

How might design be used to better represent Esports and its position within mainstream media?

Introduction

In today's world, sport has been shifted drastically by a global pandemic and the rise of exciting new technologies. Whilst physical sports have had to take measures like having matchups with no crowds in stadiums and stepping away from a pay-per-view model, esports on the other hand has been able to continue to grow with little disruption, mainly due to the industry already operating on a primarily digital front. But with the disruption in physical sports, why hasn't the media capitalized on esports? Instead of coverage of the Olympics being postponed for another year, show coverage of one of the high octane tournaments esports showcases weekly. Whilst esports thrives during current times, it still faces its deep, core issues of stabilization and brand specification. This report will aid in breaking down esports and its positions in the media and what esports means to the public, as well as exploring possibilities through design for esports' core issues.

Esports is a term used to categorise competitive video gaming. According to the British Esports Association (BSA), "Esports is competitive (human-vs-human) and usually has an engaging spectator element to it, like traditional sports." (*What are esports? An overview for non-fans*, 2020) BSA also says that esports is

“competitive video gaming where skill and professionalism is celebrated.” (*What are esports? An overview for non-fans*, 2020) Esports can be played in single, player vs player games or in team games. Teams can be owned by brands, countries or cities. For example, in the video game Overwatch, and their competitive league, the teams that compete represent cities around the world, and are all unique in their brands. Team examples include Huston Outlaws and London Spitfire. The Overwatch league also has a world cup, where the best players from a country come together and form a team to compete for the Overwatch world cup. Teams in esports also have coaches, analysts, strategists and managers who help bring the most out of the players. One of the things that stands out about esports is its accessibility, in which it's open to anyone and everyone, and teams and tournaments are mixed between all sorts of ages and genders. Another thing that stands out about esports is its earnings, with the industry in 2020 grossing in \$1.1 billion according to a global esports market report by Strive (2020) and is predicted to grow to \$1.9 billion in 2022 (Massaad, 2017). Alongside this, Newzoon (2020) reports that in 2020 the global esports audience grew to 495 million people, an 11.7% increase from 2019.

Aims

Regarding the question, my aims to answer it are;

- Ask the general public questions regarding the state of esports and its position in the media, and create a discussion using data and facts vs opinion and feelings.
- Look into existing brands, organisations, games, teams and media that are involved or cover esports, and find out what they do to bring in attention, money, and an audience.

- Exploring the way esports promotion can be used to reach alternative audiences, as well as explore ways esports can fix its issues of stabilization and brand specification.

As for how these aims will be met, for the first bullet point, I will be talking to the public through a questionnaire to gather data for a discussion about how the public see esports and its coverage within the mainstream media. For the second bullet point, I will be looking at statistics within esports through websites, videos and journals, and thoroughly explaining what the esports industry is, how it operates, its history with mainstream media and its problems. As for the third bullet point, I will be using the information from the first and second aims to discuss possibilities for where esports could go to further expand its audience and its coverage in the media, as well as looking at some of the main problems in the industry and trying to pitch ways to tackle them through design.

Games, Viewership and Revenue

There are many games associated within the esports scene. Some of the most popular games are League of Legends, Counter-Strike: Global Offensive, Overwatch, Super Smash Bros, Call of Duty, etc. These games are successful for many reasons, one being that esports consists of so many genres of games that there's always something new, fresh and engaging to interact with or watch. For example, League of Legends is a 5 vs 5 player arena game, where each team's objective is to destroy the other team's base. Each player in the game plays a unique character known as a champion, and each of the players have their own unique abilities and powers, which evolve and upgrade as the game goes on and by how well the player performs. This esports experience is nothing like the esports experience of a game like Call of Duty though. Call of Duty in esports works with 4 vs 4 player teams, and works on a selection of modes in the game that mix straight slaying with objective, to bring out the strengths of all players in a team. Call of Duty also works on fixed or restricted loadouts that the player has a choice from. So whilst Call of Duty is more balanced, its high octane movement and intense gunfights provide the same craziness as 10 unique characters going head to head to take out an enemy base in League of Legends. Esports has many games that bring out the same hype and

energy through completely unique and different means, and that's one of the things that excels this industry in the sporting market.

There is also esports for existing physical games that have been brought online, like Poker and Chess. Most of these games and tournaments are played using PC's, though with Cross-Play becoming more and more of a normal feature in top games, and current generation consoles being able to compete with the performance of many medium to high-end PC's, players entering and playing on consoles like Xbox and PlayStation is becoming more common in tournaments. To get a glimpse of the scale of esports, BSA says that "some of the biggest tournaments offer millions of pounds in prizes." With them exemplifying the Dota 2 international and the Fortnite World Cup both offering \$30 million in a total prize pool for players. (*What are esports? An overview for non-fans, 2020*)

Esports can happen fully online, at small gatherings, conventions and full stadiums or arenas. According to Sports Pro Media, in 2020, the League of Legends World Championship peaked at 3.8 million viewers at a single time, which is slightly lower than last year's peak of 3.9 million. But it also saw over 139 million hours of viewership, which is up from last year's total of 137 million. (Dixon, 2020) Some of the top esports tournaments in history have been the League of Legends Championship of 2015, the CFS World Championship of 2017, The League of Legends World Championship of 2016, the Intel Extreme Masters Katowice of 2017, and the League of Legends Mid-Season Invitational of 2018. (Navarre, 2020)

Looking at the overall value and generated revenue from the esports industry, a market research agency called "Ovum" released a documented report titled "Esports Revenue Forecast: 2017-22". Ovum predicts that the global esports market will be valued at \$1.9 billion in 2022, which is huge considering in the report Ovum states that in 2013 the industry was only valued at \$100 million. Ovum have described the developing market of the esports industry as "The Wild West", due to the wealth of opportunities with the developing market that are looking for a business model and structure that can benefit all parties. Ovum also says that "the benefits of involvement could be spectacular" and that those who are

entering the industry need to understand where it is best to make a difference, and that they should act quickly. (*Esports will be worth almost \$2bn in 2022, claims new report, 2020*)

Players and Non-Endemic Brands

A lot of professional players in esports earn a lot of money, with top esports players having earned over \$1 million. This money collectively comes from tournaments, contracts, sponsors, brands, merchandise and more. (Willingham, 2018) Looking at Esports Earnings's current report on players' earnings in 2021, it is apparent that the statement above is not wrong. Already this year, some players like Bojun Zhu and Ronghua Zeng from China have earned \$140 Thousand. Esports Earnings also shows players' total earnings, which again boosts the statement above, with players like Peter Rasmussen from Denmark having a total of nearly \$1.9 million earned from competing in esports. (*Top Players of 2021 - History, 2021*)

Also, a lot of players have taken to streaming during or after competing in esports tournaments. A good example is Félix Lengyel, known as xQc, who is a former Overwatch League professional esports player, who now is one of the lead faces of live streaming and content creation in gaming. During his time in esports and the Overwatch League, he was already making a seven-figure sum, whilst having a net worth of \$1 million. Today, his net worth is over \$4 million, (Watesh, 2020) with most days spent streaming to an audience averaging of 60k people, full of direct donations and subscriptions to his channels and content.

A lot of famous brands and people have become involved in esports over the last few years. Some notable brands include Coca-Cola, The Olympics committee, Nike, Mastercard, Red Bull, BMW, Dolby, Dominos, Bud Light, and many more. (Bednarski, 2018) Some notable people who are involved with esports include Drake, Ariana Grande, Will Smith, Marshmello, Mike Tyson, The Weeknd, Michael Jordan and Shaquille O'Neal. (Jain, 2019)

Esports in Mainstream Media

Another topic to look at with this question is within the term “Mainstream” and looking at the main sporting mainstream media. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, Mainstream as an adjective means “considered normal, and having or using ideas, beliefs, etc. that are accepted by most people”. Its noun definition is “the way of life or set of beliefs accepted by most people” and its verbal definition is “to make something start to be considered normal”. (Cambridge Dictionary, 2021)

Looking at esports and its positions within mainstream media, we must look back to around the year 2013, where the mainstream media first started acknowledging and covering esports. Looking at a good video from Tramah on YouTube, Tramah shows a lot of footage from multiple news channels and mainstream media sources from the past few years, which tell the story of how esports has evolved, grew, and changed within mainstream media. At first, the media mocked the esports industry, mainly mocking the nerd demographic, the fact it is a video game, its health factors, and so on. (Tramah, 2016) This was the main argument in the media about esports for a couple of years, until figures and data started coming out about how much the esports industry is bringing in, and how it is being more successful than most other sports like NBA, NFL, etc. From this point, with the help of many physical athletes and celebrities defending the industry, the mainstream media decided to do a U-Turn and buy into esports. From here, more and more mainstream sport media outlets like ESPN, CNN, BBC Sport, BT Sport, HBO Sport and Vice have invested heavily into the esports scene and have brought in many brands and figures along with them. Also, news media outlets and talk shows like Conan, Joe Rogan, Forbes, The New York Times, Jimmy Fallon, Sky, TNT, Jimmy Kimmel and so on have their own branches and standpoints within the eSports industry. (theScore esports, 2017)

Current Day Position of Esports

Looking at esports and its current position in mainstream media, esports is at an all-time high and is one of the biggest and opportunistic industries out there. More and more of the biggest brands, people and medias' are investing into esports. Social Media's like Facebook and YouTube have their own gaming and esports extensions built into them, Sky and other high end betting services are taking bets and wagers for match ups, celebrities like Drake and Magic Johnson are co-owners of esport organisations and teams, and we live in a time were getting into video games and playing or watching esports games has never been easier.

However, there are some journalists saying that the scenario for esports right now is that the mainstream media is playing catchup towards this industry, as a price to pay for their negligence and insult towards the industry nearly 10 years ago. According to an article from The Guardian, the journalist reckons that a lot of the mainstream media is playing catch up as an attempt to regain and steal back more viewers into their platform and the mainstream media, but instead according to the data it is just doing the opposite. (Hern, 2015) A lot of the mainstream media involvement is very behind the scenes or kept on the low. For example, main media outlets like BBC are showcasing esports on their secondary channels like BBC Three, its online service, and BBC 4, instead of its headlining channels of BBC 1 and 2. Esports is looking like it hasn't solidified its position within the sporting market to fully sell itself to the mainstream media, and get the frontline coverage it is seeking.

How to Represent Esports

So, when we look at the question, what does “better represent” mean in terms of esports in the mainstream media? Well, one way to do this would be to provide the necessary information about esports to brands and media before they step into the esports industry. Another way would be to further push main esports events into the global scale, with more broadcasters and commenters chipping into the biggest esports events. Another way would be to push the accessibility of esports even further to people by broadcasting on national television and having more games directly support esports. Or, you could have local councils and governments, or places like schools, have their own local tournaments and clubs for esports. What about design solutions? One way to promote esports could be through controversy, by creating a campaign based on esports being better than a physical sport, and having the campaign brag about its earnings and its viewership. Another way design can help better represent esports could be through a branding agency that works with officiating and promoting teams and tournaments to mainstream media, which would provide that link from esports to the mainstream media that is currently still being built up, giving both parties an easier time working together. The ways to expand esports’ representation is certainly vast.

Case Study: Esport Brands

To break it down though and strictly talk about esports’ representation within mainstream media coverage, firstly we must look at what representation really means. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, the term Representation as an acting noun means “a person or organization that speaks, acts, or is present officially for someone else”. As a descriptive noun it means “the way that someone

or something is shown or described". (Cambridge Dictionary, 2021) So, in this context the question will be looking at how others can better represent esports through mainstream media. With this context, I must look at some brands that were born into the esports industry and represent the industry in some of the biggest ways.

Looking at a brand called "100 Thieves", they are one of the biggest organisations involved in the esports industry whilst only being established 3 years ago. 100 Thieves, pronounced "Hundred Thieves", was built at the intersection of competitive gaming, entertainment, and apparel. The brand was founded in 2017 by Matthew "Nadeshot" Haag, who is a former OpTic Gaming Call of Duty captain, X Games gold medallist, and 2014 Esports Athlete of the Year. In its first 2 years, 100 Thieves has won multiple esports major championships and made the League of Legends and Fortnite World Championships. (100 Thieves, 2021) But 100 Thieves does not just thrive in the competitive scene, they also thrive online as influencers and content creators. 100 Thieves have done many things to make a statement in the media, with things like having multiple top gaming podcasts on iTunes, selling out over a dozen apparel drops, having multiple content creators signed to the brand with a combined following count of over 20 million, building the Cash App Compound and the 100 Thieves content house in Los Angeles, and having big time investors like musician Drake, Scooter Braun, and the owners of the Cleveland Cavaliers. 100 Thieves also has a lot of sponsorships including Cash App, General Mills, Rocket Mortgage, Red Bull, JBL, AT&T and Chipotle, (100 Thieves, 2021) with their most recent being Rockstar Energy Drink, with their reveal being one of the main Superbowl Adverts of 2021. 100 Thieves has an incredibly diverse range of branding and design to represent every single move 100 Thieves make, ranging from decorative social media posts to standpoint editing and design to represent their teams, content, and big brand announcements. And this strong design ambition has paid off, bringing 100 Thieves over 850 thousand followers on Twitter and 1.19 million subscribers on YouTube. Whilst building up 100 Thieves, Nadeshot was named Forbes 30 under 30 for his success as an entrepreneur and content creator.

Assumptions

I assume that with the results of the questionnaire, more people will be unfamiliar with Esports and how it works, and probably haven't watched it. I'm more confident about assuming that people have heard of Esports through talk shows and other sports castings over other ways of advertisement and publicity. I think that more people from the questionnaire will think Esports is a sport and defend it as one. I also think that people will agree with me on saying that the coverage of Esports is still more negative than positive, and that it isn't being covered to its full potential. I think that people will agree with some of my suggestions towards bringing more people and involvement into the esports industry. I also think that people won't see physical sport and esports to be that different from each other.

Data Discussion

The questionnaire I released to the public for this report was well received and met my target goal of 100 responses. A total of 112 answered the questionnaire. The questionnaire covered 3 sections and also had an intro set of questions. Section 1 was about the debate "Is esports a sport?". Section 2 was about the person's interest in esports. Section 3 was about esports in the media. The questionnaire is titled: Esports: Is it a Sport? A discussion regarding how the public sees esports' current position in the media and the financial market. Also included in the questionnaire are cited definitions for the terms "Esports" and "Mainstream" as well as what I mean by the phrase "Esports in media". When going over the results, all respondents will remain anonymous with their answers and replies to the questions asked.

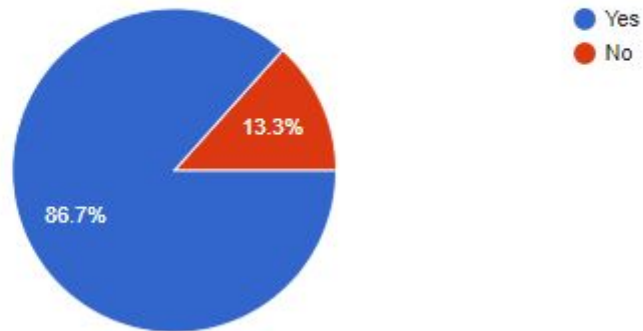
Looking at the data provided, most of the questions I asked in the questionnaire were choice questions, with 4 having paragraph options. I won't fully go over the paragraph answers, but I will draw from some answers and provide a general overview to the responses people said. I also won't cover all the questions, but will provide the data for what I see are the most important questions in the questionnaire. Firstly, looking at the initial questions, the main age range to answer

the questionnaire was 18-28 year olds. No over 50's answered the questionnaire, which doesn't really surprise me due to how I've seen esports represented by that age range. Everyone who answered the questionnaire knew about esports, with the majority of people's initial opinion of Esports matching the definition I provided in this report from the Cambridge Dictionary.

Looking at section 1 of the questionnaire, which is about the debate "Is esports a sport?", and the question "Do you think Esports is a Sport?", 86.7% of the respondents said yes to the question, and 13.3% said no. When looking at the reasons for the answers, a lot of respondents cited that the demand for mechanical skill and intelligent strategy is what makes esports a sport, whilst some others said it was due to the amount of teamwork and cooperation from teams and brands. Also, some other respondents said that the physical and mental training required to stay healthy in esports makes it a sport. One person who responded said he would even class each type of game within esports its own genre of sport, which I found as an interesting take. A few people who disagreed with esports being a sport said it was due to the lack of physical involvement and said that esports went against the definition of sport. Others who disagreed simply said it was because esports plays video games. Moving on in section 1, I dive deeper into seeing if statistics I cited earlier in this report would help influence esports as a sport to people answering the questionnaire. First, I showed the yearly revenue income for esports and compared it to other popular sporting leagues, and stated that in 2020 esports generated more than \$1.1 billion. I then asked if this would class esports more as a sport. 56% of people agreed it would, whilst 44% said it wouldn't. I then explained that both esports and physical sports require a high level of skill and talent to compete in, with both types of sport requiring the competitors to have a vast knowledge of the sport and their rolls. I followed this up by asking if esports and physical sports really are that different. 76% said no they aren't that different, whilst 24% said they are different. I followed up this question by talking about how more well know physical sports like poker, football, chess and golf are making their way into the esports scene, and asked if people would still class these are sports if they were played in a digital, online manor. 93.3% of people said yes they are still sports, whilst 6.7% said no to them still being sports. To conclude section 1, I asked if people considered esports players and professionals athletes. 82.7% of people class them as athletes, with 17.3% not classing them as athletes.

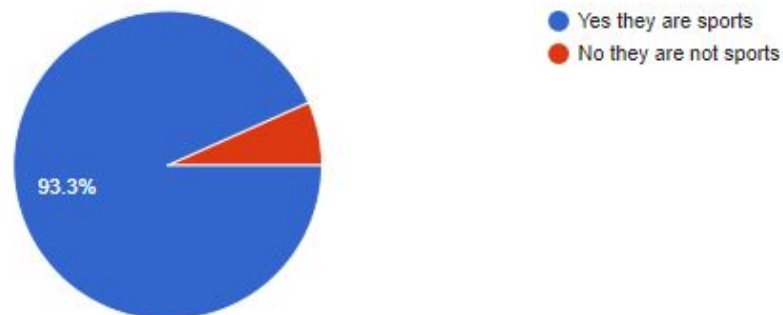
Do you think Esports is a Sport?

75 responses



If I told you that physical sports like Chess, Football, Poker and Golf are making their way into the Esports scene, would you consider these Sports still or not?

75 responses

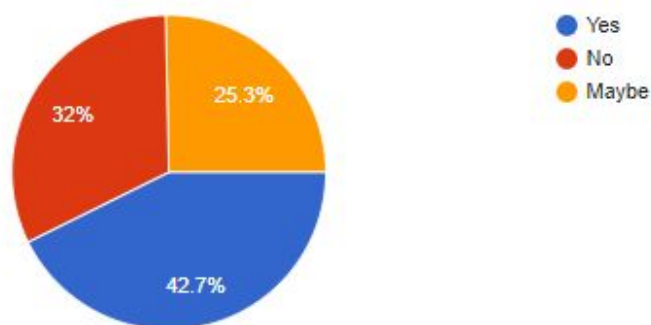


Looking at section 2 of the questionnaire, which is about people's interest in esports, and the question "Do you watch Esports on TV or on the Internet?", 76% of the respondents said yes to the question, and 24% said no. When looking at the reasons for the answers, a lot of the respondents said that the level of action in esports is what interests them in watching it. Some others also said that the commentary for esports was better than for most other sports, and was another thing that interested them in watching. Some people also watch esports due to playing the game that's being competed on themselves, and just enjoy watching as well as playing that game. Some people also like watching esports due to the variety in games, genres and players. However, some people said they don't like watching esports due to where they can watch it, or that they just find it boring. Some other people said they don't watch esports because they don't like the game

being played in esports. Some people also said that it's due to time zones that they don't watch esports, or that it's a bit overwhelming on where to start watching. Moving on in section 2, I dive deeper into seeing if some already existing incentives that are not public knowledge would actually further interest people into watching and getting involved with esports. First, I asked if people saw a famous person that you liked being involved with esports, would that further people's interest in esports. 42.7% said yes, 25.3% said maybe, and 32% said no. Next, I asked if people saw or heard esports coverage on their favourite TV channel, news channel or radio station, would that further people's interest in esports. 44% said yes, and 28% said both maybe and no to the question. To conclude section 2, I asked if people saw one of their regular or favourite brands promoting or working with esports, would that further people's interest in esports. 41.3% said yes, 24% said maybe, and 34.7% said no.

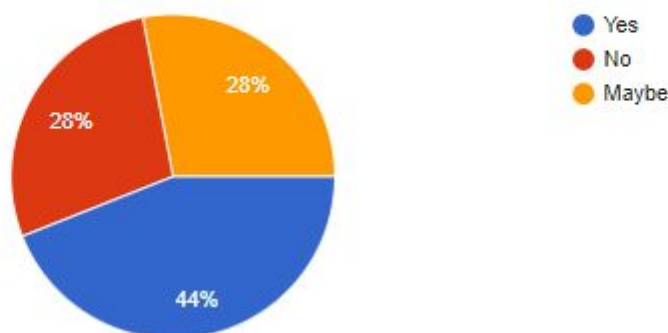
If you saw one of your favourite celebrities/musicians/influencers involved in the Esports scene, would that influence your interest in Esports?

75 responses



If you saw/heard Esports coverage on your favourite TV channel, news channel or radio station, would that influence your interest in Esports?

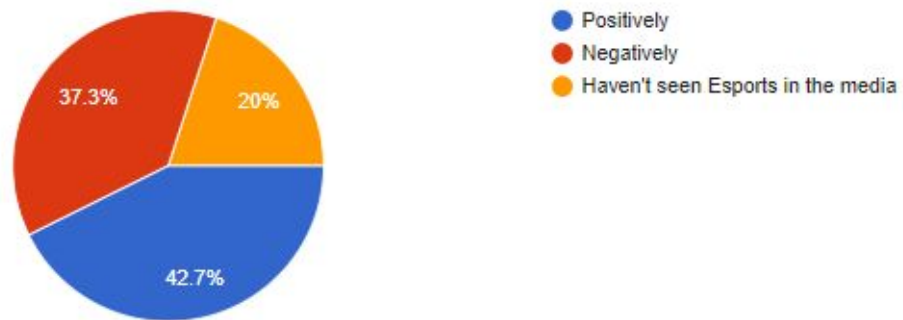
75 responses



Looking at section 3 of the questionnaire, which is about esports in the media, and the question “Do you feel like Esports is talked about enough in the media?”, 78.7% of people said no, and 21.3% said yes. Following this is the question “If you have seen Esports in the media, is it represented mostly positively or negatively?”, to which 42.7% of people said esports was represented positively, 37.7% of people said esports was represented negatively, and 20% of people haven’t seen esports in the media to make a decision. When looking at what people would expect to see covered about esports in the media, a lot of people said they expected things like prize pools, event and game run downs and things like round ups of games and tournaments across a couple of days, like Match of the Day for football. Some others also said player breakdowns and achievements, as well as key highlights in the games played. Some other people also said statistics about players and games and a more historical look at esports, as well as saying that the media should also look to future games and tournaments and promotions. Some people also said they would like to see interviews from players and teams more often in the media. However, some people said that they have seen things like reporters mocking players for winning big cash prizes, and act like the players didn't have to do anything for the money. Some others also said they’ve seen debate in the media about esports and how it even exists, adding to the mocking of the industry. Moving on in section 3, I dive deeper into more things that people may like to see more of from esports in the media. First, I asked if people saw esports coverage on the lineup of a news anchor or talk show, would they be interested in watching the segment. 57.3% of people answered yes, 33.3% answered maybe, and 9.3% said no. Next, I asked people should esports athletes be more known to the general public from their success and talent. 77.3% of people said yes to this, and 22.7% said no. I then asked people if they thought more brands and media should be getting involved with esports, to which 92% of people said yes to, and 8% said no. To conclude section 3, and the questionnaire, I ended by asking people if they felt like the information regarding esports and how to get involved with it was either widespread or limited. 82.7% of people said that this information was more limited, whilst 17.3% said it was widespread.

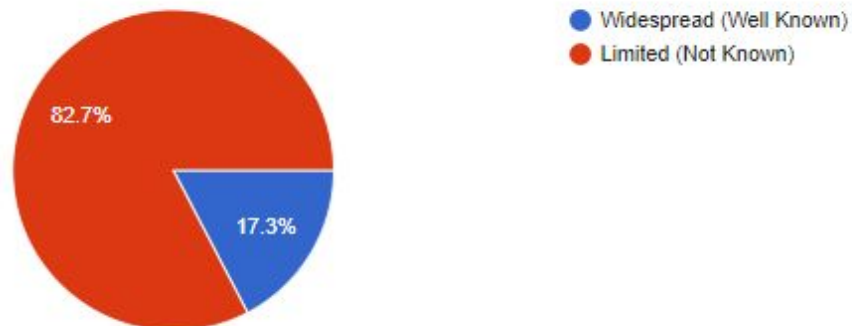
If you have seen Esports in the media, is it represented mostly positively or negatively?

75 responses



Do you feel like the information regarding Esports and how to get involved with it is widespread or limited?

75 responses



Overall, the data collected from the questionnaire has provided a good insight into how people feel about esports, and contains results from people who are involved with esports, watch esports, know of it and have no interest in it. Some of my assumptions of the results were correct, whilst others were wrong. From this data and this discussion, I have learnt of many areas of issue within the esports industry, as well as more ways it shines compared to other sports. With this data, I can more accurately pursue a solution towards this report's question.

Conclusion

In conclusion to this research report, I believe that my assumptions were accurate about the esports industry, though some of the data I collected added to my assumptions, or even proved my assumptions wrong. I have learned a lot about esports through this report, and have enough information to go forward with

exploring design solutions for my question and the problems within the esports industry. The takeaway from this report is that the main problem in the esports industry is its brand specifications as well as its stabilization in the sporting industry and among the general public. I believe the question I need to be asking is “How can design be used to challenge people's perspectives of the esports industry by bridging the gap with the mainstream media?”. I feel like this question better represents both my goals of my final major project, as well as the problems uncovered from facts and figures collected and displayed in this report.

To conclude, I have 3 initial ideas as to where I can create a design outcome for this question. Firstly, I could create a campaign that challenges people who are against esports, full of bragging about esports' achievements and using influential figures and brands, to ultimately have a campaign that fights against the esports industries oppressors, whilst also bringing in more outreach to the general public. My next initial idea is to create a marketing brand identity, which would act as a voice for esports in the mainstream media, which would set out to advertise esports in the mainstream media and establish a solid presence in the media and in the sporting industry. My third initial idea is to create a campaign that could fight physical sports, with the aim of trying to replace physical sports with esports with games like fifa for football. These are only initial ideas for my project, but already these ideas are shaping up to tackle my question and the problems I've highlighted in the esports industry.

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Questionnaire

The questionnaire consists of the following questions:

Intro:

How old are you?

Do you know what Esports is?

What is your initial opinion of Esports?

Section 1:

Do you think Esports is a Sport?

Based on your answer to the question, please explain in detail why you do/don't think Esports is a Sport

If I told you that the Esports Industry over the last few years has consistently grossed in more money than most other Sporting Leagues (NFL, NBA, etc), with 2020 grossing in over \$1.1 Billion, would that make Esports more of a sport?

Esports and Physical Sports both require a high level of skill and talent to compete in, with both types of sport requiring the competitors to have a vast knowledge of the sport and their rolls. Both sports also require a lot of practice and preparation to compete for. Does that make them any different?

If I told you that physical sports like Chess, Football, Poker and Golf are making their way into the Esports scene, would you consider these Sports still or not?

Do you consider Esports players and professionals Athletes/Sports Representatives?

Section 2:

Do you watch Esports on TV or on the Internet?

Based on your answer above, why do/don't you watch Esports?

If you saw one of your favourite celebrities/musicians/influencers involved in the Esports scene, would that influence your interest in Esports?

If you saw/heard Esports coverage on your favourite TV channel, news channel or radio station, would that influence your interest in Esports?

If you saw one of your favourite/regular brands promoting Esports, would that influence your interest in Esports?

Section 3:

Do you feel like Esports is talked about enough in the media?

If you have seen Esports in the media, is it represented mostly positively or negatively?

What would you expect to see as coverage of Esports in the media?

Many news stations and talk shows have covered Esports in the past, with some now fully involved with coverage of Esports. If you saw Esports coverage on the lineup of a news anchor or talk show, would you be interested in watching that segment?

Should Esports athletes be more known to the general public from their success and talent? Much like Messi is to Football, Andy Murray to Tennis, Tom Brady to American Football, etc.

Do you think more brands and media should get involved with Esports?

Do you feel like the information regarding Esports and how to get involved with it is widespread or limited?