AS Monaco and ascribe an increasingly strong belonging of the brand to the global community of esport competitors. The brand has added a new facet to its social identity without hurting the existing identity.

These findings show that two groups of fans of the same sport brand can exist quite apart from each other if they perceive and enact different social identities of the brand they feel belonging to. They consider the brand playing different roles that might support each other in strengthening the brand. At least, the addition of the new role does not do any harm. The fans of each section identify with the specific social identity of the brand. That is, sport brands cannot only have different traditional social sport identities in parallel but can add an esport identity facet without hurting their brand.

The findings underline the influence of various stakeholders on the discourse related to a sport brand. The discourse becomes more or less engaging depending on events. The fact that AS Monaco and AS Monaco esport do not appear among the influencers in the ongoing discourse may be due to the infancy of their social media and of the AS Monaco esport team. At the same time the strongly increasing communicative activities in 2018 induced by a more active role of club management show the importance of inputs from brand management to continuously fuel the ongoing discourse.

6. Conclusion

Esport is not only a new social and business phenomenon spreading fast all over the world. It also represents an interesting field of research for many disciplines. Despite the potential influence of esport activities on incumbent sport brands, sport brand literature has not picked up on the trend yet. The research presented here provides some first insights to the field.

The research has a number of limitations. Since January 2018, protection of individual data has been reinforced due to the GDPR regulation. Social media, like Facebook or Twitter, developed their specific data architecture to allow or refuse data access. Since then it has become more difficult to get detailed data from social media for a long-term period.

The empirical phase of the research is not finished yet. Semi-structured interviews of AS Monaco fan community leaders will complete netnography. Such interviews help deepening the understanding of the drivers of community discourse related to the brand and the launch of the esport activities. So far, the researchers had no direct personal interaction with any of the influencers, fans, or other participants in the discourse. Fans and journalists interpret the observable behavior of employees as an expression of the identity of the brand. When sport brand managers launch an esport product they intend reaching certain goals and behave

accordingly. Personal semi-structured interviews of AS Monaco managers and staff together with the analysis of internal documents related to the product launch will provide information concerning the reasons for actions taken within the period of research. A comparison with the content and emotionality of the discourse following those actions will allow determining how the actions influenced the development of the discourse. The number of interviews will depend on when the level of information saturation is reached (Charmaz, 2006; Quinn-Patin, 2015).

A longitudinal media content analysis of *l'Equipe* the leading French sport newspaper, will complement the empirical research. Analyzing articles concerning the AS Monaco esport launch over the time period of observation and a comparison with the posts and threads of fans during the same period as well as the actions taken by club management will allow an assessment to what extent public media influence the fans' discourse related to the sport brand and potentially changes in brand identity.

The online requests were conducted in French language only. Future research should use English language, opening the research to Asian websites and social media, in particular in China and South Korea, where football and AS Monaco are well known and considered by AS Monaco management as future ways of development. Because of the specificities of the case of AS Monaco, future research should compare the findings of this exploratory research to the identity dynamics of bigger clubs such as Paris St. Germain and Manchester United when these clubs launched their esport activities.

Despite the unfinished state and the limitations of this research sport brand managers can draw an interesting implication from the findings: management of a traditional sport brand can launch esport activities without hurting the intended brand identity if the fans of the sport brand do not consider the fans of the esport brand to be rivals but an additional out-group that does not hurt their turf. Management must consider the creation of two social identities being apart and of an additional facet of individual brand identity that positively adds to the existing roles.

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