Esports and the Spatial Legitimation of a Market

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Abstract

Prior work has explored how space and place can be utilised to change or disrupt a market, primarily focusing on how institutional actors create and make use of such spaces (e.g. Kellogg, 2009; Cartel et al., 2019; Furnari 2014). However, the role of space and place in institutionalisation remains somewhat under-explored (Lawrence & Dover, 2015; Wright et al., 2023). This thesis contributes to this area of research by exploring the role of space and place in the creation of a market and its impact on legitimation processes. Drawing on institutional theory as an enabling lens, the Esports market is used as the research context for this study. Competitive video game playing has grown exponentially over the past two decades to become an estimated $1.6 billion industry (Mintel, 2023). Through semi-structured interviews and archival research, this thesis examines the legitimation stages of the Esports market and the various roles that offline and online spaces play in the legitimation process. The findings of this study highlight that space and place can have three key effects on the legitimation of the market: building, conferring, and constraining. Contributions to prior work are made by examining the role of space and place within the co-creation of a market (e.g. Giesler, 2008; Brandstad & Solem, 2020), the mimicking and borrowing of established practices (e.g. DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Kjellberg & Olson, 2017), and the role of governments in market growth (e.g. Koch & Ulver, 2022; Huff et al., 2021). The effect of these roles on the legitimation of a market is also explored. It is suggested that future research could build upon this work to assess the applicability of the findings to other markets.

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Author's Declaration

I, Charlotte John, declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in substantially the same form for the award of a higher degree elsewhere.

Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis investigates the role of space and place in the legitimation of a market, using the Esports industry as the research context. This introductory chapter provides an overview of the thesis, first by introducing the research background and the objectives of the study. Following this, the research context is introduced. Then, an overview of the methodology is provided followed by the resulting findings, and contributions to literature are discussed. The chapter concludes by setting out the structure of the thesis.

1.1. Research Background and Objectives

Institutional theory originated within organisation studies as the study of how organisations gain legitimacy (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 1987). Further work in this area has examined the systems through which individuals and organisations evaluate institutions (e.g. Friedland & Alford, 1991; Thornton & Ocasio, 2008; Haveman & Gualteri, 2017), the actors who seek to change or disrupt institutions (e.g. Lawrence & Phillips, 2004; Garud et al., 2007; Hardy & Maguire, 2017), and the institutional work these actors perform (e.g. Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence et al., 2011; Canales, 2016). Whilst there is no concrete definition or metric by which legitimacy can be measured due to its subjective nature (Deephouse et al., 2017), a practice, organisation, or market is considered to be highly institutionalised when it is essentially invulnerable to social intervention or taken for granted (Jepperson, 1991; Suchman, 1995). Prior consumer research has used institutional theory as an enabling lens to explore how organisations, markets, and consumption activities legitimise over time (e.g. Baker et al., 2019; Humphreys, 2010; Coskuner-Balli & Ertimur, 2017). However, this work has tended to focus on the roles of producers and consumers in these legitimation processes (e.g. Dolbec & Fischer, 2015; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013).

Rooted in geography and anthropology, space and place theory is a field of literature in which various conceptualisations of ‘space’ and ‘place’ are explored (Cresswell, 2004). Although it is generally agreed that “a space thus becomes a place when it becomes invested with meanings by those who use it" (Maclaren, as cited in Solomon et al., 2013, p. 84), there are a number of different perspectives on how a space gains the meaning required to become a place. These approaches can be broadly summarised through

Agnew's (2014) categorisations of place: location, which is a geographical description of place, such as a point on a map; locale, which is a place formed by social relations, such as a school or workplace; and sense of place, which is the emotional attachment to a place, such as the feeling of being home (ibid; Agnew, 2005; Cresswell, 2015). Prior consumer research has drawn on space and place theories to examine the effects on consumers in service and retail environments (e.g. Bitner, 1992; Penaloza, 1998; Borghini et al., 2009) and the creation of temporary place for community activities (e.g. Kozinets, 2002; Sherry & Bradford, 2015), amongst others.

A growing body of work has drawn on both institutional theory and space and place theory to examine how institutional actors can use space and place to change or disrupt an institution (e.g. Kellogg, 2009; Cartel et al., 2019; Furnari, 2014). However, this work and broader implications of space and place on the legitimation process remains under-explored (Wright et al., 2023). As such, this thesis aims to contribute to the literature by exploring the role of space and place on the legitimation of a market. To achieve this, three research questions have been set out:

RQ1: How do offline spaces contribute to the legitimation of a market?
RQ2: How do online spaces contribute to the legitimation of a market?
RQ3: How is the legitimacy of a growing industry aided by the use of places that have already gained legitimacy in a different market?

In order to respond to these research questions, this thesis focuses on the Esports market. This market serves as a rich context through which to explore the role of space and place in the legitimation of a market as it uses a variety of spaces and places, both online and offline. Next, the Esports market will be introduced in more detail.

1.2. Research Context

An Esport can be defined as "a multiplayer electronic or video game competition organised as a spectator sport, typically involving professional contestants and watched by viewers online" (*Oxford English Dictionary,* 2023). The Esports market has grown dramatically since the late 1990s, from friends getting together to compete in internet cafés in South Korea (Huhh, 2008), to an estimated $1.6 billion global industry in 2023

(Mintel, 2023). Its recent and ongoing legitimation makes it an interesting context to analyse in terms of institutional theory, however it is the various spaces that the market occupies that makes it particularly suitable to this study.

As a video game, Esports primarily takes place in the virtual space of video gameplay. Furthermore, in many cases, games are played online, with players competing from different physical locations. Matches are also often streamed online, through sites such as Twitch and YouTube. However, Esports also take place offline. The biggest matches are held in physical spaces, including stadia such as the Arthur Ashe stadium, typically home of the US Tennis Open, but which hosted the Fortnite World Cup in 2019 (Erzberger, 2019), or the Bird's Nest stadium in Beijing, built to host the Olympic Games in 2008, but which held the League of Legends World Championship Finals in 2017 (League of Legends Origins, 2019). Therefore, the variety of spaces used in the Esports market makes it an ideal site for this topic of study. A more in-depth discussion of the Esports market, as well as a review of existing Esports literature, will be conducted in the following chapter.

1.3. Overview of Methodology

In line with a social constructionist epistemology, a pragmatic approach to the research has been taken (Savin-Baden & Major, 2023) in line with the interpretive consumer research tradition (e.g. Goulding, 1999; Cova & Elliot, 2008; Cova et al., 2019).

Thirty-two semi-structured interviews (Gordon & Langmaid, 1998; DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Arsel, 2017) were conducted with participants from sixteen countries across six continents, all of whom were involved in the Esports industry in some form. Most were amateur players who also spectated matches both online and offline, however participants also included coaches, events managers, and those in senior management roles of small to medium size Esports organisations. The participants also represented seven different Esports games between them. The breadth and variation of experience therefore provided a holistic understanding of the Esports market and its variances between regions and games.

In addition, extensive archival research was conducted (Golder, 2000; Humphreys, 2010) which included 1,661 newspaper articles from US and UK newspaper titles printed between 1995-2021, 269 US and UK television news reports from the same era, 13 documentary films, and 4 documentary series. These were used to help build a timeline of the Esports market for analysis of legitimation over time, and also to gain understanding of the market in other countries – especially South Korea, where Esports originated – and of offline events, which could not be accessed during the research period due to the Covid pandemic. Data was analysed through an iterative approach, moving between intratextual and intertextual cycles of analysis (Thompson, 1997; Spiggle, 1994). A priori codes were created based on the research questions (Belk et al, 2012); subsequent coding rounds used an initial coding style followed by a holistic selective coding approach (Saldana, 2021; Urquhart, 2013). The following section will summarise the findings that were gained from this research.

1.4. Summary of Study Findings and Contributions

The thesis presents three key findings. First, building upon prior market co-creation research (e.g. Giesler, 2008; Brandstad & Solem, 2020), the findings propose an adaptation of prior models of market legitimation stages (e.g. Johnson et al., 2006; Humphreys, 2010) to better align with a consumer-driven market (Martin & Schouten, 2014). Second, prior work that explores the legitimacy perceptions of the general public (Humphreys & Latour, 2013) has been extended to include the insight that those within the Esports community and those outside of it can perceive a practice as legitimate for different reasons. Finally, the thesis extends our understanding of the role of space and place in the legitimation of a market (Wright et al., 2023) by proposing that space and place can build, confer, or constrain the legitimacy of a market. Seven roles that space and place can play in producing these effects are set out. These contribute to prior work by providing further insight into how institutional actors can use space to negotiate new practices (e.g. Kellogg, 2009; Cartel et al., 2019), how spaces can be used to test new practices (e.g. Lampel & Meyer, 2008; Hardy & Maguire, 2010), and how communities can create a safe space in which they can perform their consumption activities (e.g. Castilhos & Dolbec, 2018). Furthermore, prior work that demonstrates how the mimicking and borrowing of practices from established institutions and organisations can

aid legitimacy (e.g. DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Kjellberg & Olson, 2017) is extended with the insight that space and place can also be used in such mimetic processes. Finally, the constraints on legitimacy placed on a market due to regional issues are explored, building upon prior literature that finds governments can restrict market legitimacy by resisting lending their support (e.g. Koch & Ulver, 2022; Huff et al., 2021).

The practical implications of the research primarily result in recommendations for managers in the Esports industry. It is suggested that they should carefully consider the spaces they use for events, work more closely with governments and authorities to ensure the market is able to legitimise more quickly offline, and the views of the Esports community should not be neglected in pursuit of approval from broader society. The thesis also calls on governments and authorities to encourage the growth of the Esports market in the areas for which they are responsible, not least because of the economic benefits that this market can bring. These contributions are discussed in more detail in Chapter Eight of the thesis.

1.5. Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is formed of eight chapters and, following this introductory chapter, is structured as follows. Chapter Two introduces the research context of this study: the Esports market. First, the chapter situates Esports within the broader gaming industry and extant video gaming literature. Then, an overview of the Esports market is given and key terms are defined, before prior academic work with an Esports focus is reviewed. Chapter Three reviews the first of the two core areas of theory to which this thesis contributes: institutional theory. A background of the theory is provided in addition to its use within marketing literature. Chapter Four reviews the second area of theory: space and place theory. Following an overview of the theory, Lefebvre's (1991) conceptualisation of space is introduced as the lens through which this thesis analyses space and place. Prior work which has applied both space and place and institutional theory is also reviewed. Chapter Five covers the methodology, including the philosophical and theoretical assumptions of the thesis, data collection methods used, and the approach to analysis and interpretation of data. Chapter Six is the presentation of the study findings relating to the stages of legitimation of the Esports market. The study's conceptualisations of intra- and extra-

community legitimation processes are also introduced. Chapter Seven is the presentation of the study findings relating to the roles that places used by the Esports market play in its legitimation, and the key effects that these roles result in. Chapter Eight includes a summary of the findings and highlights the theoretical and practical implications of the study, before acknowledging the study limitations and offering suggestions for future research.

Chapter 2: Research Context

2.0. Introduction

The context for this study is the Esports market. An Esport is the competitive playing of a video game (OED, 2023) and is a sub-category of the broader video game market. This chapter will begin by situating the study of video games within existing marketing literature. Following this, the Esports industry will be introduced and the difference between Esports and the video game industry more broadly will be discussed. Finally, extant Esports literature will be reviewed.

2.1. Video Games within Marketing Literature

Esports are a sub-category of the video game market. With this in mind, it is worth situating the context within the existing gaming literature. This section will review how video games have been studied within the marketing literature. Arguably the largest area of gaming research within marketing is advertising, which includes the advertisement of video games (Burmester at al., 2015; Cox & Kaimann, 2015; Marchand et al., 2017), in-game advertising (e.g. Grigorovici & Constantin, 2004; Molesworth, 2006; Acar, 2007), and advergames (e.g. Wise et al., 2008; Hernandez et al, 2004; Dias & Agante, 2011). Whilst it is acknowledged that this is an expansive topic of study, it has been excluded from discussion here as it is not relevant to the topic of the thesis. Therefore, the core areas of gaming research in marketing literature are discussed with relevance to the thesis: motivations, consumer identity, and 'the dark side'. Each topic will be reviewed and comparisons to the Esports market will be made.

2.1.1. Consumption

The consumption practices of video games consumers have been a focus within marketing literature. Griffiths et al. (2003) claim to have conducted the first study into gamers' demographic data – they found that 85% of gamers were male, and that 50% had a degree, meaning the stereotype of the teenage boy gamer is not true. Carr (2005) found that games had largely been made for and marketed towards boys, and that there was nothing within the game or the user's experience that was significantly causing women to be less likely to play. A key focus of consumer researchers within this context has been

to explore why people play video games. This literature will now be explored, and comparisons will be drawn between the Esports market and the broader video game market.

2.1.1.1. Motivations

A core motivation for video game play is enjoyment, and players will be more loyal to a game if they perceive it as having hedonic value (Molinillo et al., 2020). However, Galak et al. (2013) found that players tend to consume games they like too quickly and become bored of them sooner as a result. They suggest that being forced to play at a slower pace results in players maintaining a higher rate of enjoyment for longer. This differs from Esports as Esports players are more likely to play for the purpose of improving their skills (Lee & Schoenstedt, 2011), and for competition (García-Lanzo & Chamarro, 2018; Lee & Schoenstedt, 2011; Weiss & Scheiele, 2013), thus enjoyment stems more from this progression which requires repeatedly playing the game. There are differing views on how more experienced players perceive enjoyment of games over time. Kaimann et al. (2019) suggest that more experienced players are also more likely to become bored of a game as they master it more quickly. However, Murray and Bellman (2011) argue that more experienced players spend similar amounts of time playing games as those less experienced, but they use that time more productively.

Beyond hedonic value, people consume video games as a form of escapism, which can manifest in a number of ways. Video game consumption has been conceptualised as being between the virtual and the real (Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2010; Skandalis et al., 2016), which allows players to enact their fantasies and daydreams and to achieve personal progress (Molesworth, 2009; Molesworth & Watkins, 2016). This is similar to Esports in that a core motivation for Esports players is to improve their skill (Lee & Schoenstedt, 2011), however whilst this skill development in broader gaming tends to be to make up for lack of personal progress (Molesworth & Watkins, 2016), it is more likely to be to satisfy the core motivation of competition in Esports (Lee & Schoenstedt, 2011; García-Lanzo & Chamarro, 2018).

Another key motivation for playing games is for the social aspect, especially within Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs), in which players role-

play as a character within a virtual world and can play with others (Badrinarayan et al., 2015). These relationships can shape players' consumption, as they are influenced to purchase in-game items that are already owned by their peers (ibid.; Wang et al., 2022). Games can also be used to form or maintain real-world relationships, such as a way for a father and child to bond (Molesworth et al., 2011). This is similar to Esports in that the social aspect is a key motivation for Esports play (Frostling-Henningson, 2009; García-Lanzo & Chamarro, 2018; Brown et al., 2017).

Whilst virtual consumption is not performed in the same way as consumption in the offline world (Trabelsi-Zoghlami & Touzani, 2019), players can form emotional attachments to digital goods in a process similar to that of forming attachments to physical objects (Watkins & Molesworth, 2012). Play can also become work, as players take on the responsibility of in-game leadership (Yee, 2006) or earn real-world money from cultivating and selling in-game items (Nakamura, 2012). This is similar to Esports in that as Esports players become professionals, play becomes their work (Taylor, 2012; Schaeperkoetter et al., 2017), however in both Esports and broader game play, this type of play is experienced by a minority. In summary, while social interaction is a key motivation for play within both Esports and video gaming more broadly (e.g. Badrinarayan et al., 2015; Frostling-Henningson, 2009), those who play Esports games are further motivated by skill development and competition (e.g. Lee & Schoenstedt, 2011; García-Lanzo & Chamarro, 2018). This identifies one element that makes the Esports market distinct from the broader video game market.

2.1.1.2. Consumer Identities and Digital Gaming

The processes through which consumers create and present their identities through consumption have been previously well-documented (e.g. Belk, 1988). Researchers have re-examined how gamers form and present their identity within the digital realm of video games. For example, Belk's original formulation of the 'extended self' posited that consumers use possessions to help formulate their identity and signal it to others (1988). Belk re-formulated his prior formulation to examine how this concept fits within a digital world, which includes video gaming (2013). The first change involves the dematerialisation of possessions in the digital world (ibid.). Denegri-Knott and Molesworth (2010) argue that consumption of digital virtual goods can allow consumers

to fulfil their imaginations – such as by driving their dream car in a racing game. In video gaming, therefore, players can form and communicate their identity using in-game possessions – and these identities can be vastly different from players' real-life identities (Pinto et al., 2015). Furthermore, consumers can use online avatars to embody either themselves, a character different from themselves, or multiple selves (Belk, 2013). They can also use games to create idealised versions of themselves – especially people with lower self-esteem, who report creating game characters that are more sociable and hard-working than they believe they are in reality (Bessière at al., 2007). Wang et al., (2014) found that gamers can have strong emotional attachments to their avatars – especially the first avatar they create – as they represent their entrance into the gaming community and the achievements made in the game. Children use avatars to help develop their sense of self, with children under 9 more likely to view their avatar in the third person and use them to engage in roleplay, while older children use avatars to represent themselves but explore their identities and interests (Bryant & Akerman, 2014).

Some online games also present opportunities to form communities – such as guilds in World of Warcraft. Within such communities, gamers can share their virtual possessions to show their status within the group or to become closer to the rest of the group (Pinto et al., 2015). The communities can also form part of a player's identity as they become a member of a group, separating themselves apart from non-members (O'Connor et al., 2015). Identity with an in-game community can increase the social motivation for playing the game (Badrinarayanan et al., 2015).

2.1.1.3. Co-creation

Gamers do not only play the games as the developer of the game sets out, but also can produce their own storylines (Buchanan-Oliver & Seo, 2012) and game modifications (Postigo, 2007). Some players have gone so far as to create films using video games, which can benefit the player as they receive praise from their peers and can benefit the developer as it can raise awareness of the game (Harwood & Garry, 2014).

Co-creation in gaming goes beyond creating content for entertainment: gaming communities have been built online by players, often with the support of the game developer (Burgess & Jones, 2020). These communities, besides being a social space for

gamers, also provide a co-creation space for materials such as game modifications and tutorials (ibid.). Motivations for this kind of work outside of the games themselves are much the same as for play – social, skills development, and escapism (Roberts et al., 2014). This is antithetical to the society's stereotypical image of the gamer as an isolated player (Newman, 2005).

Communities within the games themselves can also be co-created by players – for example, guilds in World of Warcraft. In these cases, communities can help the player get further in the game by achieving feats not possible alone and by sharing virtual possessions or winnings from tasks completed together (Pinto et al., 2015). Members of these groups can also draw support from other members about both in-game and real-world issues (O'Connor et al., 2015). However, these communities can also be used by players to demonstrate their unhappiness with decisions made by a game's developer (Weijo et al., 2019) and, overtime, can become codestructive (Pera et al., 2021). This is particularly likely to happen if players feel exploited for work or money by the developer (Lehtonen et al., 2022) or if they do not feel supported in their co-creation activities (Weijo et al., 2019). The community spaces themselves can be a co-creation between producers and consumers, as community managers can be employees of the game's developer and the forum could be hosted on the developer's server, whilst players contribute to the discussion and can be promoted to 'elders' within the community (Zimmerman, 2019). As a result, players can feel particularly hurt if the developer pulls support from the community they have co-created (Burgess & Jones, 2020). This literature is relevant to this thesis as the Esports market is a co-creation between players, games developers, and other stakeholders. As such, the thesis builds upon this prior work by exploring the co-creation activities within the Esports market specifically.

2.1.2. The Dark Side

The final core area of focus for video gaming within marketing academia is an evaluation of the 'dark side' of gaming, which includes violent games, addiction, and in-game advertising aimed at children. It is unclear whether or not violent video games cause violence in players (Anders, 1999). Following the 'third-person effect', people have a tendency to believe that violent video games are unlikely to affect them but may affect others more strongly (Wan & Youn, 2004). In the US, there have been a number of

attempts to restrict violent video game access to minors, however, these attempts have been blocked by the courts under the notion that restricting access goes against the right to free speech (Collier et al., 2008). Laczniak et al. (2017) found that the more parents restricted their children's access to games themselves based on the game's rating, the stronger the household rules about video game play are, resulting in a reduction in game play activity without the need for further external intervention.

Research on addiction to video gaming is scarce within the marketing literature, however Wei et al. (2017) found that gamers who interact more online whilst playing are more likely to remain loyal to the game but are less likely to become addicted. They suggest that the more time that social gamers also spend offline, the less likely they are to become addicted to gaming, as they are able to have a social life that is not dependent on the game. This is similar to the suggestion that as social interaction is one of the key motivations to play for Esports players, this may have a mediating effect on addictive behaviours (Bányai et al., 2019a). This research has been reviewed as any factors of a market that are negative or viewed disapprovingly could affect how it legitimises (e.g. Kjellberg & Olson, 2017; Humphreys, 2010). Later in this chapter, this topic will be explored in greater detail with relation to the Esports market specifically.

2.1.3. Gaming versus Esports

The purpose of this section has been to review the existing literature on video games within the marketing discipline. As Esports is a specific form of gaming, there are many similarities between Esports activity and video game play more broadly. Hedonic and social values are important for both Esports and general gamers, but competition and skill development are more key in Esports (Lee & Schoenstedt, 2011, García-Lanzo & Chamarro, 2018). Whilst gamers can and do form communities and co-create content, these are not as key as within Esports, which requires these activities by its nature of being a competitive spectator activity (Jenny et al., 2017). Furthermore, the broader video gaming literature within marketing does not explore the spaces in which games are played, as the location is typically within the home. However, Esports are played both in and out of the home. Ultimately, it is these factors that make the Esports industry different and the suitable context for this thesis: the motivation for play and the spaces used for play.

The following section will specifically explore the Esports industry and will review relevant existing literature.

2.2. Introduction to the Esports Industry

This section will begin by introducing the context of this research: the Esports industry, providing a brief overview of the history of Esports and its current status in the world. Following this, the chapter reviews the extant Esports literature that has been published to date. Thus far, prior research has tended to focus on four broad areas of discussion: the extent to which Esports can be considered a sport, the effect of Esports on health, the dark side of Esports, and the ongoing professionalisation of the industry. Contributions have been made from many academic disciplines, particularly business, sports management, sociology, media, and law (Reitman et al., 2019). This literature will be reviewed in order to provide an overview of the context of the study.

2.2.1. An Introduction to Esports and its History

An Esport is defined as "a multiplayer electronic or video game competition organised as a spectator sport, typically involving professional contestants and watched by viewers online" (*Oxford English Dictionary,* 2023). Although not all video games can be played as Esports, there are a number of different types, including first-person shooter, strategy games, and sports games (Adamus, 2012). Esports can also be differentiated from traditional playing of computer games for leisure by the fact that it is seen as a 'serious activity' by its participants and can be used to make financial gains (Seo & Jung, 2014). This reflects Caillois' (2001) distinction between play, which he defines as "a free and voluntary activity, a source of joy and amusement" (p.6), that does not have a pre-determined goal or produce wealth at the end of play, and games, which have more structure and require skills to perform. This suggests that a key difference between Esports and gaming more broadly is that Esports require more structure and discipline to participate in.

Esports participants in effect have two roles, one as a player and one as a spectator. This is something that distinguishes Esports from gaming more broadly – the spectatorship of an audience, which is not a core feature of gaming as a whole, but is of Esports (Jenny et

al., 2017). Major matches are often held offline but streamed to audiences at home – much like with a traditional sports match. Esports audiences are growing both online and offline - for example, the 2018 FACEIT CS:GO Major finals sold out Wembley Arena (Sky Sports News, 2018), Twitch had more than 15 million daily viewers in 2017 (Twitch, 2018), which grew to 30 million daily visitors by 2022 (Grayson, 2023) and the League of Legends Worlds 2019 reached a total of 100 million unique online viewers (Sportsvideo.org, 2020). As the audience grows, as do the financial resources being channelled into the industry. Some of the world's biggest companies now sponsor Esports events and individual athletes in the same way as they might sponsor the stars of traditional sports. For example, Mercedes-Benz has sponsored a number of the Esports League's tournaments and Gillette sponsored League of Legends athlete xPeke (Rogers, 2018). At $641 million, sponsorship forms the industry's biggest source of revenue, more than media rights, merchandise, and streaming combined (Newzoo, 2021a). As revenues have increased, so have the prize funds available to tournament winners. Whilst it has been widely reported that the creators of Fortnite have offered record-breaking prize pools in recent years (Tidy, 2019), the 2019 Dota 2 International still holds the record for the biggest prize pool at $34 million in total (E-Sports Earnings, 2021), over $15 million of which goes to the 1st place winner (Michael, 2019).

In South Korea, where Esports has been popular and broadly accepted by society since the late nineties, PC bangs (internet cafés dedicated to gaming and that are specific to Korea) remain highly popular places for people to play games, despite broadband now being in most households, because of the social aspect of playing there (Huhh, 2008). Whilst such establishments have yet to gain popularity in the UK, the high street store GAME has introduced gaming centres into some of its stores (Stevens, 2017). These add another dimension to the offline spaces inhabited by Esports participants and make it possible to study this interplay between online and offline spaces in Esports within the UK, where there are fewer big Esports events to attend.

The Coronavirus pandemic will also be explored to some extent within this thesis. Although it affected the original plans for data collection, it has also offered an interesting opportunity to discuss the importance of online and offline spaces for Esports participants, and some of the questions within the interviews focus on this. The global Esports revenues decreased by nearly 1% from their original forecast to $950.3 million (Newzoo,

2020). This was due to the cancellation of major Esports events, rather than because either demand or supply had fallen (ibid.). As such, global revenue grew to over £1.1 billion in 2021, during which time the global Esports audience grew to 489.5 million – nearly half of whom can be considered 'Esports enthusiasts' as opposed to 'Occasional viewers' (Newzoo, 2022a). The latest available data shows that the global market grew to nearly $1.3 billion in 2022 and was expected to rise 17% year on year to $1.6 billion in 2023 (Mintel, 2023). This growth may be in part due to the pandemic enabling new consumers to enter the Esports scene. In the UK, 64% of those who now watch Esports started doing so during the pandemic, however 60% of UK Esports viewers expected to spend less time doing so after the pandemic (Mintel, 2021). As of 2023, Mintel data showed that 67% of British gamers had watched Esports in the past three months (2023). To summarize, this section has introduced Esports, explaining the phenomenon and the growth of the market. In the following section, existing Esports literature will be reviewed.

2.3. Esports - What is it and why do people participate?

2.3.1. Esports: a sport?

The first Esports-related research was published in 2002 (Reitman et al, 2019). Bryce and Rutter (2002) offered an examination of how women could engage with the gaming industry. They suggested that public gaming spaces were male-dominated, which led to the exclusion of female gamers, whilst online gaming offered anonymity which could make women feel more comfortable participating and competing in games (ibid.). As will be discussed later in this chapter, this has not necessarily come to pass. Since this first Esports-related research, a large portion of the discussion within academia has been the extent to which Esports can be considered a sport, with researchers setting out various metrics by which this could be measured (e.g. Jenny et al., 2017; Cranmer et al., 2021; Jonasson & Thiborg, 2010; Abanazir, 2019). Much of this discussion builds upon previous debates about the definition of sport in the traditional sense.

2.3.2. What is a sport?

The Oxford English Dictionary defines 'sport' as "an activity involving physical exertion and skill, esp. (particularly in modern use) one regulated by set rules or customs in which

an individual or team competes against another or others” (OED, 2023). Initially used to describe activities such as hunting, the entry continues “the consolidation of organized sport (particularly football, rugby, cricket, and athletics) in the 19th century reinforced the notion of sport as physical competition” (ibid.). This review begins with this definition because, in the words of Graves (1900), “there are few words in the English language which have such a multiplicity of divergent meanings as the word sport”. Discussion and debate over the meaning has continued over the past century. Modern sport philosophy developed as an academic field in the 1970s (Breivik, 2019), of which the problem of the definition or essence of sports has remained a core topic (Connor, 2011). Some of the main arguments for how to define a sport will now be reviewed.

One of the most commonly cited discussions of the definition of sport is that of Suits (1988, 2007). He proposed a triad comprised of games, play, and sport, in which an activity could be classified as one, two, or all three of these (1988). He gives the example of diving, which he believes is a sport, but is not a game, instead calling it a performance (1989). He differentiates a performance from a game, arguing that the former is not governed by constitutive rules to achieve a specific goal – a diver needs to jump from a height, perform a dive, and land in the pool, but how this is done is not restricted by rules such as the offside rule in football (Suits, 1988; 1989). A referee in a football match does not judge performance, but enforces rules; a judge at a diving competition assesses performance (Suits, 1988).

Meier (1988) is also often cited in relation to this debate within Esports literature. His paper was a direct critique of Suits’ triad and provides two arguments of particular interest to Esports researchers. First, he proposes that the presence of physicality in a game is not a determining factor in whether it is a sport, but the extent to which physicality affects the outcome is important. He gives the example of chess, which requires movement of the pieces, but the way in which they are moved from one square to another does not affect the outcome of the match. Secondly, he argues that the institutionalisation of a game is important to its being classed as a sport, which, as will be discussed shortly, is a key point built upon by those discussing the classification of Esports.

Throughout this thesis, reference is made to ‘Esports’ and ‘traditional sports’, the latter being those generally considered sports by society, such as football, basketball, and tennis.

Guttmann (1994) coins a different phrase – 'modern sports' – in contrast to 'traditional physical contests'. Guttmann's modern sports have seven criteria: they are not linked to religion; no one can be excluded because they belong to a certain social group or class; they are governed by a regulator; there are specialised roles and positions within the game; rules are frequently revised and training and equipment are updated to include the most advanced technologies available; they are quantifiable and statistics of games are created and available; and records of achievement are kept and aimed to be broken. Guttmann lays out these criteria to differentiate from 'traditional sporting contests', by drawing upon the example of an Olympic 200-metre sprint versus children running races for fun.

Despite these attempts to define criteria to help classify what is and what is not a sport, there remains no absolute definition of what constitutes a sport. McBride (1975) concluded "philosophers ought not to waste their time attempting to define 'sport'" (p. 4), after arguing that it was not possible to define elements that belong to sport and no other activity. Wertz (1995) argues that "an essential definition [of sport] is unnecessary and indeed undesirable" (p. 87), because sport is an open concept that evolves over time. Nevertheless, the discussion of a definition of sport has been included here as the extent to which Esports can be considered a sport is a core part of extant Esports literature. This prior work will now be outlined.

A number of different metrics have been put forward to examine the extent to which Esports can be considered a sport (e.g. Jenny et al., 2017; Cranmer et al., 2021; Jonasson & Thiborg, 2010). Whilst the exact criteria for consideration vary, Suits' (1988; 1989) and Guttmann's (1994) suggestions discussed previously have largely been applied to Esports and there are three broad areas on which researchers tend to agree that Esports can therefore be considered a sport. The first is that the rules and regulations have been codified, which is seen as an important early step towards the institutionalisation of a sport (Jenny et al., 2017; Summerley, 2020; Taylor, 2012; Abanazir, 2019). For example, the Football Association (FA) was formed in 1863 to codify and universalise the rules of football as different clubs played by different rules, making competitive play between clubs difficult (Summerley, 2020). The second point of agreement is that players are becoming professionalised, which is seen as one of the results of achieving sport status (Jenny et al., 2017; Abanazir, 2019; Jonasson & Thiborg, 2010; Summerley, 2020). These steps are important to the institutionalisation of a sport as they allow fair play and accurate

comparison of matches if everyone plays by the same rules and are awarded points in the same way (Summerley, 2020). The third area of agreement is that having regulatory oversight from a governing body – such as FIFA in football - is important in the process of becoming a sport (Heere, 2018; Jenny et al., 2017; Jonasson & Thiborg, 2010). However, since the Esports industry consists of a number of governing bodies, even within the same sport (Chao, 2017; Martinelli, 2019), there exists a lack of standardisation as different leagues may have different rules and regulations. Therefore, this step towards institutionalisation is still in development.

The key area of disagreement however falls in the physicality criterion. As previously discussed, it is typically expected that a sport has some element of physicality, although the extent is a topic of debate (Meier, 1988; Suits 1988). Jenny et al. (2017) argue that whilst Esports does not typically require the gross motor skills that traditional sports often do, they do require highly trained fine motor skills. This is echoed by Witowski (2012), who highlights that "physicality also extends through processes of skilfully managing and engaging with multiple bodily sense and actions (human and non-human)" (p. 362). This includes not only the movement of the body but also input devices such as the movement of the mouse and the sensations caused by virtual means such as computer lag. A further complication in this debate on physicality is that it varies by the type of Esports being discussed. In addition to traditional video games played on a computer or games console, several types of games require specialist rigs or Virtual Reality headsets to play (Türkay et al., 2021). These types of games naturally require more physicality. For example, a Formula One Esports world champion lost over 20kg before competing to retain his title in 2018 (Baldwin, 2018), as he felt his physical fitness was vital to competing at such a high level. To aid discussion and definition of these Esports types, Cranmer et al. (2021) have put forward an Esports matrix to define the realms of Esports dependent on three scales: level of physical activity, the role of technology in the game, and the Esports environment. This results in four categories of Esports, as shown in the following figure.

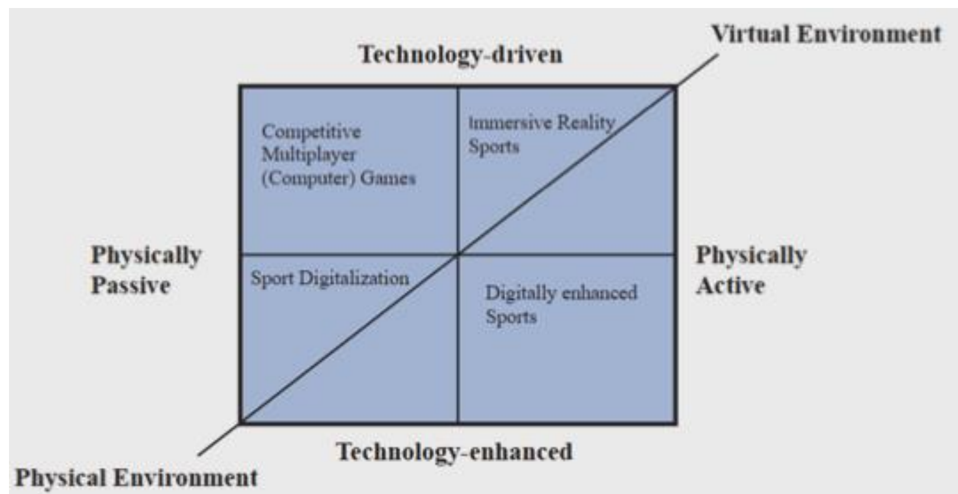


Figure 01: Esports Matrix (Cranmer et al., p.8)

This is a helpful way to categorise the various games that comprise the Esports industry, especially when it comes to the physicality debate. For example, immersive reality sports – which require virtual reality or mixed reality headsets – require players to move and interact with elements in order to play the game. Although this form of Esport is still in its infancy (ibid.), it would be hard to argue that highly skilled players do not meet the physicality criterion set out by Suits (1988).

Amongst this debate, Heere (2018) argues that regardless of whether or not Esports can be considered a sport, sports management researchers should examine them as they are a "manifestation of sportification" (p. 24). He defines sportification as "to view, organise, or regulate a non-sport activity in such a way that it resembles a sport and allows a fair, pleasurable, and safe environment for individuals to compete and cooperate" (ibid, p. 24). Heere argues that that sporting industry is beginning to accept Esports, and so researchers should too (ibid.)

This thesis does not take a position on the extent to which Esports is considered a sport. As evidenced by the existing literature, the definition of sport is not absolute. No one authority – sporting, academic, or governmental – is able to universally define the term (Graves, 1990; McBride, 1975; Heere, 2018). Furthermore, only 34% of people in the UK agree that Esports can be considered a "legitimate, professional sport" (Mintel, 2019). Thus, to continue this debate seems futile. Importantly, it is possible to analyse the institutionalisation process the Esports industry has undergone – this thesis' aim - without

needing to conclude whether it can be considered a sport. However, this does not mean that the discussion of whether or not Esports is a sport serves no purpose. In particular, it can have ramifications in the legal world. If Esports are officially a sport, this can affect things like legal action, visa applications, and university sports funding (Holden et al., 2017b). This will be relevant to the discussion of the findings. Next, extant Esports literature beyond the sport classification debate will be reviewed.

2.3.3. Institutionalisation of Esports

Few papers have examined Esports through the lens of institutional theory as understood in the field of business and management (e.g., DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Institutional theory – discussed in much greater detail in the following chapter - offers frameworks analysing and methods of conducting institutionalisation processes across multiple industries, thus providing useful templates to better understand how the Esports industry may have legitimised.

Pizzo et al. (2019) do use institutional theory – specifically Lawrence and Suddaby's (2006) framework of creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions - to analyse creation strategies used by US colleges when introducing Esports into their athletics department. They found that using language, approaches, and images similar to those used by the traditional sports played in the university helped college administrators, students, and other stakeholders to accept Esports more quickly. For example, some colleges' academic regulations and standards for those receiving Esports scholarships are nearly identical to those for students on traditional sports scholarships, thus aligning values of Esports programmes with those already held by the university (ibid.). Another staff member reported promoting Esports via the same social media and communications methods of the wider sporting department, thus aligning Esports with traditional sports in the minds of those receiving these communications (ibid.).

Whilst the core of the Esports market is based around Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) games, there is a growing interest in sport simulation games (Cranmer et al., 2021). Some professional football clubs are seizing the opportunity to expand into Esports by creating their own Esports teams who compete in games such as EA Sports FC (formerly known as FIFA) (Lefebvre et al., 2020). An already-institutionalised

organisation launching an Esports team could aid the legitimacy of the market. This also benefits the established club as it allows them to diversify and prevents stagnation (Pizzo et al., 2022).

As the Esports market grows, barriers to legitimation remain. These include a lack of understanding of the market (in 2022, 86% of respondents in Europe reported being aware of the term Esports, but only 41% could define it (Deloitte, 2022)), perceived lack of inclusivity or toxicity within Esports that can put people off watching (Mintel, 2022), and a perception that gaming competitively is bad for mental health (Mintel, 2023). However, legitimation is possible. One city where Esports is generally considered legitimate is Jönköping in Sweden. One of the world's biggest Esports events, DreamHack, originated in the city in 2001 (McCauley et al., 2020). By engaging with local government and people and getting them involved with the events, Esports actors have helped develop the local offline Esports market (ibid.). Further examples of how the market can gain legitimacy will be explored in the findings. Whilst the legitimation of Esports has been studied to an extent – although largely without the application of institutional theory – this thesis seeks to explore how Esports is institutionalising through the use of space and place – both online and offline.

2.3.4. Media and Broadcasting of Esports

One of the main differences between video gaming and Esports is the spectator element. When an offline Esports event takes place, it is usually streamed online for people to watch from home – just as in many traditional sports. Internet streaming of Esports games has been a core practice since the early days of the industry, but the popularity of streaming platform Twitch has solidified the practice in the industry (Burroughs & Rama, 2015). Streaming is different from the broadcast of traditional sports as interactive features such as chat are built into the platform (Brown et al., 2017). In addition, streams can be of major matches – often in the form of broadcasts that are being held offline – or they can be direct from an Esports participants' bedroom (Burroughs & Rama, 2015).

When it comes to major matches held offline and in-person but streamed to audiences online as well, Esports has borrowed many broadcasting techniques from traditional sports (Taylor, 2015). For example, both Esports and traditional sports broadcasts have

commentators (‘shoutcasters’ in Esports parlance) narrating the action and replays of key moments. Narratives of player journeys are constructed, with pre- and post- match interviews with players. Coverage of the events are caught from all angles, including game play from various perspectives, fan reactions, and player/management reactions. This could be considered a way of legitimising Esports through a mimetic process, as described by DiMaggio and Powell (1983). A mimetic process is when a company or industry mimics a practice of an established company or industry in order to gain legitimacy. By replicating practices typically used in traditional sports broadcasts, Esports broadcasts gain further legitimacy. This will be discussed in greater detail in the findings section of the thesis.

When it comes to streamers livestreaming themselves online, via sites such as Twitch, there has been suggestion from some researchers that both streamers and spectators are performing a form of work. The streamer themselves can monetise their stream, turning playing a game into a form of paid work (Postigo, 2016), often whilst also putting on a performance by putting on a character or incorporating humour to keep the audience engaged and to attract more viewers (Woodcock et al., 2019). Carter and Egliston (2021) argue that Twitch spectators make streams more appealing through actions such as creating virtual crowds and sending emotes, which improves the value of the stream. However, they point out that this does not mean they dislike the work, as they are doing it voluntarily – a notion supported by Wulf et al., (2018), who found that performing these interactive social actions on Twitch contributed to their enjoyment. Despite streaming and broadcasting of Esports matches being a vital part of the industry, there is little existing research on this, especially outside the field of media research. This thesis seeks to fill this gap by exploring the role of online events in the legitimation of the Esports market.

2.3.5. Motivations for playing and spectating

Researchers from the fields of psychology and sports management have explored the motivations behind Esports game play. The main motivations found include playing for social reasons (Frostling-Henningson, 2009; García-Lanzo & Chamarro, 2018; Brown et al., 2017), competition (García-Lanzo & Chamarro, 2018; Lee & Schoenstedt, 2011; Weiss & Scheiele, 2013) escapism (Frostling-Henningson, 2009), skill development (Lee

& Schoenstedt, 2011) and to experience the feeling of flow (Frostling-Henningson, 2009; Jang & Byon, 2020).

The motivations of gaming more broadly, as discussed previously in this chapter, align with some of the motivations for playing Esports games – in particular: socialisation, escapism, and to experience 'flow'. This stands to reason – Esports are a subcategory of gaming, so it would follow that there is some overlap in motivation for consumption. However, the key differences in player motivation for Esports are for competition, peer pressure, and skills development (Lee & Schoenstedt, 2011, García-Lanzo & Chamarro, 2018; Weiss & Scheiele, 2013). Lee and Schoenstedt (2011) suggest that Esports developers can use the peer pressure motivation to encourage more people to play through encouraging either rivalries or teaming up with friends. The latter is something a number of participants in this study reported as being a reason for entering the Esports market – friends asked them to play on their team.

Some researchers have explored the differences in motivations between different demographics and genres of game. Martončik (2015) found that Esports participants who played in a team were not more extroverted, nor did they have more of a need to socialise than those who played solo. However, he did find that those who played competitively displayed a greater need for new life experiences and to socialise than those who played casually. García-Lanzo et al. (2018) found that semi-professional League of Legends players spent more time playing and tended to be younger than amateur players. They also found that these players were "not obsessed or frustrated people" and that their "use of videogames [was] not necessarily harmful" (p.59). Jang et al. (2021) highlight the differing motivations with regards to genre. They found that those who played 'physical enactment' and 'sports simulation' Esports games had similar play motivations to each other, but the group who played 'imagination' games (defined as games which primarily include "imaginary worlds, rules, and characters (ibid., p. 96)) had different motivations. The studies discussed highlight the differences between the types of gamers and video game types, despite Esports research to date treating players and games as one whole.

Researchers have also explored the motivations behind online Esports spectatorship. As for playing Esports, social reasons were found to be a key motivation for spectating (Qian et al., 2020; Brown et al., 2017; Hilvert-Bruce et al., 2018). However, Hamari and

Sjöblom (2017) found that there was no significant correlation between social gratification and spectating frequency. In another study, they found that tension release was the biggest positive predictor of how many hours users watched streamers (Sjöblom & Hamari, 2017). As with motivations behind Esports play, there may be different motivations behind the viewing of different games. Rogers et al. (2020a) found that the motivations for playing NBA 2K – a basketball simulation Esport game – were different from those who played other Esports: those who watched NBA 2K reported feeling more peer pressure to watch than those who watched general Esports, for example. This again highlights the issue that current Esports scholarship often explores Esports as a whole, rather than exploring the differences between different games.

A core difference between gaming more broadly and Esports is that the former does not typically involve spectators whilst the latter does (Jenny et al., 2017). However, it is not possible to examine the motivations behind spectating Esports versus gaming more broadly; instead, a few researchers have compared the motivations behind spectating Esports to spectating traditional sports. Brown et al. (2017) found that Esports consumers watched Esports content and traditional sporting content for similar motivations such as fanship and socialisation but were far more dedicated to and engaged with Esports content. Given the participants were Esports fans, this is perhaps unsurprising. However, Rogers et al. (2020a) confirmed this finding in their research, which did include traditional sports fans. However, they found that fanship was more of a motivation in traditional sports – they argue that the difference is that fanship in traditional sports is aligned to specific teams, whereas Esports fanship is aligned with Esports more broadly.

In sum, the motivations for playing and watching Esports are broadly similar to the motivations for playing games more broadly or spectating traditional sports. Motivations diverge along the aspects which differentiate Esports from generic video gaming – namely, the competition element and, relatedly, the desire for skill development. The extent to which Esports can be considered a sport is not something that this thesis will attempt to answer. Nevertheless, its potential to be categorised as a sport is relevant to the market's legitimation. As such, the similarities in the motivations for playing and spectating Esports compared to traditional sports are relevant to note. Now that the Esports market has been introduced and the academic literature reviewed, the darker elements of the market will be examined.

2.4. The Dark Side of Esports

A significant proportion of existing Esports literature examines the problematic – or perceived problematic – aspects of the industry. These include gaming addiction (e.g. Yilmaz & Özkan, 2022, Chung et al., 2019), gambling (e.g. Macey & Hamari, 2019; Wardle et al., 2020; Forrest et al., 2016;), doping (e.g. Frias, 2022; Gupta et al., 2021; Holden et al., 2019), and toxicity (e.g. Türkay et al., 2020; Tang et al., 2021; Sengün et al., 2019), of which the literature on each will now be reviewed.

2.4.1. Addiction

In 2018, the World Health Organisation added 'Gaming Disorder' to the International Classification of Diseases (WHO, 2018). On their website, the organisation defines this as "a pattern of gaming behavior… characterized by impaired control over gaming, increasing priority given to gaming over other activities to the extent that gaming takes precedence over other interests and daily activities, and continuation or escalation of gaming despite the occurrence of negative consequences". This definition enables healthcare providers to develop treatments for those who become addicted to gaming, meaning those affected should receive more support in the future (ibid.).

Gaming addiction is something that has caused a great deal of concern in South Korea, where gaming and Esports are a significant and normalised part of the culture. Hospitals in the country had been accepting patients with game addiction before the WHO officially classified it as a disease (Hattenhouse, 2017). In 2011, the controversial so-called 'Cinderella law' banned children under the age of 16 from gaming between 12am and 6am in an attempt to curb a rise in gaming addiction (Lee, 2011). In 2021, it was announced that this law would be abolished and replaced by a 'choice permit' that allows parents to set their own curfews for their children (Leston, 2021).

Despite the lived experiences of gamers and healthcare experts, research into this has generally claimed that games are not inherently addictive. For example, factors such as family conflict and having a short-term mentality have been found in those who play games heavily, suggesting that their addictive behaviour may be influenced by external

factors rather than the activity itself (Yuh, 2018; Huanhuahn & Su, 2013; Spekman et al., 2013).

However, it is worth noting that these studies focus on gaming as a whole, rather than solely Esports. More research on gaming addiction and Esports specifically is needed to fully understand if there are any major concerns, but this is made difficult by the lack of strict classification between recreational video games and Esports (Chung et al., 2019). This is exemplified by Chan et al.'s (2022) research which reviewed existing studies of the impact of Esports and online video gaming on youth behaviour, and found only three that specifically focused on Esports or online competitive gaming – the others relevant to their paper all covered a much broader category of gaming. Of these, one studied addiction in adult players of MMORPGs, such as World of Warcraft, and found high rates of internet addiction. However, they do not specify if the participants were taking part in Esports-related play – whilst MMORPGs do have an Esports scene, the majority of players are not playing competitively, because their core gameplay is player-versus-environment rather than player-versus-player (Plarium, 2023). A second study had the same issue with focusing on MMORPGs, and found that socialising and game advancement were key motivations for play in Turkish MMORPGs (Dindar & Akbulut, 2014). The third (DiFrancisco-Donoghue et al., 2019) did explicitly study Esports players as their participants were collegiate Esports players in the USA and Canada. They found that 56% of participants reported eye strain, 42% had experienced neck and back pain, and a third had experienced wrist and/or hand pain (ibid.). Thus, even though Chan et al.'s (2022) aim had been to find studies specifically about Esports' impact on behaviour, they were unsuccessful. However, since this study, Yilmaz and Özkan (2022) have published research that studied members of Esports societies at universities in Ankara. They found that participants who played for 5 to 7 hours a day were more likely to be addicted to playing than those who played for less than an hour, and those who made most of their friends online were more addicted to games than those who made their friends offline. They also found that having a fearful attachment style is a significant predictor of a game addiction. However, they do concede that "it is difficult to conclude that the time spent by Esports players alone is sufficient for determining game addiction" (ibid., p. 339) – if someone plays for many hours but does not suffer negative consequences, then that does not mean they are addicted. Bányai et al. (2019a) did not study addiction in and of itself, however they found that recreational gamers and Esports

players had similar motivations for playing games, with escapism the key motivation in each group. However, they also found that Esports gamers were more likely to be motivated by “social, competition, and skill development motives” (ibid., p. 1), which they proposed may have a mediating effect on any addictive behaviours.

The inconclusive and conflicting results of studies of gaming addiction and the lack of studies on the links between Esports specifically and addiction show that more work needs to be done to examine whether or not there are concerns in this area. This is relevant to the thesis as, if it is conclusively proven that Esports are addictive, this could potentially affect the legitimacy of the market.

2.4.2. Gambling

In addition to concerns about addiction, as the popularity of Esports has grown, so too have criticisms of gambling-related activity. Well-established betting companies such as Sky Bet offer odds on Esports matches just as they would for traditional sports (Sky Bet, 2019). However, gambling in Esports also appears in the form of buying and trading ‘loot boxes’. These are virtual boxes containing virtual goods that can be bought by players often using real currency. The player does not know exactly what will be in the box until they have purchased it. Some people liken this to gambling, resulting in the practice being banned in Belgium (Gerken, 2018). The UK government does not view this as gambling "because there is no way to monetise what is inside [loot boxes]” (Kleinman, 2019). Following a public consultation that began in September 2020, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport reviewed this but ultimately maintained its position (DDCMS, 2022).

Within academia, researchers have explored these new and emerging forms of gambling and the types of people most likely to engage in such activity. Bettors tended to be young men (Macey & Hamari, 2019; Wardle et al., 2020), although this is to be expected as it reflects the core demographic of the Esports community as a whole. Esports gamblers tended to have higher engagement with Esports (Macey & Hamari, 2019) and to exhibit higher rates of problematic video gaming behaviours (Marchica et al., 2021). However, multiple studies have failed to find a direct link between general video game consumption and Esports betting (Macey et al., 2020; Forrest et al., 2016; Wardle et al., 2020). Esports

is also not the only form of entertainment that is being used by online betting companies to make a profit – the industry is also expanding into the online sports and fantasy sports genres (Lopez-Gonzalez & Griffiths, 2018). An emerging subculture of Esports is that of betting using in-game currencies, in particular 'skin gambling' – skins being in-game cosmetic items that change the appearance of a character. This activity has raised particular concern as the practice is unregulated (Gambling Commission, 2017), putting vulnerable and underage bettors at risk (Greer et al., 2019).

The prevalence of gambling in Esports has led to some high-profile scandals, often as a result of match fixing. For example, one of the most famous StarCraft players, Life, received a prison sentence for throwing matches (Tseng, 2020). As a consequence of such scandals, there were calls for more regulation of and governance within the industry (Holden et al., 2017a), and in 2016 the Esports Integrity Commission was founded to work with industry stakeholders to prevent corruption and cheating (ESIC, 2020). This is highly relevant to this thesis, as it is typically seen as more difficult to cheat in an offline event than an online event (Zavian, 2020), which can affect Esports' participants' views on the legitimacy of a particular match.

2.4.3. Doping

Just as in traditional sports, the consumption of performance-enhancing drugs takes place in Esports (Holden et al, 2019). One of the first major scandals came in 2015 when a professional CS:GO player admitted their team were taking Adderall for the purpose of improving their cognition (Fashina, 2021). Both players and audiences tend to look upon doping negatively, especially as Esports typically have a younger audience (Gupta et al., 2021). Nevertheless, many Esports teams and leagues have partnered with energy drinks companies such as Red Bull, which potentially undermines any attempt to quash the use of performance-enhancing drugs (Frias, 2022).

One problem with current regulations is the lack of one, overarching regulatory body capable of enforcing anti-doping rules, and the lack of player unions that can support those accused of doping (Bafna, 2020). This also creates an imbalance of power, as games developers often maintain control, meaning they have the power over players' careers without external, objective intervention (Windholz, 2020). The Esports Integrity

Commission (ESIC) was established in 2016 to address all forms of cheating in Esports. Whilst some leagues and events have signed up to adhere to the ESIC's code of conduct, there are a number of other regulatory bodies competing to be the official regulatory body within Esports (Fashina, 2021). It is also challenging to get all stakeholders – commercial, digital, and cross-cultural – to agree to one set of regulatory standards (Kelly et al., 2021). Whilst it is possible for Esports to be incorporated into existing regulatory frameworks, as FIFA did for their 2018 eWorld Cup, it is important to consider the differences between traditional sports and Esports when doing so (Aghey, 2020). The problem of doping not only creates a problem of integrity, but highlights the lack of an overarching regulatory body within Esports. This is relevant to the thesis as regulation is seen as a key part of the institutionalisation process of a sport (Jenny et al., 2017).

2.4.4. Hate Speech

The fourth major concern surrounding the Esports industry is the prevalence of hate speech amongst gamers. Although not limited to just Esports, female gamers have reported experiencing discrimination, sexual harassment, and rape threats (Ruvalcaba, 2018). Female gamers have reported avoiding using voice chat so as not to reveal their gender and using gender-neutral voice tags in an attempt to prevent such discrimination (Türkay et al., 2020). Professional Esports players are disproportionately male and there are many obstacles facing women who want to make it to the elite level (Darvin et al., 2021). Even those who do make it face discrimination (Tseng, 2020). This is despite the fact that, unlike the common perception in traditional sports, women are not at a physiological disadvantage in Esports (Shen et al., 2016). Tang et al. (2021) suggest the gender disparity could be blamed on men and women having different motivations for viewing and participating in Esports, with the current industry more tailored to men. However, Paaßen et al. (2017) found that there is a persistent stereotype against women in Esports, largely due to the fact that most famous, professional players are male. In addition, as Esports tends to borrow language and the sense of competition from traditional sports, the focus on masculinity can be transferred into the industry (Rogstad, 2021). The toxicity women face and reasons for the gender disparity could be put down to the broader gender biases that exist in society (Madden et al., 2021). There are also different beliefs as to how to tackle the disparity, particularly over the idea that women-

only teams and tournaments are the best ways to showcase female talent until gender parity can be achieved (ibid.).

Racism can also be an issue in Esports, although there is less discussion of this in the literature. One of the problems with moderating racist comments is that a dictionary-based approach to word moderation does not necessarily work, as it is the way words are used and their context that have the effect (Sengün et al., 2019).

Besides being an unpleasant experience, toxic behaviour has also been shown to worsen performance (Monge & O'Brien, 2022). However, some players have found ways to cope with toxicity. Türkay et al. (2020) found that collegiate Esports players will either try to ignore the toxicity, perhaps empathising that the perpetrator may be experiencing personal struggles, or they will retreat and leave the game. However, whilst ignoring toxic behaviours may protect the victim from further harm, it can result in normalising the behaviour as the perpetrator does not face any consequences for their actions and so can continue their behaviour (Adinolf & Türkay, 2018).

One of the causes of toxicity in Esports is 'tilt', which is an emotional reaction that can spiral into poorer gameplay and negative emotions (Wu et al., 2021). As a result, players often take frustration out on themselves (ibid.). Frustrations can also be caused by game design or issues within the team (Kou & Gui, 2020). Esports players report trying to engage in emotional self-regulation (ibid.), but there are some actions that games developers can also take to help reduce toxicity. Kou and Gui (2020) suggest creating a space where players can learn about and share their experiences. Kordyaka et al. (2020) suggest providing anger management programmes to help players deal with their behaviour and ensuring pro players set a good example to others. Ensuring that rules are up to date with player norms could also help (Kou, 2020). However, the problem is not limited to the gaming environment. Social media sites where gamers tend to socialise, such as Reddit, can also contribute to the normalisation of toxicity (Massanari, 2017), meaning that there is only so much video game developers can do to prevent abuse.

Whilst this thesis does not directly grapple with the issues of toxicity and inclusion within Esports, it is useful to understand these issues, particularly with regards to how it may have affected the recruitment of research participants, and to how institutionalisation

could be affected. For example, toxicity in Esports could also negatively affect brands who sponsor Esports teams and events (Xue et al., 2019), which could have a knock-on effect on the legitimacy of the market. However, traditional sports have had cases of doping scandals since ancient times (Sjöqvist et al., 2008), toxic behaviour from players and fans has often been an issue, such as hooliganism in football (Williams et al., 2014), and betting on sports has continued to grow since it became possible to do so online (Lopez-Gonzalez & Griffiths, 2018). As Esports and traditional sports share these traits, this helps Esports align with traditional sports and could help legitimise the industry to those outside of it. This will be explored further in the findings of the thesis.

2.5. Physical and Mental Health

Despite the potential risks of playing video games, participation has also been shown to have positive benefits. Not only do players report making friends through gaming, but many studies have shown that many skills are improved through playing, including object tracking (Boot et al., 2008), spatial cognition (Spence & Feng, 2010), strategy formation (VanDeventer & White, 2002), prosocial behaviour (Greitemeyer & Osswald, 2010), and social skills (Tang, 2018). However, much of this research is focused more on general video gaming, rather than Esports specifically (Bányai et al., 2019b).

The pervasive stereotype of Esports participants and gamers in general is that of the lazy, unfit person who rarely leaves their computer. There is a debate as to how true this is in reality. It is true that Esports athletes spend many hours sitting in front of a screen (Wattanapisit et al., 2020), and DiFrancisco-Donoghue et al. (2020) have found that Esports players have a higher body-fat percentage than non-Esports players. However, Rudolf et al. (2020) found that two-thirds of participants in their study met the WHO’s recommendation for physical activity, reflecting a greater proportion of the wider population who did so; their study also showed that good sleep and diet were areas where Esports participants needed to improve. Key problems amongst professional Esports athletes are overuse injuries – such as wrist, neck, and arm pain and eye fatigue (DiFrancisco-Donoghue et al., 2019). Overall, studies into the physical health of Esports players compared to the rest of the population are limited, and Chan et al., (2022) have called for more longitudinal studies in this area.

Playing Esports, especially at a professional level, can be very psychologically demanding for athletes (Martin-Niedecken & Schätten, 2020). Additionally, Esports players can have their sleep affected because of late training times, a lack of time to wind down, pre-game anxiety, and jet lag when travelling to compete (Bonnar et al., 2019). However, high-ranking Esports athletes display higher connectivity in the executive function areas of the brain compared to low-ranking athletes (Gong et al., 2019) and Esports athletes with higher levels of mental toughness are better at coping with stress (Poulus et al., 2020). Nevertheless, more research is needed in this area to explore how to better support Esports' athletes mental health (Madden & Harteveld, 2021).

What is noticeable about these current studies is how some of the suggestions made by researchers relate to traditional sports. Professional athletes in traditional sports will also suffer from overuse injuries, and it is suggested that Esports teams have health management plans in place just as traditional sports teams do (DiFrancisco-Donoghue et al., 2019). Bonnar et al. (2019) suggest that strategies to support traditional athletes with their sleep could be adapted to help Esports athletes. It is also recommended that Esports teams have a sports psychologist to help their players (Cottrell et al., 2019) – an already common practice amongst traditional sports teams. This is an example of Esports mimicking practices of traditional sports to help aid legitimacy.

2.6. Professionalisation

The professionalisation of players is seen as an important step in the process of becoming a sport (Jenny et al, 2017; Heere, 2018). Some existing literature has explored this process in relation to Esports players. Professional Esports play requires a high ability in many skills, including mastery of the game, strategic thinking, skilled improvisation, and social skills (Taylor, 2012). Beyond this, to have a successful career, players also need to have a good career strategy, be a good team player, and be very dedicated to the game (ibid.). When playing well, elite Esports athletes experience high levels of flow and manage their stress levels effectively (Poulus et al., 2021).

There are multiple routes into an Esports career, and journeys are individual to each player (Meng-Lewis et al., 2021). A growing number of US colleges are offering scholarships to

Esports athletes in the same way they offer support to traditional athletes (Baker & Holden, 2018). Many of these scholars hope to pursue a career in Esports after graduation (Schaeperkoetter et al., 2017). However, Esports careers are often quite short as reaction times tend to slow from the mid-20s onwards (Smithies et al., 2020). Yet the unique skills developed during their careers can be transferred into other jobs and make them particularly suitable for roles as pilots, drone operators, or air traffic controllers (ibid.). The professionalisation of players can not only be beneficial for those who achieve it, but also for the games and leagues in which they participate. Those who achieve 'super stardom' can have a positive effect on aspects such as viewership and prize pools as more people want to watch them play (Ward & Harmon, 2019).

It is not only players that have professionalised over time. Casters – people who commentate on matches – have also professionalised and are an important part of the Esports infrastructure (Kempe-Cook et al., 2019). They use commentary styles similar to those used in traditional sports (ibid.), again demonstrating a way in which Esports mimics traditional sports. Casters often start casting as a solitary activity and can struggle to gain experience (ibid.). Whilst Esports careers may typically be short, the fact that players can become professionals means that this is one area of the process of becoming a sport that Esports has achieved.

2.7. Esports in Marketing and Consumer Research

The discussions of Esports within marketing theory are few, and focus on the co-creative nature of the market (Seo 2013; Seo & Jung, 2016) and consumer attitudes (Rogers et al., 2020b; Huston et al., 2021). Seo (2013) suggests that Esports is not just the playing of a game, but is a network of "experiential performances" (p. 1543). He builds upon value co-creation theory (Vargo & Lusch, 2004) to show that Esports experiences are co-created by numerous stakeholders, including the game developer, the players, the audiences, and the event organisers. He concludes that developers should not just focus on games, but on the management of Esports experiences, as these increase profitability and consumer numbers, which would aid the growth of the market.

Expanding on this, Seo and Jung (2016) use practice theory to argue that Esports players are not just players, but perform various other roles. They suggest that the use of specialised hardware, such as gaming mice, as well as the elements of competition, governance, and performance make Esports distinct from gaming more generally. Similarly, Andrews and Ritzer (2018) point out that many Esports participants are 'prosumers' who both produce and consume content, giving them more power to shape the market. This blurring of the roles between producer and consumer has consequences for the development and legitimisation of the market – especially in its innovation stage (Humphreys, 2010), as will be discussed later in the thesis.

Huston et al. (2021) explored the various Esport consumer journeys. They argue that whilst some Esports players participate for skill improvement, there are many other reasons for consumption, including for the entertainment and social factors. They also suggest that Esports participants' engagement with Esports shifts over time and according to the game, rather than growing in a linear fashion. Furthermore, they argue that the competitive environment of online gaming and negative responses to poor performance from other players results in players being inducted into a practice of toxic interactions (Huston et al., 2023b). Players are socialised into this toxic environment through indoctrinating practices, in which new players are expected to accept the same toxic behaviour that established players experienced when they began playing (Huston et al., 2023a).

Rogers et al. (2020b) analysed Esports consumers' responses to companies who sponsor Esports teams and matches. They found that consumers responded more positively to sponsorship from brands that had a good fit with the Esports market than those that bore little relevance to Esports. This is something we already know about consumers' reactions to sponsorship (e.g. Crimmins & Horn, 1996; Russell, 2002), which suggests that Esports consumers are not particularly different in their responses to advertising than consumers more broadly.

As demonstrated, the primary focus of prior work within marketing and consumer research that explores Esports focuses on consumption practices and the use of sponsorship. The legitimation of the market has yet to be explored, and this is the gap this thesis seeks to fill.

2.8. Conclusion

To conclude, Esports are distinct from gaming due to the competitive element, professionalisation of players, and codification of the rules (Jenny et al., 2017). As it is in its infancy, Esports research is a growing field across several disciplines. One of the core discussions revolves around whether or not Esports can be classed as a sport, with no definitive answer either way. However, similarities have been drawn between traditional sports and Esports, such as motivations for participation. The dark side of Esports – including doping, gambling, and toxicity – have also been explored, and whilst these elements are not central to this thesis, they will impact on the institutionalisation process, as will be explored within the findings. Whilst elements of the institutionalisation of Esports have been studied, particularly the professionalisation of players, prior work somewhat fails to explore the Esports market through the lens of institutional theory, and researchers have yet to explore the role of space and place in this process. This is the gap the thesis seeks to fill. By using Esports as the research context, it is possible to better understand the role of space and place in the legitimation process. This is because Esports has used a variety of spaces – both online and offline – as it has grown and become more legitimate.

Chapter 3: Institutional Theory

3.0. Introduction

This chapter will begin by reviewing existing institutional theory from its roots in the early 20th Century. Institutional logics will then be discussed, followed by the mechanisms and actors involved in creating, maintaining, and disrupting logics. Topics of particular relevance to the thesis will then be examined, including field-configuring events and the discussion of space in institutional theory. Finally, the use of institutional theory within the marketing and consumer research literature will be reviewed.

3.1. Origins and Foundations

Institutional theory constitutes a large area of research with the common theme of exploring how organisations are structured and gain legitimacy (David et al., 2019), or "the social process by which individuals come to accept a shared definition of social reality" (Scott, 1987, p. 496). The foundations of institutional theory within organisation studies were laid in the 1940s and 1950s. Robert K. Merton and his students at Colombia University are typically credited with having brought the study of organisations into sociology (Scott, 2014). One such student, Phillip Selznick, was one of the first to discuss institutionalisation as a process in which organisations embody values over time (Selznick, 1957). In doing so, Selznick portrayed the organisation as a variable, something which evolves over time according to both those within the organisation and the external environment (Scott, 2014). Parsons was another influential early institutionalisation scholar. One of his key contributions to the field was his research on the links between institutions and the wider social-cultural context. He posited that one of the ways in which institutions gained legitimacy was through the enactment of their values in society, and that broader societal values guided both the organisation and the individuals within it (Parsons, 1956).

The 1950s to 1970s saw a shift in focus to an organisation's internal structures. During this period, attributes such as size and hierarchy of personnel were considered key to organisational efficiency (David et al., 2019). There was also more detailed discussion of

each of these aspects and how they contributed to efficiency. In the 1970s, the field took a turn into what many term ‘neo-institutional theory’ (David et al., 2019; Scott, 2014). Whilst old institutional theory considered the organisation to be embedded in the local community and that it became institutionalised once it was, Meyer and Rowan (1977) challenged the idea that the focus of organisational attributes was on efficiency. They proposed that the rules and structures adopted by organisations are often done so because they are ‘rationalised myths’, standards that are a result of public opinion and tradition, rather than because they are necessarily best practice (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). By adopting the structures and processes accepted by society or the field in which the organisation operates, they suggested that an organisation can gain legitimacy and maintain stability, but not necessarily increase efficiency or productivity (ibid.).

In their seminal work, DiMaggio and Powell (1983) explored how organisations become similar through processes of isomorphic change, which include coercion and persuasion from other organisations (coercive isomorphism), copying or modelling other organisations’ structures and behaviour (mimetic processes), and the professionalisation of workers resulting in certain expected norms (normative pressures). Institutionalisation may be the aim for organisations as it often results in a higher status and more respect from others, but it does not necessarily mean that the organisation is more efficient as a result (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Of the three forms of isomorphic change put forward by DiMaggio and Powell, ‘mimetic processes’ is arguably the most apparent in the process of the legitimisation of the Esports market. For example, event organisers use traditional sports arenas to hold large events and broadcast techniques developed for traditional sports, and team managers use training personnel and techniques that have been developed for physical sports teams (League of Legends Origins, 2019; CBSN Originals, 2018; Jenny et al., 2017).

In the late 1980s to the 2000s, criticisms of institutional theory began to rise. The key critiques were that institutional research was too focused on the similarities between organisations rather than their differences (David & Bitektine, 2009; Dacin et al., 2002) and that there was too much of a focus on macro-level processes rather than the micro-level (Tolbert & Zucker, 1996). There was a shift in focus from the idea that institutionalisation forced organisations to conform, to the suggestion that organisations could adapt and interpret institutional norms to an extent that suits them (Scott, 2008). As

a result, research began to divide into different streams, exploring the processes of institutionalisation and the actors involved. The following sections will review the dominant streams.

3.2. Institutional Logics

Institutional logics can be defined as socially constructed "s*ystems of cultural elements (values, beliefs, and normative expectations) by which people, groups, and organisations make sense of and evaluate their everyday activities, and organise those activities in time and space*" (Haveman & Gualteri, 2017, p. 1). Thus, the study of institutional logics can be used as a bridge between macro perspectives of institutions and the micro processes performed by actors to maintain, create, or disrupt institutions (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008).

The main original proponents of institutional logics were Friedland and Alford (1991), who argued that institutionalisation could be caused by various values rather than just a commitment to rationality, and that each societal institution has its own central logic. They suggested that whilst these logics can constrain individual behaviour, the contradictions between different institutional logics can provide actors with the resources to make change. There are a number of key assumptions of this institutional logics perspective: that society is an inter-institutional system; that institutions are composed of both the material and the symbolic; that individual agency is embedded within the dominant institutional logic; that institutional logics can be developed and analysed across multiple levels, from the individual to the societal; and that institutional logics are contingent on their historical context (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Thornton & Ocasio, 2008). Since Friedland and Alford's initial work on institutional logics, further research has explored both the ways in which actors make change and the constraining nature of institutional logics. Institutional work performed by institutional actors and entrepreneurs has been a particular focus of this research, and will be explored in more detail in the following sections. This will be followed by exploration of the constraining nature of institutional logics.

3.2.1. Institutional Entrepreneurship

Institutional entrepreneurship refers to the actions of actors who seek to change or transform institutions, whilst institutional entrepreneurs are the actors who take responsibility for this action (Hardy & Maguire, 2017). Institutional entrepreneurs can work across the individual, organisational, and societal levels and use elements of different existing logics to create a new logic (Tracey et al., 2011). While some actors are field makers, who take initiative to make change, field takers are those who simply follow (Child et al., 2007). One puzzle within institutional theory is the paradox of embedded agency: if actors are embedded within their institutions and therefore conditioned by them, how can they envision and enact change (Holm, 1995; Seo & Creed, 2002)? Institutional entrepreneurship explores the mechanisms used by actors and the skills required to overcome their institutional constraints (Garud et al., 2007).

Institutional entrepreneurs can come together in a number of ways, such as by establishing a power dynamic, creating a common ground between actors, mobilising a bandwagon to recruit actors, incentivising actors to join, or using ethical arguments (Wijen & Ansari, 2007). Actors can be recruited to the cause using 'inviting stories' to target specific actors, whilst 'signalling stories' can be used to promote activities to a wider range of actors and increase legitimacy (Wry et al., 2011). Actors working on collaborative projects can then conceptualise how they will work together before linking their work to wider social norms (Perkmann & Spicer, 2007).

One criticism of institutional entrepreneurship research is that the focus tends to be on how change is made rather than on the origins of the change (Lounsbury & Crumley, 2007). It has been suggested that the first step can be problem recognition, but that it may require a group of people within a field to recognise that the problem exists in the first place (ibid.). However, Lawrence and Phillips (2004) suggested that broader cultural changes can also instigate institutional change. They explored how the cultural shift from seeing whales as monsters to being depicted more sympathetically led to local actors on the west coast of Canada shifting their practices to create a whale-watching industry. In this case, the origin of change was not a problem, but an opportunity, and the macro-level cultural shift caused the micro-level action. A further criticism of institutional entrepreneurship research is that it typically focuses on the positive outcomes, so Khan

et al. (2007) demonstrated how institutional entrepreneurship can also cause negative outcomes. They explained how the football manufacturing market eliminated child labour from the production process, but that this resulted in many women losing their jobs. The football industry framed the project as a success and benefited as a result, whilst the subjects of this action – the workers themselves – lost out. Understanding how people are motivated to become institutional entrepreneurs and how they identify a need for change is useful, however it is also important to understand how they subsequently act. This is explored in the following section.

3.2.2. Institutional Work

Institutional work is a concept introduced by Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) and refers to "the purposive action of individuals and organisations aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions" (ibid., p. 216). Whilst institutional entrepreneurship examines the actors involved in institutionalisation, Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) argued that more actors are involved in these processes beyond just the entrepreneurs. On reviewing extant literature, they felt that institutional theory had held more of a process-based view than a practice-based one, and so focused on the actions performed by actors within these processes (ibid.).

Institutional work can examine the actions of an organisation but encourages more focus on the actions of individuals – and not just on big actions, but on day-to-day actions performed by ordinary actors (Lawrence et al., 2011). Institutional work can be both visible and well-documented, and invisible, working 'behind the scenes' to network with other actors, experiment, and strategise (Canales, 2016). Whilst institutional entrepreneurship focuses on the creation of institutions in particular, Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) argued that actors also perform actions to maintain and disrupt institutions. They reviewed existing literature to draw out the various forms of institutional work undertaken to achieve each of these aims, which are summarised in the following table.

Creating Institutions	Maintaining Institutions	Disrupting Institutions
Advocacy Defining Vesting Constructing identities Changing normative associations Constructing normative networks Mimicry Theorising Educating	Enabling work Policing Deterring Valourizing and demonising Mythologising Embedding and routinising	Disconnecting sanctions Disassociating moral foundations Undermining assumptions and beliefs

Table 01: Forms of institutional work proposed by Lawrence & Suddaby (2006)

Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) pointed out that existing research had covered this institutional work, but not explicitly. Following their intervention, researchers began to examine institutional work more thoroughly.

One focus of this new work was the role and actions of institutional actors. Zietsma and Lawrence (2010) examined how institutional work can be used to maintain institutions as well as make institutional change. They argued that when existing institutional boundaries and practices were accepted, actors performed habitually, but when these were contested, actors gained practical agency to respond to changes. Michel et al. (2019) explored what happens when the institutional work of two different actors meets, and found that the result can be different from what either party had originally envisioned. They also found that organisations that resisted change were less likely to survive than those who were more willing and able to adapt. Voronov and Vince (2012) suggested that the role of emotions in institutional work had been under-explored. They argued that institutional work should not always be seen as rational, because actors may not be consciously aware of their emotions yet can still be guided by them. They suggested that actors who were both emotionally and cognitively invested in their institution were more likely to work to maintain it, whilst those who were less emotionally and/or cognitively invested were more likely to disrupt or create a new institution.

Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) observed that much institutional work is language-based, performed through dialogue, rhetoric, and narratives. For example, Coskuner-Balli and Tumbat (2017) found that US presidents used three main rhetorical devices to legitimate free trade: ontological articulations based on logic, cosmological articulations that suggest change is natural, and value-based articulations that link with dominant cultural values. Munir and Phillips (2005) demonstrated how Kodak shifted the narrative of photography from a serious, professional undertaking to a fun activity used to preserve family memories in order to justify their lower quality but easier-to-use film cameras. Narratives can also be used by competing groups of actors, by creating their own narratives as well as counter-narratives to delegitimise the narratives of the other group (Zilber, 2007).

Understanding the types of institutional work performed by actors is relevant to this thesis, as it provides a better understanding of how the Esports market has legitimised thus far. However, Lawrence and Dover (2015) argued that place has largely been ignored in organisational research, and so examined how place can affect institutional work. They found that places can either contain, mediate, or complicate institutional work. Places that contain institutional work act as a boundary in which actors can perform their institutional work. Places that mediate act as signifiers that help target institutions or their intended audiences. But places can also complicate – places can be used as practical objects in institutional work, but this can sometimes add complexity. For example, Lawrence and Dover (ibid.) found that a programme that used churches as an overnight shelter for homeless people encountered issues as the churches were not zoned for overnight stays. Thus, places can be used in institutional work and can affect its outcomes. Lawrence and Dover (2015) explored two places used in two different – albeit similar – programmes. This thesis seeks to build on this work by exploring how different spaces can both be used by actors and can affect the outcomes of institutional work on the legitimation of a market over a longer period of time.

3.2.3. Categorisation

One field of research that focuses on how institutional logics can constrain is categorisation. This is the discussion of how organisations are categorised and the resultant effect on legitimacy (Durand & Paolella, 2013). Early discussions tended to

focus on how deviation from categorical norms could result in an organisation being penalised by its audience (Zuckerman, 1999). This understanding was built on the underlying view within neo-institutional theory that organisations that do not conform were less legitimate than those that do, resulting in increased homogeneity of organisations (e.g. Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). However, later discussion has built on this to look at the different approaches to categorisation and the ways in which category spanning can be accepted (e.g. Kovács & Hannan, 2010; Durand & Boulongne, 2017; Phillips & Zuckerman, 2001).

Categories are used to give order to and make sense of organisations and can be useful to producers and audiences alike as they can compare products, competitors, and the status of the organisation within their field (Zukerman, 1999; Durand & Paolella, 2013). However, there are several different ways in which organisations can be categorised. The classic approach to categorisation is through prototypes – organisations are classified based on their similarity to a particular ideal, and the more like that ideal an organisation is, the more receptive the audience is to the organisation (Durand & Paolella, 2013). For example, in the category of 'shoe shops', Clarks would be close to the ideal, as they only sell shoes and shoe maintenance products.

However, Glynn and Navis (2013) argue that categorisation does not have to be a cognitive process, but can also be a cultural one. Audiences use their knowledge and understanding of organisations – the context – to create categories (ibid.; Durand & Paolella, 2013). Furthermore, organisations can be categorised using a goals-based approach, in which an audience categorises based on their needs (Durand & Paolella, 2013; Durand & Boulongne, 2017). For example, a parent may have a category of 'shops from which to buy my child's back to school products'. Organisations in this category may include a uniform shop, a shoe shop, and a stationery shop – all organisations that would not fit in the same classic, prototypical category, but do fit together in this goals-based approach.

Prior research has also examined what happens when an organisation spans multiple categories. Organisations that fit into multiple 'prototype' categories are expected to underperform because they do not fit in well with audiences' expectations (Durand & Paolella, 2013; Hsu, 2006) and because the critics and experts of the field in which the

organisation operates will not be as attracted to it as it does not specialise in their category (Zuckerman, 1999). However, there are ways to alleviate the confusion caused by category spanning. Kovács and Hannan (2010) suggest that the starker the contrast between the two categories being spanned, the more difficulty the audience has in interpreting the organisation. Therefore, spanning categories with lower levels of contrast is preferable. Phillips and Zuckerman (2001) found that an organisation's status has an effect on its ability to violate expected norms: those with high status are unlikely to lose status by working outside their category, whilst those with low status often are not being paid much attention. Thus, it is organisations with middle status that must conform. However, Pontikes (2012) argues that the level of detriment to a company that spans multiple categories depends on the audience: some people are influenced by categories to navigate the market, whereas others are more accepting of hybridity and change within a market. Thus, the extent to which category spanning could harm an organisation ultimately depends upon the audience's approach to categorisation (ibid; Durand & Boulongne, 2017; Glynn & Navis, 2013).

The discussion of categorisation is relevant to the legitimacy of Esports because, as discussed in the Research Context chapter, the debate of whether or not Esports can be classed as a sport is long-standing and ongoing. Whilst this thesis does not seek to contribute to this debate, it is important to understand the theoretical underpinnings of why this classification issue has an effect on the legitimacy of the Esports industry, and why different audiences have differing approaches.

In summary, prior work has explored institutional actors (e.g. Hardy & Maguire, 2017; Child et al., 2007) and the types of institutional work they perform to create, maintain, and disrupt institutions (e.g. Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010). This thesis will extend this work by examining the spaces used by institutional actors in the Esports market. Furthermore, prior work has examined the effect of categorisation on an organisation and the risk that institutionalisation can be constrained if an organisation deviates from category norms (e.g. Zuckerman, 1999; Durand & Paolella, 2013). The findings of this thesis will explore the effects on the legitimacy of the Esports market as a result of the debate over whether or not it can be categorised as a sport. Following this exploration of the work and actors involved in institutionalisation processes, the extent to

which it is possible to measure institutionalisation and extant research on the role of space in the institutionalisation process will be explored.

3.3. Extent of Legitimisation

While institutional theory focuses on the processes of institutionalisation, there is no agreed definition of a point at which something becomes legitimate, because legitimacy is subjective (Deephouse et al., 2017). Whilst it is difficult to have a conclusive metric of institutionalisation, Jepperson (1991) suggested that something is highly institutionalised if it is almost invulnerable to societal intervention. Some scholars have proposed different stages of legitimation or institutionalisation which a market or organisation must go through to be considered legitimate.

Tolbert & Zucker (1996) outlined three stages of institutionalisation: 1) habitualisation, when new ideas are formed; 2) objectification, when consensus begins to form and organisations begin to adopt the new structures; 3) sedimentation, at which point the structure has been adopted and accepted by a group of actors for a longer period of time. Suchman's (1995) forms of legitimacy are widely used in institutional theory. He proposes three forms of organisational legitimacy: 1) pragmatic legitimacy, which is achieved by an organisation gaining legitimacy with its key, immediate audience; 2) moral legitimacy, which is achieved if an organisation fits in with societal values; and 3) cognitive legitimacy, which is achieved when an organisation becomes taken-for-granted or is deemed necessary. These different forms of legitimacy mean that there is no linear pathway for an organisation to go through to be considered legitimate. However, they can gain different forms of legitimacy as they grow from having a smaller audience who perceive them as legitimate to gaining legitimacy on a much wider scale.

Scott (2014) reflects on the various approaches taken within institutional theory and suggests that scholars' existing proposals can be divided into three categories, or 'pillars of institutions'. The regulative pillar involves complying with rules and regulations, the normative pillar requires compliance with society's morals and social obligations to be achieved, and the cultural-cognitive pillar involves an institution sharing cultural meanings and understandings with the society or culture in which it operates. Scott argues

that it is rare for an institution to only comply with one of these pillars, but that it is not necessary for all of the pillars to be used in order to achieve legitimacy.

In marketing and consumer research, Humphreys (2010) uses Suchman's (1995) definitions of legitimacy and Scott's (2014) three pillars of institutions to analyse the casino gambling market. Using Johnson et al's (2006) four stages of legitimation: innovation, local validation, diffusion, and general validation, Humphreys proposed the following model:

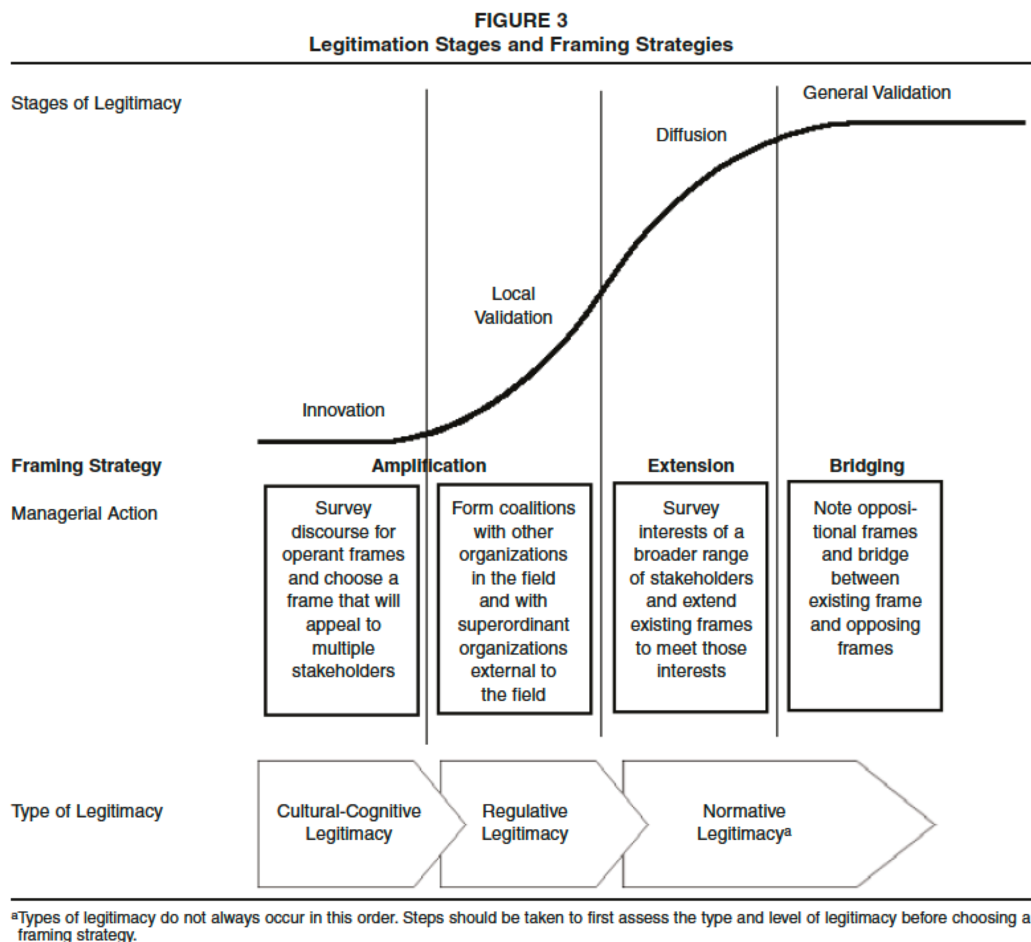


Figure 02: Humphrey's findings (2010, p. 16)

Humphreys (2010) developed this model based on analysis of the legitimation process of the US casino gambling market. When considered in relation to the Esports market, however, there are limitations to its application. The current model does not align with a market that has largely developed online and which is considered globally by the esports community to be legitimate, yet is not considered legitimate to the same extent by those

outside the community. This will be discussed and challenged much further within the findings in Chapter 6.

Although there may not be agreement on when something is fully institutionalised, there is a pattern in the suggested stages: change begins on a micro-level and becomes more accepted over time, until it is accepted on a wider scale. This study proposes that the Esports market has not followed this trajectory – rather than the institutional process growing from local to global validation, a network of global actors has helped to legitimise the practice, and they are now trying to increase legitimacy on a local scale. This is supported by one of the few Esports studies that uses institutional theory (Cestino-Castilla et al., 2021), which found that institutional actors within Esports are motivated to help legitimise the market by their experience of receiving negative reactions towards Esports from those closest to them, such as family and friends.

A further critique of legitimation models such as Humphreys' (2010) is that they can present each stage as being distinct from each other, when in some cases stages can be concurrent or overlap in some way. This thesis will argue that this is the case within the Esports market as consumers are heavily involved in the creation of the market, and thus the innovation stage is not driven purely by managers as in Humphreys' (2010) model. Branstad and Solem (2020), on reviewing literature that explores consumer-driven markets, suggested three forms of market innovation, the first being incumbent legitimator logic, in which an organisation or firm creates or expands a market – much like in Humphreys' (2010) model. The second is the consumer-activist logic, which is driven by consumers typically in opposition or resistance to producers or practices of an existing market (Branstad & Solem, 2020). For example, Giesler (2008) studied the emergence of the music streaming market the process of what he terms "marketplace drama" between conflicting groups of consumers and producers; Hietanen et al. (2016) explored how a now-globalised retail festival started as a protest against legislation that restricted where food outlets could open in Finland. In these cases, the consumers break away from the existing market as a result of conflict and establish their own.

Finally, Branstad and Solem (2020) suggest that the market co-creator logic is a process through which a market is innovated through "collaboration between consumers, producers, regulators, stakeholders, etc., creates a new market practice that parallels the

incumbents' market practices and leads to diversified co-existing offerings" (p. 568). Whilst in this case the new market tends to be driven by consumers, they are not in conflict with the existing market, as in the previous logic. For example, Martin and Schrouten (2014) studied the minimoto market, in which the desire for adults to take part in dirt bike racing on small motorcycles led to the formation of a consumption community that became a market in its own right, borne from a desire to fulfil a gap in the existing market rather than in conflict with it. This thesis will advance our understanding of market co-creation through the examination of the Esports market, which was a co-creation between players and game developers.

More recent work on legitimation processes has explored the levels at which a practice can be considered legitimate. It has been argued that there are three levels of the legitimacy process (Bitektine & Haack, 2015; Haack et al., 2021). 'Propriety' is the micro-level of legitimacy, in which an individual evaluates if the object or practice in question is legitimate; 'consensus' is the meso-level, in which a group begins to agree that the object or practice is legitimate; 'validity' is the macro-level, at which point it is taken for granted that the object or practice is legitimate (ibid.).

To conclude, as a result of the subjective nature of legitimacy, there is no defined point at which something is considered to be legitimate, and thus there exists no conclusive method to measure its progress (Deephouse et al., 2017; Jepperson, 1991). Nevertheless, prior work involving analysis of a specific market has been used to create an example of how it has legitimised over time (Humphreys, 2010). This thesis will adapt this work to better align with the consumer-driven Esports market (Branstad & Solem, 2020). Prior work has largely focused on the role of actors within the institutionalisation process (e.g. Hardy & Maguire, 2017; Child et al., 2007; Garud et al., 2007) and the forms of work they perform (e.g. Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Canales 2016; Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010). However, a growing but as yet under explored field of research has begun to study the role of space and place in processes of institutionalisation (e.g. Lampel & Meyer, 2008; Lawrence & Dover, 2015; Wright et al., 2023). This is the strand of institutional research to which this thesis primarily seeks to contribute, thus prior work will now be explored.

3.4. Space and Place in Institutional Theory

The role of space and place in the legitimation process has thus far been under-explored in institutional theory (Lawrence & Dover, 2015; Wright et al., 2023). However, a significant contribution to this strand of literature thus far has been that of field-configuring events. Lampel and Meyer (2008) define field-configuring events as a time-limited occasion in which actors gather face-to-face in a location to "generate social and reputational resources that can be deployed elsewhere and for other purposes" (p. 1027). Extant literature has focused on occasions such as trade shows, industrial gatherings, and conferences as field-configuring events (Lange et al., 2014; Hardy & Maguire, 2010). The focus has also been on how field-configuring events can be used for change. For example, Oliver and Montgomery (2008) demonstrated how a 1944 conference defined the Jewish legal profession in pre-state Israel; Hardy and Maguire (2010) examined the UN conference prior to the Stockholm Convention that established regulations on dangerous chemicals; Graves and Lauer (2020) discussed the establishment of the fact-checking field through 'Global Fact' meetings. However, there is little discussion of field-configuring events beyond field creation or change (Schüßler & Sydow, 2015). This is perhaps understandable, given the name field-*configuring* events, but it does bring into question whether or not Esports events can be considered field-configuring events, given how institutionalised the market has become – which also raises the question of whether or not all events of a certain nature are field-configuring events.

Brewer (2017) found that whilst field-configuring events can help new markets grow and legitimise by bringing actors together, once the market is more stable, they can become less useful. However, in Brewer's study of the US handmade bike market, this was largely due to the costs involved with attending the key industry showcase – more research would be needed to discover if this is a more universal phenomenon. Schüßler and Sydow (2015) argued that organisers of creative industry events can begin to organise events unknowingly habitually once their event has been institutionalised, and whilst this may not be creating change, it is still a form of institutional work. In this sense, Esports events could still be considered field-configuring events, even though such events are no longer particularly sites of change. Read et al. (2023) suggest that a field-configuring event can be used to disrupt an institution, based on their analysis of the 1999 Lausanne conference which established anti-doping regulations and practices. They suggest that the higher the

congruence of understandings prior to the event, and the involvement of a dominant actor in the field, the less chance there is of disrupting an institution. However, this analysis was based on just one event, and so may not be true across other institutions. It has also been argued that field-configuring events are not necessarily spaces of market change or disruption, but can be used for knowledge production. Lange (2021) used the case of an Innovation Workshop at a German university to analyse how specific places were used to aid knowledge production, including how tables were arranged in a workspace to encourage group interaction. In doing so, the author called for more focus of such research to be on how space can specifically be used to aid such knowledge exchanges.

Based on the findings, this thesis suggests that some Esports events can be considered field-configuring events. For example, the Season 2 League of Legends World Championship could be considered a field-configuring event as it was one of the first major in-person Esports events, but the internet stopped working during a crucial moment. As a result, the solution of using an offline server changed the way such events were managed across the industry (League of Legends Origins, 2019). This is an example of McInerney's (2008) postulation of field-configuring events as an opportunity to conventionalise accounts – something which happens at one of these events in an emerging field can become convention. However, it is also argued that most contemporary Esports events cannot be considered field-configuring events, as they maintain, as opposed to configure, the field. Furthermore, existing field-configuring event scholarship appears to focus on internal discussion and change. The findings suggest that much of this intra-community discussion happens online in the case of Esports – given the market is continually online and occasionally meets offline, much of the negotiation for any change within the market happens online. Existing research into field-configuring events tends to focus on an industry temporarily coming together, which is not the case in Esports.

Beyond field-configuring events, some prior work (e.g. Kellogg, 2009; Cartel et al., 2019; Furnari, 2014) within institutional theory has examined how different spaces can be used to aid institutional processes. One of the key ways in which space and place theory has been applied to institutional theory is through analysis of a space or place as a location used for change. In these studies, space is often conceptualised as more than just a location in which the institutional work takes place. Space can also have a more abstract

conceptualisation to include space as a social construction or as a lived experience (Cresswell, 2015; Wright et al., 2023). This thesis follows Lefebvre's (1991) theory of space as a social production, but the conceptualisation of space shall be explained in more detail in the following chapter.

Much of the institutional research that has applied space and place theory has focused on how institutional actors use space to break away from the status quo of their work practices, roles, and hierarchies in order to negotiate institutional change or disruption. For example, Kellogg (2009) introduced the concept of 'relational spaces' – free spaces where reformers could meet away from their institutions and defenders of the institutional norms to build relationships and create social movements. Cartel et al. (2019) examined the role of experimental spaces, which are a result of actors initially creating boundaried spaces in which they can distance themselves from the status quo of their work in order to conceptualise alternative practices. Furnari (2014) suggested that interstitial spaces – small, informal settings, where diverse members of different fields meet occasionally to take part in a common activity to which they devote limited time – are spaces in which successful interactions between actors in different organisational fields can spark the creation of new practices. Rodner et al. (2020) explored how actors can disrupt an institution by demarcating their own space and challenging institutional norms.

Whilst much prior research has focused on how space and place can be used to change or disrupt an institution, there has been less examination of how space and place can be involved in the maintenance of an institution. However, Wright et al. (2021) explored how custodians of a place of social inclusion – defined as "institutions endowed by a society or a community with material resources, meaning, and values at geographic sites where citizens can access services for specific needs" (ibid., p. 42) maintain such institutions by managing the tensions between the needs of service users and finite resources.

To conclude, prior work that has explored the role of space and place in the process of institutionalisation has focused on the concept of field-configuring events (Lampel & Meyer, 2008) or has applied space and place theory to explore how institutional actors use space to change or disrupt an institution (e.g. Kellogg, 2009; Rodner et al., 2020). Whilst these initial explorations of the role of different spaces in institutional processes

are useful, their focus is on the initial stages of change or disruption. This thesis aims to explore how different spaces have been used throughout the institutional process – from the beginnings of the Esports market to the present day. Based on this understanding of institutional theory more broadly, the application of this theory within marketing and consumer research will be explored.

3.5. Institutional Theory and Marketing

Institutional theory originated as a field within organisation studies (Slimane et al, 2019). The focus was on how organisations institutionalised, with consumers merely experiencing the results of institutional processes (ibid.). However, over time, this began to change. First, institutional theory began to examine how organisations and institutional actors could shape markets. For example, Munir and Phillips (2005) examined how Kodak changed the photography industry from a specialised skill to an everyday activity, Spicer and Okhmatovsky (2015) found that the state acting as an owner and regulator of the banking system could increase trust in the banking market, and Grimshaw and Miozzo (2006) examined the institutional effects of the IT outsourcing market.

Following this turn towards the role of institutional theory in market development, institutional theory began to examine the role of institutional actors – including consumers - as more active participants within institutional processes, who undertake institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). This included how consumers worked together to change or disrupt a market, such as through the creation and work of social movement organisations (e.g. Hensmans, 2003; Khan et al., 2007; King & Pearce, 2010), the role of local actors in the development of a growing market (Lawrence & Phillips, 2004), and how actors can undertake institutional work to maintain their field (e.g. Wright & Zammuto, 2013; Fredriksson, 2014).

Marketing academics began using institutional theory within their work in the late 1990s to early 2000s (cf. Slimane et al., 2019). Institutional theory has been applied in marketing and consumer research in a number of ways, including how organisations have sought legitimacy from consumers (e.g. Arnold et al., 2001; Kates, 2004), the variety of ways in which a market legitimises (e.g. Humphreys, 2010; Baker 2019), and the roles of consumers in institutional processes (e.g. Dolbec & Fischer, 2015; Scaraboto & Fischer,

2013). Furthermore, a growing subfield of marketing research has begun to cover market systems dynamics (Giesler, 2003; 2008), which explores how social systems, actors, and institutions shape and are shaped by markets (Giesler & Fischer, 2017).

A core contribution to marketing literature from researchers using institutional theory is the examination of how organisations seek legitimacy from consumers. This can be with a focus on the image the organisation tries to project. For example, Arnold et al. (2001) examined how Walmart distributed flyers to a community presenting itself as a family and community-oriented business rather than a corporate behemoth in order to appeal to smalltown suburbia, and Kates (2004) found how brands are able to gain legitimacy within specific consumption communities, in this case, the gay men's community.

A further contribution to institutional theory from marketing scholars is the exploration of how markets are created and shaped. For example, Humphreys (2010) explored the role of social actors in the legitimising process, using the context of casino gambling. She pointed out that members of society such as journalists and politicians also play a key role in the legitimation process, through the ways they legislate the market and the language they use to discuss or report on the market, for example. Baker et al. (2019) studied the 'new circus' movement that grew in the latter part of the 20th century. They found that, through various groups with similar goals working together over time, the 'new circus' movement was able to develop their 'product' and legitimise it over time through government aid, standardisation of the education of their performers, and mimicking similar groups who had already had success, such as theatre groups. Ertimur and Coskuner-Balli (2015) explored how managers and brands can navigate competing institutional logics within a market – in their context, the US yoga market – to create coherent understandings of the market in order to increase its legitimacy. In sum, these papers have examined the roles of various stakeholders in the legitimation of a market and have laid out the institutional processes at play, however, they have not explored the role of space in the legitimation process. This is the gap this thesis seeks to fill.

Research has also been conducted into the role of consumers in the legitimation process (e.g. Kjeldgaard et al., 2017; Dolbec & Fischer, 2015). For example, the ways in which consumers can perform collective action to disrupt a market in order to increase the diversity of offerings in a market (Kjeldgaard et al., 2017) or to protest against an

established industry (Kristensen et al., 2011). Scaraboto and Fischer (2013) explored how plus-size women with an interest in fashion were considered by fashion designers and retailers to be less legitimate than other consumers, and how these women formed communities online to try to change this way of thinking. This is an example of how consumers can work together to try to get their voices heard within a market, similar to how women in the Esports market have coordinated to increase representation within the male-dominated Esports community. In addition to disrupting markets, consumers can also perform institutional work that helps maintain markets. Dolbec and Fischer (2015) suggest that an increasing amount of institution-maintaining work in the field of fashion is undertaken by consumers. Roles that were previously undertaken by paid employees such as press officers and photographers are now increasingly performed by ordinary consumers (fashion bloggers) who share style photographs with readers of their blog. This also results in consumers having increased influence on the producers, which makes the relationship between producers and consumers more akin to value co-creators. This is when the consumers are involved in the value creation process, something which has grown as services have become more dominant in the marketplace (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). This is key in Esports, as the consumers are the players, but these players also produce the content that attracts audiences just through playing the game. Thus these consumers who produce content are important to the growth of the industry, but the ultimate power in Esports lies with the game developers, who ultimately control the game.

Furthermore, market system dynamics refers to markets as dynamic social systems, embedded within the broader socio-cultural context and evolving over time (Giesler, 2003; 2008). This branch of marketing research explores how and why markets change and the actors and processes involved (Giesler & Fischer, 2017). For example, Kjellberg and Olson (2017) found that an interrelating market can contribute to the legitimation of a new market through normalising, exchange, and representational practices. Coskuner-Balli and Tumbat (2017) examined rhetorical strategies used to maintain the dominance of free trade as a market institution. However, upon reviewing the field of marketing system dynamics, Giesler and Fischer (2017) pointed out the insufficient examination of how space can shape market systems. Castilhos et al. (2017) address this by introducing a spatial framework through which market dynamics can be analysed – this will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter. In addition, Coskuner-Balli and Ertimur (2017) explored the role of globalisation in the legitimation process by studying the

adoption of yoga in the US from its origins in India. They produced a framework that included 'reterritorialisation strategies' for how yoga has achieved legitimacy in the US, based on three different types of legitimacy – moral (based on societal norms), cultural-cognitive (the idea that without the institution there would be chaos), and pragmatic (the immediate connection between organisation and audience) (Suchman, 1995). Their work contributed to our understanding of how a product or practice can be reappropriated for a market other than that in which it originated. However, as evidenced by this review of prior institutional theory literature, the role of space and place in the legitimation process remains under-explored. Therefore, this thesis will contribute to this gap in the literature by elucidating the roles of the spaces used by the Esports market in the process of its legitimation.

To summarise, institutional theory explores the processes an organisation undergoes in order to legitimise. Institutional theory has been used within marketing research to explore how consumers, communities, and markets legitimise (e.g. Dolbec & Fischer, 2015; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013; Coskuner-Balli & Ertimur, 2017). The role of space and place in the process of institutionalisation has been explored in particular through the concept of field-configuring events (Lampel & Meyer, 2008), such as trade shows and conferences (Hardy & Maguire, 2010; Lange et al., 2014). However, despite some recent contributions (e.g. Castiohos et al., 2017; Coskuner-Balli & Ertimur, 2017), the role of space and place in the legitimation process remains under explored. As result, there are questions that remain unanswered. For example, how does the use of space affect legitimacy? Does using already legitimised places transfer some variant of legitimacy onto a new or developing market? This is the main gap that this PhD seeks to fill. In doing so, it is now worth reviewing the space and place literature in more depth.

Chapter 4: Space & Place Theory

4.1. Theoretical Background

Space and place theory has its roots in geography and anthropology (Cresswell, 2004). There are many approaches taken when defining the difference between a 'space' and a 'place'. Overall, the difference between the two terms is best summarised as "a space thus becomes a place when it becomes invested with meanings by those who use it" (Maclaren, as cited in Solomon et al., 2013, p. 84). Cresswell (2004) simplifies the explanation by using the example of a university dorm room: once a student moves in, fills it with their belongings and makes it their home, the space becomes a place.

Space is typically seen as a more abstract concept than place (Cresswell, 2015). For example, Tuan (1977) suggested that places are pauses in movement through space, and these pauses can be defined and given meaning. This distinction between space and place has been the dominant one through much of the academic literature since the spatial turn in the 1970s (Cresswell, 2015). Whilst some academics – such as Henri Lefebvre - do not use the word 'place' but instead 'social space', Cresswell (2015) argues that these are essentially the same – place is created in space. Different academics also believe that the meanings necessary for a space to become a place are found in different ways. There are three core approaches to this: descriptive, social constructionist, and phenomenological (Cresswell, 2015). The descriptive approach is one we may think of automatically in day-to-day life – essentially describing the location of something. The social constructionist approach is interested in both the particulars of a place as well as the social processes at play within and beyond them. A phenomenological approach is not concerned with physical or virtual place but with the meaning of place and what it means to humans.

Cresswell (2015) argues that the resulting definitions of place can broadly be categorised by Agnew's (2014) three aspects of place: location, locale, and sense of place. Agnew (ibid.) defines location as the geographical place – what we would typically think of when we think of 'place', such as a point on a map or an address. This descriptive approach to place has largely been the domain of physical and regional geographers who look at the differences between different places (Cresswell, 2015).

Agnew (2014) describes locale as “the settings in which social relations are constituted” (p.28) or “where everyday-life activities take place” (Agnew, 2005, para. 16), such as a school or workplace. This aspect of place is seen as a product of social relations and typically comes from a social constructionist approach to space (e.g. Giddens 1984; Shields, 2013). It has been argued that spatial theory over the past half a century has devalued these elements of place (Agnew, 2014) in part due to the rise and influence of conceptualisations of sense of place (on which more shortly). In response, some scholars have argued the importance of location and locale, insisting that everything happens in a place, and that the features or constraints of that place will influence these happenings (e.g. Massey, 1994; Pred, 1983; Agnew, 2014). As such, this thesis ensures inclusion of place as location and locale, as the physical location in which the practices of Esports take place are likely to have an effect on the market’s growth.

Agnew’s (2014) ‘sense of place’ is “the subjective and emotional attachment people have to place” (Cresswell, 2015, p. 14) - such as a feeling of being home, or “a strong sense of ‘belonging’ to a place” (Agnew, 2005, para. 16) – which can extend beyond a particular location or locale. This conceptualisation of space typically comes from a phenomenological approach. This category is where philosophers vary most in their conceptualisations of place. Yi-Fu Tuan, for example, suggested that the relationship between humans and their environments is based on an individual’s experience of the world and their culture (Rodaway, 2011, Hayden, 2009; Tuan, 1977). In earlier work, before suggesting that location is an important aspect of place, Massey (1994) wrote, “Instead then, of thinking of places as areas with boundaries around, they can be imagined as articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings” (p. 154). As such, a sense of place is not a material concept, but an experience – or as Casey (1996) articulates it, “places not only *are*, they *happen*” (p. 27, emphasis in original).

While academics in some fields debate the exact definition of ‘space’ versus ‘place’, academics in consumer research tend to be consistent in their usage of the terms and define place as a space with meaning (Coffin & Chatzidakis, 2021). As such, in this thesis the term ‘space’ will be used when discussing abstract space and ‘place’ will be used when discussing specific, named places (such as stadia), unless the literature being reviewed uses different terms. For example, Lefebvre (1991) only refers to ‘space’, including when discussing what this thesis would otherwise term a place.

This thesis uses Lefebvre's social constructionist approach to space and place. A social constructionist spatial approach views a place as space given meaning through the social relations, understandings, and knowledge that take place there, rather than just a physical location (Low, 2017). However, the physical environment is still seen as having an important role in the construction of place, as it can affect these social relations (ibid.; Cresswell, 2004). This approach is useful for this research as it allows analysis of the online and offline spaces in which Esports take place as well as the social relations within them.

Whilst Lefebvre's approach is a form of social constructionism, he terms his theory 'the production of space' (1991) because he argues that space is a product of social, historical, economic, and political influences that in modern times have been dominated by capitalism, and that these spaces in turn control society and its rhythms (Low, 2017; Tally, 2013; Duarte, 2017). His theory will now be discussed in more detail.

4.1.1. Lefebvre

Henri Lefebvre was a French philosopher who put forward his spatial theory in his book 'The Production of Space' in 1974 (Lefebvre, 1991). He reviewed and critiqued historical philosophical perspectives of space, in particular the debate between realist approaches (e.g. 'absolute' space, as posited by Newton, and 'relational' space, as argued by Descartes) and idealist approaches (e.g. Leibniz) (Hoefer et al., 2022; Janiak, 2022; Schmid, 2022). Instead, Lefebvre argued that space (which is the term he uses, as opposed to 'place') is neither subject nor object, but a social reality, a process produced by people (Lefebvre, 1991; Schmid, 2022) and an active creation (Shields, 2011).

> *"For Lefebvre, understanding space cannot be a question of looking at things in space but rather of analysing space as a social product and revealing the social relations associated with its production" (Schmid, 2022, p.263).*

Lefebvre (1991) puts forward two inter-connecting spatial triads, as explained in the table below.

Spatial Triad	Ways of Experiencing Space
Spatial Practice – The practices, performances, and routines of everyday life; "the process of producing the material form of social spatiality" (Soja, 1996, p. 66)	**Perceived Space –** The practical perception of the everyday life
Representations of Space – Defined and labelled space; "ideational, made up of projections into the empirical world from conceived or imagined geographies" (Soja, 1996, p. 79)	**Conceived Space –** How space is divided, described, and defined
Representational Space – Imagined space; meanings and symbols brought to a physical space	**Lived Space –** The lived experience of a space and the influence of culture and the arts

Table 02: Lefebvre's Spatial Triads (Adapted by Lefebvre, 1991)

In essence, Lefebvre argues that space is *perceived* through the everyday *social practices* we perform, *conceived* by city planners, architects, and the like who designate *representations of space*, and is *lived* through the experiencing of symbols and meanings that are linked with *representational spaces* (Lefebvre, 1991; Smith, 2001).

It is worth noting that Lefebvre uses the word 'space' in his thesis and does not provide a clear distinction between 'space' and 'place'. Cresswell (2015) argues that this socially produced space is essentially the same as place, in that the process of production has given space meaning. Lefebvre wanted to avoid giving one priority over the other – his conceptualisations of space are related variables that are all part of its production, thus one should not be considered more real or necessary than another (Smith, 2001). Soja (1996) describes this as 'thirding' and uses this to develop his concept of 'thirdspace'. 'Thirdspace' is broadly aligned with Lefebvre's 'representational space' and includes

perceived and conceived spaces whilst also going beyond this binary (Soja, 1996). Thirdspace is both real and imagined, subjective and objective, abstract and concrete, thus breaking with conventional approaches to space and allowing them to be contested (ibid.). This is relevant to the thesis, as Esports is both online and offline, virtual and physical, and is contesting how existing spaces are used.

Lefebvre's concept of space is used in this thesis because it provides a general framework that can be applied to all types of spaces and places, both online and offline, which allows the same approach to be used regardless of the Esports space being analysed. Furthermore, the dimensions of Lefebvre's spatial triads are to be used equally and together rather than any element given priority over the others (Schmid, 2022). This allows simultaneous analysis of the particulars of spaces in which Esports practices take place, the social practices of the activity, and the symbolic, experienced space – all three of which will contribute to our understanding of the role of space and place in the legitimation process.

Lefebvre's spatial framework has been applied in existing marketing and consumer research literature to propose new theoretical concepts and to examine social and community spaces and practices. Both noting that space has typically been seen more as a passive background to market dynamics, Castilhos and Dolbec (2018) and Holmes et al. (2021) use Lefebvre's approach to space to introduce new concepts to marketing theory. Castilhos and Dolbec (2018) use Lefebvre's spatial framework to develop their typology of spaces, saying that space is both the product and producer of social dynamics, while Holmes et al. (2021) use Lefebvre's and Harvey's spatial theories to conceptualise 'spatio-market practices', which bring together spatial dynamics and actor's practices. Both call for a more active examination of the role of space and place in marketing and consumer research, which this thesis aims to contribute toward.

Lefebvre's conceptualisation of space, not just as the site for social and/or consumption practices, but also the product of social relations, enables researchers to use his framework to analyse both the effect of space on consumers and the ways in which consumers use space. Essentially, individuals can both consume and produce space, such as in commodified US universities, where students both consume spaces of education and recreation whilst those spaces in turn produce graduates prepared for work in a capitalist society (Cunningham, 2016). Similarly, marginalised groups can be excluded from

marketplaces or urban spaces (Saaticioglu & Corus, 2016; Saaticioglu & Ozanne, 2013) particularly through the creation of brandscapes curated for middle- and upper-class consumers (Castilhos, 2017). This production of space by one group affects whether or not another group can participate in the space. However, these excluded groups can organise to create spaces of agency (Saaticioglu & Corus, 2016) by turning existing spaces into protected social spaces – such as LGBT consumers using hospitality venues to construct community values (Lugosi, 2007) or creating new spaces of resistance. For example, Chatzidakis et al. (2012) illustrated how a neighbourhood in Athens had been created as a heterotopia – a place of critical resistance against mainstream thought and consumption.

Lefebvre's emphasis on the importance of the role of history and politics in the production of space also enables researchers to explore the socio-historic context of consumption spaces, allowing a deeper understanding of the community that uses and/or creates a space (O'Leary et al., 2019; Petrylaite & Hart, 2021). This approach to space is therefore useful for exploring the role of space and place in the legitimation of a market as it allows examination of the historical, political, and social contexts of the spaces used. Now that space and place theory has been introduced and extant literature reviewed, the following section will examine how it has been applied to research within the field of marketing.

4.2. Space and Place in Marketing and Consumer Research Literature

With the rise of the internet, consumer behaviour research began to focus on how communities were no longer limited by geography, thus enabling people to form communities based on common interests regardless of physical location (e.g., Park et al., 2007; Valck, 2007; Weijo et al., 2014). However, Kozinets (2002) called for a return to the inclusion of physical space in the field as, even though communities and consumer behaviour can now transcend geographical boundaries, the physical spaces inhabited by consumers still often have an important influence on the consumption activity. Following this, scholarship in contemporary consumer research has seen a rise in interest in space and place conceptualisations. This has resulted in explorations of servicescapes (Bitner, 1992; Maclaren & Brown, 2005), brandscapes (Borghini et al., 2009; Thompson & Arsel,

2004; Penaloza, 1998) and the creation of temporary place (Sherry & Bradford, 2015; Kozinets, 2002). The focus has primarily been on how market agents use or are affected by space, rather than how space and place affect market dynamics.

Bitner (1992) brought together strands of existing research from various disciplines to explore how service environments affect both consumers and employees. She put forward a framework of how elements of the service environment – or 'servicescape' – combined with personal preferences and mood can affect an individual's overall response to the service encounter. Further research has been conducted into how the service environment can be manipulated to affect behaviour through sensory marketing, such as the ability to touch products alleviating consumers' tension, and ambient music having an effect on mood (Krishna, 2012). This has been of particular value in an era where experiential marketing and consumption is flourishing (Handley, 2013).

A number of papers have since built upon this servicescape literature by examining how brands use their retail environments – or 'brandscapes' - to affect consumers. Flagship brand stores are retail outlets owned by manufacturers ostensibly to sell their goods, such as Lego stores or The Body Shop. However, the purpose of these stores is also to emphasise the ideology of the brand, rather than just to make sales (Kozinets et al., 2002). This is achieved through manipulation of the servicescape to create an experience. For example, Borghini et al. (2009) examined the American Girl Place, a flagship brand store in Chicago, where American Girl dolls are the primary product. The store comprises of a museum exhibit, a library, and a theatre experience, which are all used to educate, telling moral tales through the stories of the dolls' characters. The salon for the dolls and the store's café encourage familial interaction, especially between female members of the family, who can share their experiences through the narratives portrayed throughout the experience. The brand's ideology - of moral purity, the importance of family, and the strength of women - are thus woven into the store's servicescape, with a resulting impression that purchasing their products is buying into that ideology.

Brandscapes previously explored in consumer behaviour research also include stores opened by brands whose primary products are intangible. For example, Kozinets et al., (2002; 2004) studied ESPN Zone Chicago, a "themed flagship brand store" (2002, p. 18), which they define as a destination focused on entertainment and the celebration of the

brand. ESPN Zone Chicago offers spectacle and elements of play to create an experience that allows a temporary escape from reality (Kozinets et al., 2004). Although such brandscapes are usually designed by the producers of the place, Kozinets et al. (2004) found that consumers could subvert the intended usage of the space, thus creating new, co-created experiences. The researchers witnessed some consumers using games equipment in ESPN Zone's Sports Arena in an unintended fashion to create their own games, drawing crowds of spectators. Penaloza (1998) supports this idea, noting in her study of the Nike Town flagship brand store that audiences are invited to participate, but that the extent of their participation is limited to approved responses. She compares this to festivals, where the audience's response is without restriction.

However, existing research is focused on brandscapes created by existing and popular brands, and places in which the distinction between producer and consumer are distinct. It can be argued that Esports events are brandscapes, as these are celebrations of the brand (which is the game) and a place where the game's merchandise is sold. However, these events have grown and changed over time, and their early iterations were not necessarily created by a well-established brand – be that the game developers themselves or an established league brand - who could rely on existing cultural capital to draw in audiences. Furthermore, the line between producer and consumer in Esports is blurred, as consumers of the product are also those producing the entertainment – be it game or commentary – for audiences to consume. This results in consumers having more power over how these events are run, meaning that Esports events have evolved over time with consideration given to audiences' wishes. Therefore, the idea that audiences' responses are limited is not always the case. However, now that Esports tournaments are a well-established phenomenon, the expectations of the audience may have changed to be more aligned with those described by Kozinets et al. (2004) and Penaloza (1998). For example, the Fortnite World Cup was established at a time when the game was new but the Esports industry and tournaments within it were well-established. Therefore, there is likely a difference between the limits of audiences' responses in emerging and established brandscapes, which could emerge through the research.

Whilst some brandscapes are used to promote a brand, others can be used to distinguish themselves from certain companies. Starbucks was described as a 'hegemonic brandscape' by Thompson & Arsel (2004), one which dominates modern-day coffee shop culture.

However, they found that people who purposely frequented local coffee shops instead of Starbucks or their ilk valued servicescapes that differed from Starbucks. Interviewees cited features such as self-serve coffee, second-hand furniture, and art by local artists as ways of distinguishing local businesses from what they felt were profit-focussed corporations. Thus, brandscapes can be used to differentiate from brands rather than celebrating them.

Although retail or service environments have been the main focus of space and place research in consumer behaviour, other environments have been studied. Consumer researchers have investigated how communities create place, often temporarily, in which to enact their communal practices and rituals. Kozinets (2002) introduced the term 'hypercommunity' to describe a temporary yet tightly bound community. This was a result of his study of the Burning Man festival, in which participates create a temporary 'city' each year in the middle of the desert to escape capitalist markets and consumerism. This is a place temporarily created in part to celebrate the community's shared values, but more so to reject and escape from the fundamental aspect of western society with which they disagree. An example of the creation of temporary place perhaps more akin to that of an Esports event is Belk and Costa's (1998) study of the Mountain Man community. Members of the community take part in rendezvous in which temporary campsites are built to facilitate the coming together of the community and the completion of rituals. Unlike what Kozinets (2002) found at Burning Man, whilst the place created might be temporary, the community is not, meaning this is unlikely to be defined as a hypercommunity. Participants maintain their interest in the Mountain Man community throughout the year, continue to work on pieces for the rendezvous, and communicate with other members of the community. The rendezvous are more of a place to temporarily fully celebrate their shared interests, much like large offline Esports events.

In some ways similar yet arguably less extreme than that of the Mountain Man community is the tailgating community, studied by Sherry and Bradford (2015). This is a community that transforms a parking lot into a small village before sporting games. A neighbourhood is temporarily constructed by the community, with certain spots reserved for key members of the group, sharing of food, and rituals such as visiting various sites within the 'neighbourhood' and beyond. This is an example of a community coming together and putting their mark temporarily on the world as they do so, a way of actualising a

community in the physical world. In many ways, this act is similar to that of Esports events – the Esports community is always there, existing digitally and emotionally, but competitions are opportunities to physicalise these bonds, to say “We are here”.

Permanent place can also provide a temporary escape from reality. For example, Maclaren and Brown (2005) examined the Powerscourt mall in Dublin, Ireland. Whilst the examples previously discussed saw people try to escape reality and the market by finding place away from commercial settings, Maclaren and Brown show how a commercial space can be used for that very same purpose. Through displace (the sense that you are somewhere else entirely), playspace (a contradiction of themes and styles resulting in a sense of play rather than intention), and artscape (the sense that the space is special or has value beyond its current usage), Maclaren and Brown theorise that utopia is created - a place, feeling, or process beyond everyday reality, that can be used by consumers as an escape from commercialisation. This is relevant to the Esports market as the physical places in which events are held, such as stadia, are permanent places that provide temporary escape from reality through the entertainment and spectacle of competition.

Space can also play a role in how consumers construct identities. In recent decades, a popular research topic within consumer behaviour has been how consumption can influence our sense of self. Researchers have explored how consumption can help us to construct our identities or to transform ourselves (Belk, 1988; Barnhart & Penaloza, 2013; for example). However, the focus in these cases has been on the products or the consumption practices themselves, rather than on the places in which these practices take place (Hirschman et al., 2012). It is possible that a place can have an important role in the transformation process. For example, Hirschman et al’s (2012) study of garages in the USA found that these are often liminal, dynamic spaces which can be used in the sacralisation and desacralisation process (in which the house is the sacred space) or can be places where items that are no longer useful but have sentimental qualities, or could be useful in the future, are stored. This is an example of how examining the role of place in consumption processes can augment our understanding of the process as a whole.

To summarise, there are three core theoretical approaches to space and place: descriptive, social constructionist, and phenomenological (Cresswell, 2015). This thesis takes a social constructionist approach to space and place, aligning with Lefebvre’s (1991) approach,

as his spatial theories will be used to analyse the spaces and places within this research. Within marketing research, space and place theory has been used to explore servicescapes and brandscapes in particular (e.g. Bitner, 1992; Thompson & Arsel, 2004; Penaloza, 1998). In the following section, prior work within marketing and consumer research that brings together institutional theory and space and place theory will be reviewed.

4.3. Institutional Theory and Space and Place

4.3.1. Institutional Theory and Space and Place in Marketing

Where space and place has been the lens in marketing and consumer research, the primary focus has been on its effect on consumers and producers, rather than the effect on market dynamics. However, Castilhos et al. (2017) and Castilhos and Dolbec (2018) provide notable exceptions. Castilhos et al's (2017) framework set out four different dimensions of space and their impact on markets signalled the beginning of a strand of research combining market dynamics with geographical and sociological conceptions of space. Their work has been briefly discussed previously in this review, yet warrants more in-depth discussion here.

Castilhos et al. (2017) used Jessop et al's (2008) conceptualisations of space – territory, place, scale, and network, hereon referred to as the TPSN framework - to analyse market systems. The authors define place according to Tuan's (1979) view that it is a defined space "invested with meaning and value" (Castilhos et al., 2017, p. 11). Castilhos et al. (2017) apply these conceptualisations to existing market dynamics and consumer culture theory. Whilst Jessop et al. (2008) put forward the TPSN framework comprising of four spatial dimensions, Castilhos et al. (2017) conceptualise place as the centre of the other three dimensions. They use existing consumer research studies as demonstrative examples of each dimension.

Territory is defined as a place that is controlled or bound by "individuals, groups, or institutions" (Castilhos et al., 2017, p.11) and a number of prominent consumer research papers are good examples of the nature of territory (Belk & Costa, 1998; Kozinets, 2002; Goulding et al., 2009; Üstüner & Thompson, 2012; Varman & Belk, 2012; Crockett and Wallendorf, 2004). Castilhos et al. (2017) identified three functions of territory:

protecting, empowering, and constraining. It is possible to apply the first two of these functions to the Esports industry. For example, the ‘protecting’ function comes into play at offline events, which are often seen as having more integrity, in part because it protects the sport from cheaters. Similarly, offline events can have an empowering effect. For example, when an Esports event takes place in a stadium – such as the Arthur Ashe Stadium in New York or the Bird’s Nest in China – Esports can demonstrate its legitimacy to the outside world through the use (and, often, selling out) of a large, prestigious sporting arena. Many of those interviewed in this study also discussed their desire to attend offline events as a way of meeting people who enjoy the same things they do, often also suggesting that they do not feel they can do so with friends outside the scene.

Scale is defined as an abstract process that “highlights the relations between different levels (e.g. local vs. global) that contribute to the formation of the market elements and processes” (Castilhos et al., 2017, p. 18) and examples in existing marketing research include Penaloza’s (1994) research on consumer acculturation and Thompson and Coskuner-Balli’s (2007) exploration of organic consumption communities. However, these existing papers tend to assume that a market grows through globalisation, with local markets growing into global ones. In Esports, the reverse is true: the global market has been established through the internet, and now more local markets are beginning to be established. The effect of this localisation on the legitimation of the overall market is something that this thesis will explore.

Finally, network is defined as “horizontal interconnections among dispersed geographical entities, flows between these entities as well as the orchestration of an assemblage of places” (Castilhos et al., 2017, p. 19). Examples of networks in existing consumer research include Giesler (2012) – who demonstrated how actors across a network shifted the image of the Botox cosmetic procedure - and Thompson and Arsel (2004), who described Starbucks as a ‘hegemonic brandscape’ and examined how consumers resisted the chain’s dominance. Of the four spatial dimensions, Esports arguably fits best in the ‘network’ category. The market exists in a number of interconnected spaces, both physical (such as offline events both big and small) and virtual (such as streams and online tournaments). However, the industry also exists on a scale – from a small, local LAN party, to a stadium-filling World Final; from a small online tournament, to a stream viewed by millions worldwide. Castilhos et al. (2017) suggested that future research

could explore combinations of spatial dimensions, and proposed several potential research questions. However, many of the questions – as well as the paper overall – assume that the global market is in a place of power over the local markets. This is arguably true in Esports, but only because there are few established local markets. As more regional and local markets begin to grow, it would be interesting to explore how this relates to existing globalisation/localisation literature.

Castilhos and Dolbec (2018) also put forward a framework detailing four different conceptualisations of space – public, market, emancipating, and segregating – and the transitions between them. They also posit that these spaces are characterised by two contradicting dynamics: negotiation versus consensus, and participation versus subjugation. This typology enables researchers to better understand the roles of market actors in different types of spaces. For example, an emancipating space typically allows consumers to work together to subvert or disrupt the status quo.

One of the main limitations of marketing and consumer research that examines the role of space and place thus far is that the focus is on physical space and place. Online spaces and places have thus far been neglected (Berger, 2020). It could be argued that an example of an online space is an unused social media platform – Facebook without any posts on it would have no meaning; a forum with no discussions is just empty space. Yet once these spaces are used, they start to become places. A forum can become a place where people talk to like-minded people about their favourite hobbies, for example. Whilst consumer behaviour research has explored online communities (e.g. Chalmers-Thomas et al., 2013; Dinhopl et al., 2015; and Husemann et al., 2015), the focus tends to be on how these communities grow, communicate, and resolve conflict. How these online spaces and places are used and how these interact with offline spaces will be a core focus of this thesis, and will be used to examine the role of space and place in market evolution.

4.4. Globalisation

Globalisation is the process of making global, and "by which businesses or other organizations develop international influence or start operating on an international scale" (OED, 2023). In essence, it is the process by which businesses, markets, and practices

can flow between or transcend different places (Ritzer & Dean, 2022). Esports is a large global market – audience numbers were expected to reach 532 million by the end of 2022 (Newzoo, 2022b). However, in the offline world, responses to the industry vary. For example, Esports have been popular in South Korea for over two decades and have received government support to build infrastructure to support the industry (Huhh, 2008; Jin & Chee, 2008). Meanwhile, in the UK, 45% of people have no interest in Esports, and a further 10% say they have never heard of it (Statista, 2022b). Given the global nature of the market, it is important to understand existing literature on globalisation, and the regional differences experienced in a global market. There is no one, clear definition of globalisation, in part because globalisation can take many forms - for example, economic, cultural, and political (Ferguson & Mansbach, 2012; Turner, 2010; Benczes, 2014). Furthermore, there is debate over the process of globalisation. Within consumer research, there are three primary perspectives taken to the process: homogenisation, glocalisation, and deterritorialization (Sharifonnasabi et al., 2020). These approaches and their application within consumer research will now be examined in more detail.

Homogenisation is the view that globalisation is essentially a process of standardisation in which the market becomes increasingly similar across the world because of a flow of influence from wealthier to poorer countries (Ritzer, 2001; Levitt, 1983; Antonio, 2016). Whilst those who take this perspective do not deny regional differences exist, they believe that we are still undergoing the homogenisation process, and that regional goods – such as Chinese food – becoming global markets are only proof of homogenisation, because they become available globally (Levitt, 1983). Within consumer research, academics have largely critiqued the homogenisation approach, instead arguing that consumers are more likely to adapt or resist forces of globalisation rather than be suppressed by them (Sharifonnasabi et al., 2020). For example, migrants can both retain elements of their culture of origin and assimilate to their new culture, depending on their access to resources (e.g. Penaloza, 1994; Üstüner & Holt, 2007).

Glocalisation is the view that the globalisation process does not mean the eradication of the local, but the local adapting the global to better suit their culture (Roudometof, 2016; Robertson, 1995). Researchers have used glocalisation to analyse how consumers construct their identity (e.g. Kjeldgaard & Nielsen, 2010; Sandicki & Ger, 2010), including how young people navigate global online influences and local culture to create

a sense of self (Kjeldgaard & Askegaard, 2006; McMillin & Fisherkeller, 2009). How consumers adapt markets and products to better suit them or to empower themselves has also been explored (e.g. Kjeldgaard & Ostberg, 2007; Cova et al., 2007; Eckhardt & Mahi, 2012). For example, Thompson and Arsel (2004) found that consumers' resistance to the dominance of Starbucks used local coffee shops as a space to express their dislike of the brand.

Deterritorialisation is the view of globalisation that markets and social practices are detached from nations (Tomlinson, 1999). Appadurai (1996) was a key proponent of this idea, suggesting that that there are five global cultural flows: ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, and ideoscapes. These flows are essentially social relations and communications between global actors on a variety of scales, that result in 'imagined worlds' that link people regardless of territory. Deterritorialisation has been used least in consumer research (Sharifonnasabi et al., 2020) but has been used to examine global communities and markets (e.g. Figueirido & Uncles, 2015; Bardhi et al., 2012). However, there is sometimes a blurring between glocal and deterritorial approaches. For example, Askegaard and Eckhardt (2012) and Coskuner-Balli and Ertimur (2017) build on Appadurai's (1996) cultural flows to suggest that yoga is a glocal practice that takes influences and elements from its Eastern origins and its Western appropriation.

As previously discussed, this thesis uses Lefebvre's approach to space as an analytical framework. His conceptualisation of space as a product of social relations that is not fixed but continually produced and reproduced results in his view of globalisation as a process of ever-reconfiguring social relations and networks across multiple spatial scales, such as the local, national, and global (Lefebvre, 1991; Brenner, 1997). Lefebvre rejects the idea of deterritorialization, writing "the worldwide does not abolish the local" (1991, p. 86), and describing the world as having the potential to become "the planetary, therefore space at one and the same time product and work: an ensemble of places, and result of a creative and thus artistic activity, both conscious and unconscious" (Lefebvre, 2009, p. 278). However, he argues that this will only happen with the reconfiguration of the State - which he says controls how a country progresses along the "paths of worldness" (ibid., p. 278) - from a system of territorial nations to suprastates (e.g. the EU) and substates (e.g. the devolved regions of the UK) that operate across the spatial scales (Brenner, 1997).

Lefebvre's view of globalisation broadly aligns with the glocalisation approach, in that he sees it as a product of social relations that are still affected by local elements. However, the nature of the Esports market makes it difficult to apply this theory of glocalisation. Much Esports activity takes place online – a space that runs parallel to the offline world. As such, the effect of space and place on the globalisation of a market goes beyond the global/local binary, and even beyond Lefebvre's multi-scalar conception, to include the online space. Although a deterritorial approach to globalisation may resolve the issue in terms of the online space being a non-territory, the findings of this research suggest that rules and restrictions caused by governments and physical location on the planet do have an effect on the legitimation of a market, thus to ignore the local entirely would be an oversight. In effect, this thesis argues that Esports has globalised before it has localised – the market has used the internet to globalise before it has taken root in offline localities, and it is only now starting to grow in these areas. Therefore, this thesis analyses how online space has affected the legitimation of the Esports market, as well as the regional and global offline spaces that are typically explored in globalisation research.

4.5. Conclusion

To conclude, this thesis takes a social constructionist approach to space (Cresswell, 2015) in line with Lefebvre's (1991) conceptualisation of space, which is used as a lens through which the spaces and places of the Esports market will be analysed. Within marketing and consumer research, prior work has used space and place theory to examine how service and retail environments can affect consumers (e.g. Bitner, 1992; Penaloza, 1998; Borghini et al., 2009), how a place can temporarily be created by a community coming together (e.g. Belk & Costa, 1998; Sherry & Bradford, 2015), and how a place can provide temporary escape from reality (Maclaren & Brown, 2005). As the effect of space on market dynamics has thus far been under-explored (Giesler & Fischer, 2017; Castilhos et al., 2017), this thesis contributes to this area of literature by examining the role of space and place in the creation of a market and its process of legitimation. In the following chapter, the methodology will be discussed. This will include the philosophical and theoretical stances taken in this study, the data collection methods used, and the approaches taken to data analysis and interpretation.

Chapter 5: Methodology

5.1. Introduction

Crotty (1998) outlines four basic elements of the qualitative research process: epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology, and methods, with each informing one another.

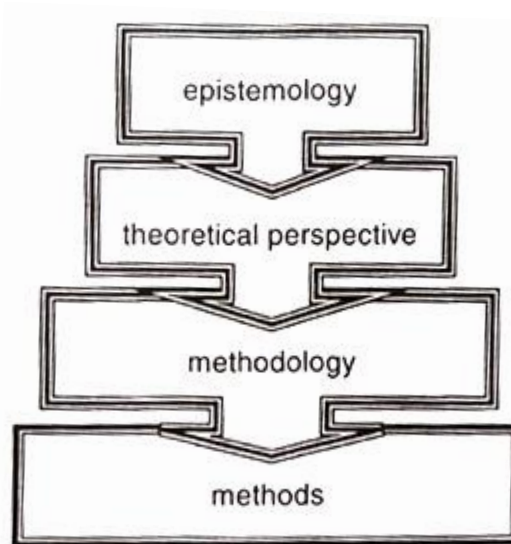


Figure 03: Crotty's Four Elements (Crotty, 1998, p. 4)

Following Crotty (1998), this chapter will first outline the philosophical and theoretical assumptions of the research, before exploring the methodological approaches taken. The research methods will then be discussed and an overview of the data collected given. Finally, the process of data analysis and interpretation will be outlined.

5.2. Philosophical and Theoretical Assumptions

5.2.1. A Constructionist epistemology

Epistemology concerns the relationship between the researcher and the world – how we gain knowledge (Spencer et al., 2014). A researcher should clarify and explain their epistemological stance as it affects how they approach their methodology (Crotty, 1998). Some academics argue that the researcher's ontological stance ("the nature of reality and its characteristics", (Cresswell & Poth, 2018, p. 20) should also be expressed. However,

Crotty (1998) argues that the two frequently get mixed up in literature, and that the researcher's ontological stance can be made clear in their theoretical perspective. As such, the epistemological stance of the research will be the primary focus of this discussion. Although there are numerous possible epistemological perspectives, there are three that cover some of the most frequent and key stances: objectivism, subjectivism, and constructionism. First, the two former perspectives will be briefly explained, before discussion the constructionist stance that this thesis takes.

Objectivist approaches take the stance that there is objective truth or reality separate from our perception, which we can observe or experience but cannot construct (Spencer et al., 2014; Crotty, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This is more suited to scientific or quantitative methods of research, in which an object is able to be observed objectively – which is not possible in this research, given the subjective nature of legitimisation (Deephouse et al., 2017). In subjectivism, an object's meaning is given by the subject, with no contribution from the object (Crotty, 1998). This means that research is based upon the researcher's perspective. However, this thesis takes a constructionist view of reality, believing that there is no objective truth, but rather that meaning is constructed by the individual (ibid.). The distinction between constructionism and subjectivism is that in the latter, "the object as such makes no contribution to the generation of meaning" (Crotty, 1998, p.9). This is not the view of constructionist approaches, wherein meaning is not entirely created by the individual – instead meanings are constructed from culture, experience, and the object itself (ibid.).

The terms 'constructivist' and 'constructionist' can be confused, but do have distinct meanings – a constructivist approach adopts the view that meaning is constructed by an individual interacting with the object. A constructionist approach adopts the view that an individual constructs meaning through interaction with the object, but is also influenced by their existing understandings of the world caused by socialisation within their culture and society (Crotty, 1998; Savin-Baden & Major, 2023). I believe it is important to take socialisation into account because those inside the Esports community and external to it are heavily influenced by their existing cultural understandings – for example, the findings suggest that those who are critical of Esports are often so because of their pre-conceived understanding of what a sport is. Furthermore, this thesis uses Lefebvre's analytical approach to space and place, and this follows a social constructionist view.

Having outlined the epistemological stance, the methodological approaches taken within the research will now be discussed.

5.3. Methodology

Pragmatic qualitative research is "an approach that draws upon the most sensible and practical methods available in order to answer a given research question" (Savin-Baden & Major, 2023, p. 171). It is also known as generic or basic qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) because it does not use just one specific research method, but employs several (Savin-Baden & Major, 2023). Over time, researchers have put forward ways in which this form of qualitative research can be structured to best qualify and critique such methods (Caelli et al., 2003). Merriam and Tisdell (2015) argue that most qualitative research is interpretive in nature and wishes to understand people's experiences and how they generate meaning. This thesis falls under this pragmatic research category as there is not one specific aim of the study as defined by other methodologies.

Interpretive consumer research emerged during the 1980s, when some consumer behaviour researchers began to move away from a positivist, quantitative research methodology towards more qualitative methods (Goulding, 1999). By adopting an interpretivist paradigm, researchers were better able to explore *why* consumers behaved as they did, as opposed to simply *what* consumers did (Shankar & Goulding, 2001). Interpretive consumer researchers employ a variety of methods – which will be discussed in the following section – and follow inductive processes of analysis, which will be outlined later in this chapter.

Interpretivist research has been criticised due to the subjective nature of qualitative research, as opposed to the objective, positivist nature of quantitative research, which has led to a number of interdisciplinary debates around the extent to which qualitative research can be trusted (Hogg & Maclaran, 2008). Interpretivist researchers have sought to ensure the trustworthiness of their research through positioning their work in relation to existing research, outlining the theoretical proposition, and explaining the process by which the proposition was reached (Lucarelli et al., 2023). Furthermore, demonstrating authenticity, plausibility, and criticality can help to convince readers of the trustworthiness of research (Hogg & Maclaran, 2008). In this vein, to ensure the validity

of my own research, I have embraced authenticity through immersion in the field, having spoken to many participants of the Esports market, collected multiple forms of archival data from a variety of sources, and become familiar with the language used by those within the Esports industry (Hogg & Maclaran, 2008). By using multiple methodological approaches (semi-structured interviews, content analysis) to investigate and analyse multiple data sources (participants of the market, three forms of archival data), data was triangulated to increase its validity (Denzin, 2017). Finally, existing literature was reviewed to clarify the gap to which this research contributes, and later in this thesis, the theoretical proposition will be outlined. First, it will be explained how the theoretical contribution was generated by outlining the methods used for data collection and analysis (Lucarelli et al., 2023).

5.4. Research Methods and Data Collection

5.4.1. Exploratory Research

Early in the research process, having recognised the rich, underexplored field of research that is the Esports market, five exploratory semi-structured interviews were conducted to help narrow the scope of the research. Ethical permission was given by the faculty's research ethics committee and all protocols were followed, including ensuring all participants were over 18, providing a participant information sheet to all participants, and obtaining a signed consent form prior to interview. Recruitment was conducted through social media, largely through posts to university societies, such as the Esports society. Other than age restrictions, criteria for participation were deliberately vague in order to remain open to as wide a range of participants as possible – participants simply needed to identify as being involved in Esports. Two discussion guides were developed – one for those who solely watched Esports, and another for those who also played Esports. Ultimately only the latter was used, as all five participants identified as Esports players.

The interviews covered five broad topics. First, the participants were asked about their background in Esports, including the games they had played and how they initially became involved. They were then asked about community involvement, including whether they played with others, whether this play was online or offline, and if they spent any money on items such as game merchandise or gaming peripherals (such as mice and

keyboards) in order to participate. We then discussed the dark side of Esports, which included their thoughts on toxicity, cheating, gambling, and addiction. Following this, the participants were asked if they had any pre-game rituals, and how they prepared for games. Finally, they were asked for their thoughts on the industry, including growing participation and rise in prize funds. The average duration of the interviews was 30 minutes. Interviews were transcribed and subsequently a summary document was produced to provide an overview of responses.

As a result of these interviews, it was immediately decided that the dark side of Esports would not be a topic of focus for the thesis, as it became evident that little new information could be gained beyond existing literature that explores the dark side of gaming and Esports. It was also decided that the criteria for participation needed to be narrower for the main body of research, specifically with regards to the games played by participants – for example, some participants of the exploratory research played online poker or card games, which provided interesting insights, but could arguably fall outside the category of Esports as a competitive video game. Finally, discussion of moving play from online to offline - either by making friends through online play and then meeting them in real life, or by attending offline matches – when combined with the space & place literature that I was reading at the time, led to the ultimate focus of the thesis.

Therefore, as a result of these exploratory interviews, it was possible to immediately discount certain topics as the field of focus for the thesis, and potential areas for exploration were identified in conjunction with my understanding of gaps within the existing literature. Although this was a pilot study and the resulting data was not used or analysed for the purpose of the thesis, it did inform the topics and approach of the primary research that was later conducted.

5.4.2. Primary Research: Semi-structured interviews

To gain insight into how participants used and experienced space within Esports, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 32 Esports participants. Recruitment was largely conducted through Reddit, a social media platform that is popular with gamers. Invitations to participate in the research were posted in multiple subreddits after first gaining permission from the moderators. Anyone involved in Esports at any level and

over the age of 18 was eligible to participate. Some participants were emailed directly, including fellow Esports researchers and some high-level gamers, but this only yielded two responses. The resulting interviewees came from 16 countries across six continents, represented 7 different Esports games, and were involved in a variety of ways, from casual Esports players, to coaches, to event organisers. Only one participant was female, however this reflects the male dominance of the industry. The full table of participants is included later in this chapter.

Interviews were in-depth and semi-structured in nature with the discussion guide used as an aid rather than as a strict script to allow any previously unconsidered points that are raised by the interviewee to be explored further, without being lost (Gordon & Langmaid, 1998). However, by using a discussion guide, it was possible to ensure that the interviews broadly remained relevant to the research questions so that the data collected was useful and did not stray into areas covered by existing research (Arsel, 2017). An iterative approach to the overall interview process was taken, which allowed additional questions to be included in the discussion guide as the research progressed if new themes were uncovered in initial interviews that warranted further exploration (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). This is pertinent as, upon reflection of the responses received in the first seven interviews, the discussion guide was revised (Arsel, 2017) to include additional questions about the participants' views on gaming infrastructure in their local area, as this was an interesting point that came from initial conversations.

Interviews always began with a broader question, asking the participant to talk about their current involvement in Esports, with some suggested prompts of "what kind of games you play or watch, whether you do play or whether you just watch, whether you play professionally, basically anything about who you are and what you do in Esports". This served as a gentle opening question to put the interviewee at ease, but the responses also provided the context needed to ensure relevant questions were asked based on the participant's role in the industry, their experience, and the game(s) they played (Arsel, 2017).

The average duration of the interviews was 40 minutes. Interviews were audio recorded and manually transcribed. All participants have been given a pseudonym to maintain anonymity. Ethical approval was given by the faculty's research ethics committee prior

to starting the research. All potential participants who expressed a desire to take part in the research were given a participant information sheet outlining the purpose of the study, what participation would involve, and how they could withdraw from the study post-interview should they wish. Those who wished to proceed with an interview were required to sign a consent form confirming that they understood the terms of participation and that they were over the age of 18.

When meeting with the participant via video call on either Skype, Zoom, or Discord as they preferred, they were asked if they had any questions or concerns about the research before starting the interview. It was made clear that they were not required to turn on their camera if they did not want to, but I turned on my own camera for transparency purposes and so they could see that I was listening and giving non-verbal responses as they were talking. Although consent to be audio recorded had already been given as part of the consent form, each participant was asked again for their permission to be recorded before the recording device was switched on.

Interviews were transcribed manually, not only as this allowed for better immersion in the data, but because ethics permission was not sought for any auto-transcribing – it can be unclear how auto-transcribing software uses the data it is given. Data was anonymised during the transcription process. No names or potentially identifying information were included in the transcripts. Any such data – such as the original, not anonymised participation list and the recordings themselves – were stored on a secure, password-protected computer, with the documents themselves also requiring a password to access them wherever possible. All university ethical procedures were followed throughout the data collection and analysis process.

Table 03: List of Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Current Main Game	Country	Primary Role	Approx. Time Involved in Esports
Oliver	Male	Overwatch	US	Coach	10+ years
George	Male	Overwatch	Finland	Player/Coach, Serious Amateur Level	10+ years
Noah	Male	Overwatch	Guatemala	Casual Player	5 years
Arthur	Male	Overwatch	US	Amateur	5 years
Harry	Male	Overwatch	Ireland	Amateur Player/Community Organiser	3 years
Leo	Male	Overwatch	US	Amateur Player	7 years
Muhammad	Male	Overwatch	US	Amateur Player/Community Organiser	7 years
Jack	Male	Overwatch	Singapore	Casual Player	3 years
Charlie	Male	StarCraft 2	Russia	Casual Player	10+ years
Oscar	Male	StarCraft 2	Denmark	Casual Player	17 years
Jacob	Male	Counter Strike/Fortnite	India/UK	Casual Player	5 years
Henry	Male	Counter Strike	Latvia/UK	Amateur Player/Coach	8 years
Thomas	Male	Counter Strike	US	Serious Amateur Player	5 years
Freddie	Male	Dota 2	UK	Amateur Player/Director of small Esports org	
Alfie	Male	League of Legends	US	Amateur Player	
Theo	Male	Dota 2	UK	Serious Amateur Player/Team Management/Event Management	
William	Male	Counter Strike	UK	Amateur Player	
Teddy	Male	Valorant	Belgium	Amateur Player	6 years

Archie	Male	Counter Strike	US	Amateur Player	10+ years
Joshua	Male	Valorant/Overwatch	Tunisia	Serious Amateur Player	
Alexander	Male	Counter Strike	Hong Kong	Serious Amateur/Coach	10+ years
James	Male	Valorant	Denmark	Casual Player/Formerly Board Director, Local Organisation	
Isaac	Male	Counter Strike	Denmark	Casual Player	3 years
Edward	Male	Valorant	India	Amateur Player	
Lucas	Male	N/A	Turkey	Operations/Project Manager	14 years
Tommy	Male	Valorant	US	Watcher	6 years
Finley	Male	Valorant	Belgium	Casual Player	5 years
Maxine	Female	Valorant	Phillipines	Casual Player	
Logan	Male	League of Legends	UK	League Organisation/Management	
Ethan	Male	League of Legends	Australia	Casual Player	4 years
Benjamin	Male	League of Legends	US	Amateur Player/Fantasy Esports Intern	12 years
Arlo	Male	Counter Strike	Belgium	Casual Player	5 years

Key	
Casual Player	Someone who plays but doesn't compete, even at amateur level
Amateur Player	Someone who competes at a low level, e.g. open league, university league
Serious Amateur Player	Someone who competes at high levels of official tournaments, but before qualifying for payment, e.g. FACEIT Level 10 in CS:GO, Tiers 2/3 in Overwatch

5.4.3. Archival Data

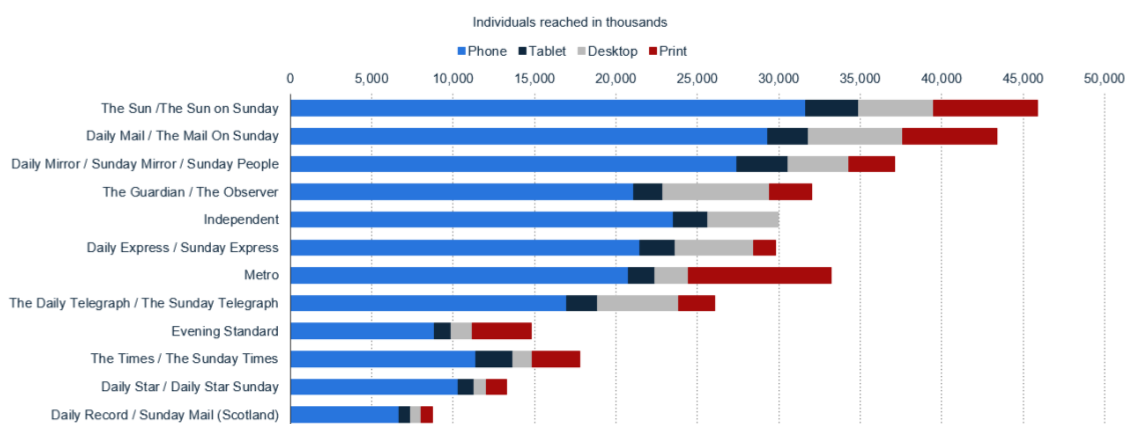
Archival data was collected to provide insight into offline events and, in particular, how professional teams prepare for and play in major tournaments, to better help us understand how professional practices have legitimised. A variety of data types were collected: newspaper articles, television news reports, and documentaries.

5.4.3.1. Newspaper Articles

Newspaper articles were collected to create a timeline of the mainstream media's attitudes towards Esports over time. This approach was inspired by Humphreys (2010) who used a similar method of building a corpus to analyse newspaper articles for her research into the evolution of casino gambling. The language used to talk about a phenomenon can tell us a lot about the extent to which society considers it to be legitimate (Coskuner-Balli & Tumbat, 2017; Munir & Phillips, 2005; Zilber, 2007), thus examining how the mainstream media discusses Esports over time provided an insight into the market's legitimation process. UK and US papers were chosen for inclusion as they are written in the English language and are based outside Asia.

Monthly reach of leading national newspapers in the United Kingdom from April 2019 to March 2020, by platform (in 1,000s)

Leading newspapers ranked by reach in the United Kingdom 2019-2020, by platform



Note(s): United Kingdom; April 2019 to March 2020; 15 years and above
Further information regarding this statistic can be found on page 24
Source(s): Publishers Audience Measurement Company; comScore; ID 246082

3 Leading news brands statista

Figure 04: UK – Monthly reach of leading national newspapers (Publishers Audience Measurement Company, 2021).

This statistic was used as it includes online platforms – which is particularly important as the Independent is still an influential news source, but is no longer available in print. The top ten newspapers in UK according to this source (including the Sunday editions) were as follows: The Sun, Daily Mail, Daily Mirror, Guardian, Independent, Daily Express, Metro, Telegraph, Evening Standard, The Times. The Nexis database was used to search through newspapers in the UK.

Search terms and criteria:	
Date range of search:	01/01/1995-26/07/2021
Keywords searched:	"Esports" OR "online sport" OR "online gaming" OR "video game competition" OR "competitive gaming" OR "competitive video gaming".
Newspapers searched:	Top ten most read newspapers in the UK
Initial Result:	**8,456 articles**

Table 04: Search terms and criteria used to find UK newspaper articles in the Nexis database

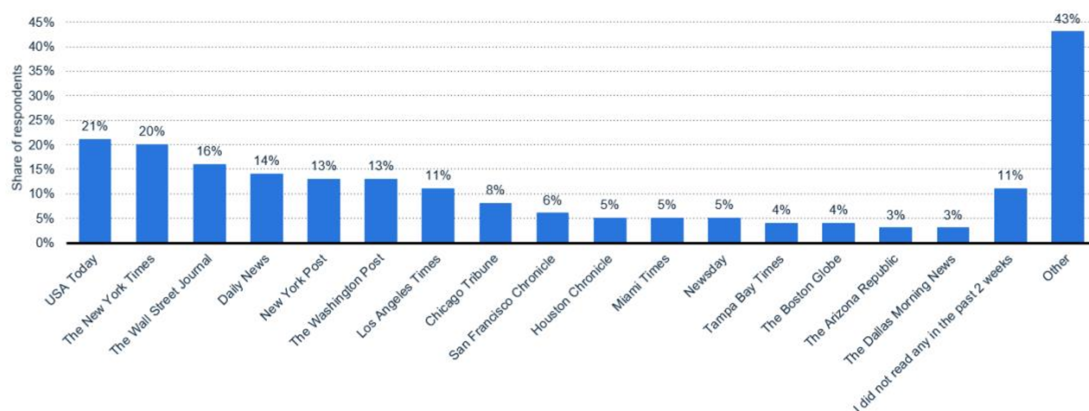


Figure 05: US – Daily newspaper consumption by brand in the U.S. 2020 (Statista, 2021)

The top ten newspapers in the US according to this source: USA Today, New York Times, Wall Street Journal, [New York] Daily News, New York Post, Washington Post, LA Times, Chicago Tribune, San Francisco Chronicle, Houston Chronicle. Searching US newspapers was more difficult than searching UK newspapers as most sources were not in the Nexis database, nor were they all contained in any one database.

Database	**Newspapers Included**	**Initial Results**
Access World News - Newsbank	USA Today	965
	Daily News	
	New York Post	
	Washington Post	
	San Francisco Chronicle	
	Houston Chronicle	
Newspapers.com	LA Times	N/A
	Chicago Tribune	
Nexis	New York Times	520
No access to archive	Wall Street Journal	N/A
	Total Initial Results	**>1,485**

Table 05: Search terms, criteria, and databases used to find US newspaper articles

The same search criteria and date ranges were used as for the UK newspapers. It was not possible to download all the results from Newspapers.com, therefore it was necessary to go through the results of each term manually. Consequently, the total number of initial results cannot be determined.

The data was cleaned by going through each article to check if it was relevant to Esports and removing any duplicates. Articles were excluded if they were not related to Esports or to the infrastructure that has contributed to it. Many of those excluded were about online betting, but omitting 'betting' from the search could have potentially excluded some relevant articles, as betting can be an important part of Esports. The relevant articles were renamed in the format 'YYYY-MM-DD – Title of Newspaper – Headline'. Adopting this approach meant that the articles were in chronological order of publication, aiding the process of analysis. Relevant articles included those directly related to Esports and those that provided key dates for infrastructure that contributed to the industry – such as

broadband and release of key games and consoles. After cleaning, the data set included 1,162 relevant articles from UK newspapers and 499 from US newspapers – a total of 1,661 articles.

5.4.3.2. Television News Reports

Television news reports were also used to build up a timeline of the Esports market and to analyse the mainstream media's response to Esports over time. Again, UK and US news channels were chosen for inclusion as they are in the English language and are based outside Asia.

For US news reports, the top 3 cable news channels in US – Fox, MSNBC, CNN – and the top 3 broadcast news affiliates in the US – ABC, CBS, NBC (Statista, 2022a) were searched. The Access World News database was used to find US news reports, using the same search keywords and date range as were used to search for newspaper articles:

Search terms and criteria:	
Date range of search:	01/01/1995-26/07/2021
Keywords searched:	"Esports" OR "online sport" OR "online gaming" OR "video game competition" OR "competitive gaming" OR "competitive video gaming".
Sources:	All in the USA including the phrase 'Fox', 'MSNBC', 'CNN', 'ABC', 'CBS', or 'NBC'.
Source type:	Video or transcript
Source language:	English

Table 06: Search terms and criteria used to find US TV reports in the Access World News database

Using this database meant that all of the hundreds of news affiliates of the six companies could also be searched. However, the data available on the television database rarely went back as far as the newspaper database – the earliest result was from April 2003. The initial search garnered 1,211 results**.** The data was cleaned by removing duplicates – including where the same report was broadcast on more than one affiliate station – and reports

irrelevant to the research topic were removed. After cleaning, there were 213 articles of data spanning 23/04/2003 to 16/07/2021.

For UK television reports, the five most watched television news sources – BBC, ITV, Sky, Channel 4 and Channel 5 (Ofcom, 2022) – were used. As these channels are not included in any database I have access to, each website was searched individually, using the 'search' function on the BBC website, and using an advanced Google search on the other sites' domains as they did not have a built-in search function. The same search terms as those used for the US news reports were used on each of these sites, then any duplicates, irrelevant pieces, and purely text-based articles were excluded.

Relevant TV News Reports Found, by broadcaster	
BBC	41
ITV	5
Sky	9
Channel 4	0
Channel 5	0

Table 07: Number of relevant TV News Reports Found, by broadcaster

It should be noted that Channel 4 and Channel 5 news do not host TV news reports on their websites in the same way that other broadcasters do. However, as ITN produces the news for ITV, Channel 4, and Channel 5, and as data saturation had already been met at this point, this was not believed to result in a loss or lack of data.

5.4.3.3. Documentaries

Esports documentaries were used to provide insights into the everyday lives of pro-gamers and offline events. The documentaries were sourced via Google searches for Esports documentaries and a number of 'best documentaries' articles on websites dedicated to Esports. As a result, 13 one-off documentary films and 4 documentary series (which comprised of a total of 22 episodes) were found, resulting in a total of 35 pieces of data – see the following table. These were transcribed to be included in the overall data set.

Title	Format	Subject of Documentary
7 Day Out	Film	Documents the 7 days preceding a League of Legends North America Championships Final.
A Gamer's Life	Film	Explores what it takes to be a gamer.
A Rising Storm	Film	Documents the nascent collegiate Esports scene in the US.
Breaking Point	Film	Follows Team Liquid during a season of the North America League of Legends Championship Series
Complexity Redemption	Film	Produced by Complexity, documents the team during a Winter CPL, trying to redeem themselves from previous poor results.
Esports Explained	Film	Short Vox-produced explainer made for Netflix.
FGC: Rise of the Fighting Game Community	Film	Follows members of the fighting game community, explains what it is/why and how they became part of it.
Fight for First	TV Series, 5 episodes	Follows British team Excel Esports as they compete in the League of Legends European Championship.
Free to Play	Film	Follows three competitors from different teams competing in the Dota 2 International tournament.
Girl Gamers	Online series, 3 episodes	Focuses on women in Esports and how they are trying to combat toxicity and promote inclusion.
League of Legends Origins	Film	Documents the creation, release, and growth of League of Legends.
Live/Play	Online series, 5 episodes	Stories of different League of Legends players from across the globe.
MTV True Life: I'm A Gamer	TV Episode	One episode of an anthology series exploring different people's lives. This follows four different members of the gaming community in 2003.
Not A Game	Film	An exploration of how gaming has changed.
The Smash Brothers	Online series, 9 episodes	History of the Smash Bros Melee scene, told by the people who were part of it.
State of Play	Film	Follows an amateur, semi-professional, and professional Korean StarCraft players.
The Gamechangers: Dreams of Blizzcon	Film	Follows two professional StarCraft players trying to make it to Blizzcon.

Table 08: Esports documentaries used in research

5.4.4. Methodological Challenges

In addition to the research methods outlined above, the initial plan had also included an ethnographic study of Esports spaces. The purpose of this had been to become immersed in places of Esports activity to better understand the culture of study (Savin-Baden & Major, 2023; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Ethical approval for this was sought in early 2020, however the Coronavirus pandemic meant that it was no longer possible to move forward with this research – both because of legal restrictions, and because most in-person Esports events were cancelled or postponed for at least eighteen months following the initial outbreak of the virus. The ethnographic study would have likely brought more direct insight into the spatial element of the thesis and would have added to the richness of the data. More secondary, archival data has been used to compensate for the inability to physically access these spaces. Through documentary evidence, it has been possible to witness and analyse a vast array of offline events to which I would not have otherwise had access, and it has been possible to examine how these events have changed over the years. Contributors to these documentaries – typically people who were present at these events – have given accounts of their experiences of the events, providing additional insights from a variety of perspectives, including audience members, coaches, and the players themselves. As such, this archival data – and the documentary data in particular – has enabled better insights to be gained into a wider variety of events over a longer period of time than if the thesis had primarily relied on ethnographic data drawn from events attended in the course of this study. Similarly, the pandemic meant that all interviews took place online, and many respondents commented that they were more flexible because of the restrictions at the time. As a result, it was possible to interview people from a much wider variety of countries than had initially been anticipated, resulting in insights that could not have been gained had more of the interviews been held in-person with UK-based participants.

5.5. Data Analysis

The manual transcribing and sorting of the data enabled full immersion in the data throughout, resulting in an intuitive understanding of the data (Spiggle, 1994). Therefore, an initial coding style (Saldaña, 2021) was employed in the first round of coding – a more open coding style that allows for multiple types of codes to explore the data in this initial

stage (ibid.). A selection of a priori codes were created based on the research questions (Belk et al., 2012), which aided the highlighting of the data most relevant to the existing questions. These codes were: online spaces; offline spaces; online and offline spaces; legitimacy; mimetic legitimacy. New codes were created using the holistic coding style (Saldaña, 2021) to draw out initial themes. This enabled me to lay down my initial reactions to the data based on my intuitive understanding of it, so that more thorough analysis could then be conducted through the second round of coding. A table of the resulting codes and the emerging themes drawn from them can be found in Appendix 3.

The interpretation of the data was conducted through part-to-whole iterations (Thompson, 1997; Spiggle, 1994). Initially, each form of data was analysed separately, in large part because each piece was collected at different times. I was immersed in the data as I collected each form of data – through the transcription of interviews and, later, documentaries and then television reports, and through the cleansing of newspaper data. As described above, an initial coding style was employed during this first round of coding. This formed the intratext cycle (Thompson, 1997). Following this, an intertextual cycle was completed, in which patterns were uncovered across different pieces of data (ibid.) It was possible to cross-analyse different forms of data that had been categorised under the same code. Using Nvivo as the data management tool, it was possible to cross-analyse all forms of data at once, either using codes assigned to the data or through keyword searches. Following this, I moved between repeated intratextual and intertextual interpretive cycles in order to gain a holistic understanding of the data and to uncover any further insights. A holistic selective coding method was employed in order to draw out emerging themes pertinent to the research questions (Urquhart, 2013). Finally, through theoretical coding, the core categories of the research were established and subcategories were integrated into each, which became the key findings (Saldana, 2021). Credibility for the findings have been sought through the triangulation of data sources and methods and through debriefing by peers at research conferences (Wallendorf & Belk, 1989).

5.6. Conclusion

To conclude, taking a social constructionist epistemology, a pragmatic approach has been taken to the research methods in line with the interpretive consumer research tradition.

After immersing myself in the data gained through semi-structured interviews with thirty-two participants from across the globe and extensive archival data, multiple coding cycles were undertaken, first analysing each form of data separately, then across all forms. In the following chapters, the findings that resulted from this data collection and analysis will be discussed.

Chapter 6: Findings Chapter 1 – Analysing the Stages of Legitimation of the Esports Market

6.1. Introduction

Previous studies in marketing which draw on institutional theory, particularly within the strands of consumer research and market creation literature, have laid out various processes for how a market legitimises over time, as detailed in the literature review (e.g. Humphreys, 2010; Bitektine & Haack, 2015; Haack et al., 2021). The primary contribution to this body of work will be the role of place in these processes, and this will be discussed in detail in the next chapter. First, it will be proposed that the nature of the Esports market as one in which the producer-consumer relationship is blurred requires an adaptation of existing legitimation theory. Then, two distinct processes within institutionalisation will be introduced: intra-community legitimation and extra-community legitimation. Following this, the legitimation processes of the Esports market will be analysed, distinguishing between the different stages of legitimation and the intra- or extra-community legitimation processes involved.

6.2. The Stages of Legitimation

Using four stages of legitimation outlined by Johnson et al. (2006), Humphreys (2010) examined how stakeholders used different framing techniques to increase the acceptability of the casino gambling market over time. She explored how different types of legitimacy were of particular importance at each stage, using Scott's (2014) three pillars of legitimacy – cultural-cognitive, regulative, and normative – to exemplify how institutionalisation is a process of social construction, rather than just a spreading of information. Humphreys visualised her results in the following model.

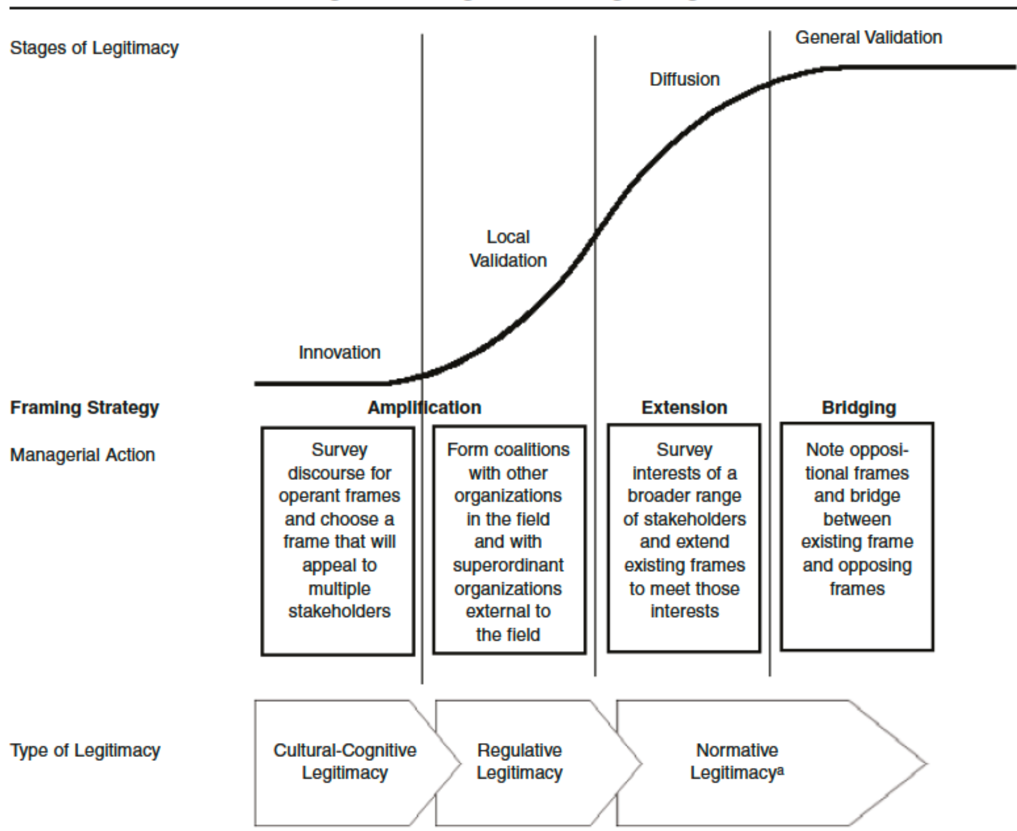


Figure 06: Humphrey's findings (2010, p. 16)

The findings of this study suggest that, in the Esports market, the first two legitimation stages – 'innovation' and 'local diffusion' – are not separate, distinct stages, but instead happen concurrently. This finding will now be explored in more detail, with support from the data that has been collected.

Humphreys (2010) defines the first stage of legitimacy as 'innovation'. This is the stage in which the practice or market is defined, and the innovation is positioned "to multiple stakeholders – consumers, investors, and gatekeepers – by amplifying certain meanings over others" (ibid., p. 15). Humphreys is suggesting that the bulk of this meaning-making work is done by the innovator – the company who has developed the innovation and the marketing managers it employs – who then go out to the key stakeholders to explain the innovation.

The findings of this study suggest that this rarely – if ever – happens in this way in the Esports market. Early Esports leagues were not created by the games developers themselves, but by the players. For example, competitions and leagues began to form in the South Korean PC bangs (internet cafés) before more formal leagues were formed (Schiesel, 2006). Smash Bros. Melee – one of the first Esports in the US – was never intended by its creators, Nintendo, to be played as a competitive game, and the company offered little support to those who formed leagues (EastPointPictures, 2013a).

Where developers have purposefully created an Esport around their game, such as Riot Games with League of Legends or Valorant, the findings suggest that this happens towards the end of the first stage, and only once the market has surpassed the first stage in another region. As such, Riot Games were building on the legitimacy that previous Esports games had already built in South Korea and through community-led tournaments, bringing the market to a bigger scale in the US. This will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter.

The second stage of legitimacy in Humphreys' (2010) model is 'local validation'. During this stage, social networks and organisations are built within the field, and ties with existing organisations outside the field begin to be established. This stage is very recognisable within early Esports, as communities came together to build their own leagues and competitions. For example, the early fighting game community travelled to community-organised events to play against each other (Hold Back to Block, 2016), and Smash Bros Melee competitions in the US were first run by players themselves (EastPointPictures, 2013a). However, the findings suggest that this took place concurrently to stage 1.

Humphreys (2010) points out that the four stages of legitimacy do not necessarily have to take place in the order as outlined. The argument put forward in this thesis is not that the first and second stages are incorrectly ordered in the case of the Esports market, but that they are not distinct stages at all. As discussed above, it was not the case in the early days of Esports that developers would make a game and promote it for the purpose of formalised competitive play. It was the players who began setting up competitions themselves, and then, in some cases, developers became involved, or organisations were

set up to formalise leagues and events. Therefore, an adaptation to Humphreys' model is proposed.

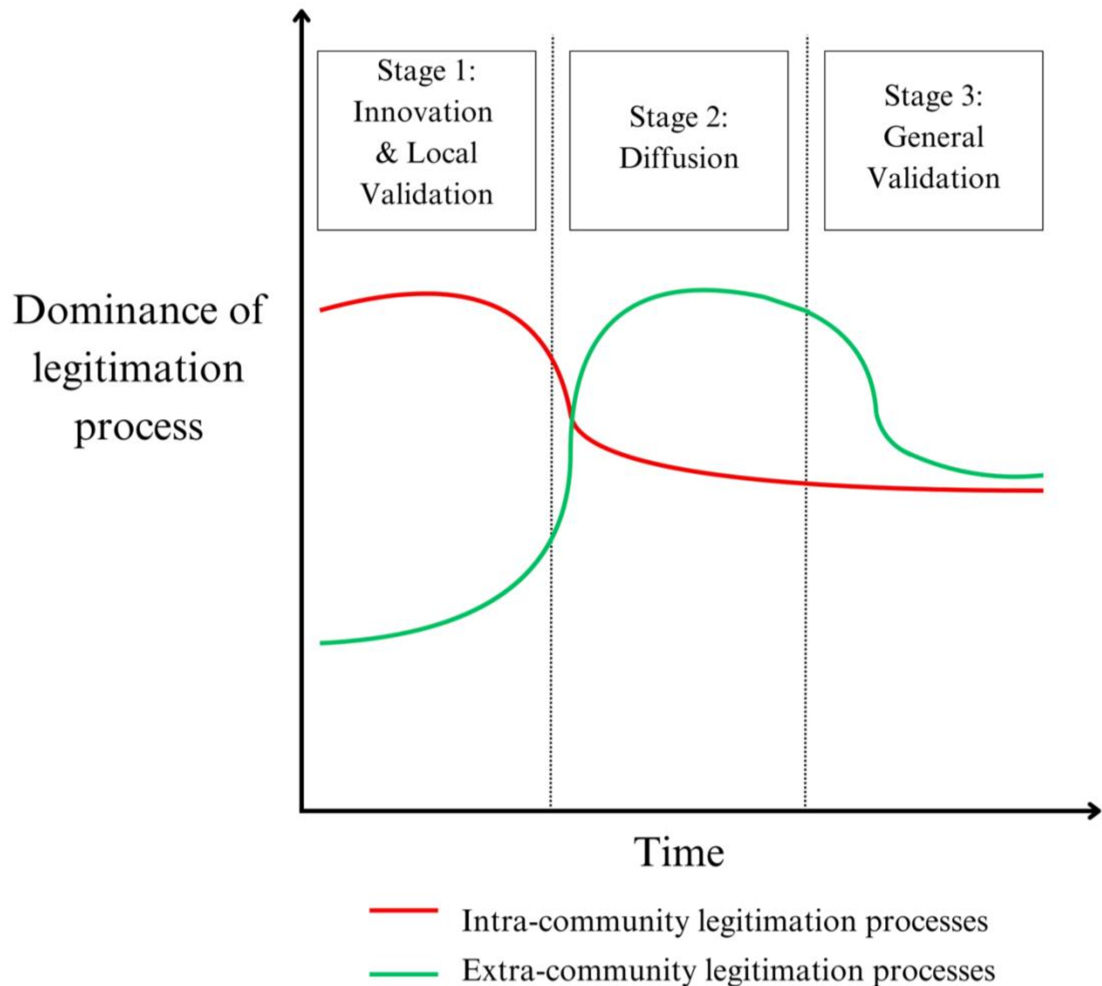


Figure 07: Adaptation of Humphreys' (2010) Model

As shown in the figure above, Humphreys' (2010) model has been adapted by merging the first and second stages of legitimacy into a single first stage. The third and fourth stages have been retained but have been renumbered accordingly. Later in this chapter, a more detailed examination of how the Esports market has progressed through each of these stages will be provided, and the other processes outlined in this adapted model - intra-community and extra-community legitimation processes – will be addressed.

The findings suggest that the Esports market was driven largely, but not exclusively, by consumers, thus aligning more closely with the market co-creator logic (Branstad & Solem, 2020). What was initially a casual activity of gamers getting together to play competitively formalised over time, in part through the work of the community in

establishing Esports leagues and organisations, but also through the support of game developers, most of whom either encouraged the competitive play, created their own leagues, or at the very least permitted use of their intellectual property to be used in such activity. Martin and Schouten (2014) describe a "continuum of models of market development based on the relative importance of firms versus consumers" (p. 866), with solely firm-driven markets on one end and consumer-driven markets on the other. Based on the reasons described above, the findings suggest that the Esports market should be placed towards, but not at, the consumer-driven end.

Humphreys' (2010) stages of legitimation are a useful tool through which to describe and analyse the legitimacy of a market over time. Therefore, by adapting these stages, it has been possible to analyse the legitimacy of the Esports market at each stage, with a focus on the places that have contributed to the legitimation process. Having explained the stages of legitimation that will be used to discuss the overall process of legitimacy of the Esports market, the following section will explain the two different forms of legitimacy that this thesis proposes comprise the overall legitimation process.

6.3. Intra-Community and Extra-Community Legitimation

As outlined in the literature review and demonstrated in Humphreys' (2010) model, extant theories of the legitimation process suggest that a new product, service, or market is first designed by its innovator, who then attempt to legitimise their innovation with key stakeholders and early adopters, before legitimacy spreads more broadly into the wider population. Despite the adaptations to the first stage that are proposed in this thesis to better fit the Esports market, it is not disputed that the Esports market's legitimacy also started amongst a smaller group of stakeholders before expanding to the wider population. However, this study proposes that this is not just one process of legitimacy.

Whilst conducting the research, it was revealed that some of the participants made a distinction between practices that were considered legitimate to them as active participants in the market, and practices that were considered legitimate to those outside the market. This compounded a question I had already been asking myself: as the Esports market is already legitimate to the hundreds of millions of people who participate across

the globe, at what point can it be considered a legitimate market overall, regardless of how it is perceived by those outside the market?

As a result, it is suggested that the process of legitimacy in the Esports market is not one process, but two. Intra-community legitimacy comprises the practices that those within the Esports community consider to be legitimate. This is built and evolves over time and continues to be negotiated by the active participants of the Esports market. Extra-community legitimacy, on the other hand, involves the practices that increase legitimacy of the market to those outside the community. In Western countries, this is the legitimacy that is currently less assured, as the media, governments, health professionals, and gamers' loved ones come to understand Esports as similar to traditional sports. Prior work has suggested multi-level legitimation processes that move from the micro-level of individual assessment of legitimacy, to the meso-level of consensus, and finally the macro-level of collective-level acceptance (Bitektine & Haack, 2015; Haack et al., 2021). However, in this prior work, the individuals discussed at the micro-level are also those discussed at the meso- and macro-levels – the focus is on how the perception of legitimacy grows over time among a collective. The levels of legitimacy that are proposed in this thesis are across different groups of people: those within the community and those outside the community.

Previous research may have conceptualised these two types of community as different market actors involved in the legitimation process – for example, in Humphreys and Latour's (2013) assessment of media impact on consumer perceptions of legitimacy, they differentiate between 'users' and 'nonusers', users being those who already participate in the online gambling market (the context of their research) and nonusers being those who do not. However, in this thesis' conceptualisation, whilst members of the intra- and extra-community are market actors, they are more active than those described in Humphreys and Latour's (2013) study, as they are often actively involved in the legitimation processes – for example, those within the community are not just 'users', they are also heavily involved in the creation of the market and are producers in addition to their role as consumers. Furthermore, this thesis conceptualises intra- and extra-community legitimation processes – not just actors – with each playing distinct roles and being the dominant process at different points in time. For example, the findings suggest that intra-community legitimation processes are more dominant in the first stage of legitimacy as

this is when those in the community work together to create and build the market, as opposed to those outside the community, who are not yet as actively engaged in the nascent market.

Whilst these are two separate processes, the findings suggest that they can influence each other, in part because it is argued that they occur concurrently – intra-community legitimation processes are ongoing even as extra-community legitimacy grows. Despite happening at the same time, they are not necessarily on the same level of precedence – for example, the research suggests that intra-community legitimation takes precedence in the early stages of a market because, in line with prior work (e.g. Humphreys 2010; Suchman 1995), the key stakeholders need to establish legitimate practices before legitimacy can grow beyond the active community. To shed further light on these processes, each process will now be explained in more detail with reference to data that supports these findings.

6.3.1. Intra-Community Legitimacy Introduced

This thesis defines intra-community legitimacy as the practices perceived to be legitimate by those actively involved in the market. In the case of Esports, this includes all stakeholders within the market, from those who only spectate, to those who manage the most elite leagues – anyone who participates in Esports. This extends Humphreys and Latour's (2013) conceptualisation of users and nonusers of a market and their differing perspectives on legitimacy by broadening the 'user' group to include all key stakeholders of the market, including producers, players, and spectators. It is argued that this is necessary in the case of the Esports market given its nature as a consumer-driven market (Branstad & Solem, 2020; Martin & Schouten, 2014).

One important point to note is that just because a practice is broadly considered by the community to be legitimate does not mean that everyone is in complete agreement (Haack et al., 2021). First of all, in the case of the Esports market, legitimate practices can vary between different games and leagues as, without one regulatory body, they can adopt different sets of rules (Leroux-Parra, 2020). Second, given the global nature of Esports, members of the community come from varied backgrounds and cultures and access the market in different ways. For example, although Esports competitions are traditionally played on a computer or game console, 19% of total hours of Esports events watched

globally in 2022 were of Esports games played on mobile devices (Statista, 2023). It is differences in opinion and access such as these that help drive change and negotiation of legitimacy over time. Heterogeneity in consumption communities has previously been explored in the context of the running community (Chalmers Thomas et al., 2013). The conclusion from this research was that heterogenous actors can destabilise a community, but a community can re-stabilise by re-aligning their values and practices (ibid.). The findings of this study further illustrate that heterogeneity in a community can be a good thing in terms of progressing the legitimacy of a market. This will be further explored later in this chapter, as the relationship between the stages of the legitimation process and intra-community legitimacy are discussed in detail. First, some examples will be given of how views can differ within the Esports community, which this thesis defines as all those who participate in the Esports market, including players, spectators, event organisers, and developers.

One example of differing views found in the research regards the importance of offline versus online events in Esports. All participants saw the importance of online events to some extent – perhaps to be expected in a market that is largely based online. However, whilst most agreed that offline events were also important, some disagreed, for example:

> *"I personally think offline events are kind of a burden… I can see like, they put a lot of effort for the offline events but I think most of the viewership will come through the online space rather than like the offline attendance, so I feel like for Esports in particular where we have this very like huge opportunity I think to go fully online compared to like traditional sports, where you don't really require a physical audience there, let's say, and I think like they can put more cost to like making the online experience better for people because I think that's where most of the viewers are going to be from, rather than like the offline event, and I think that they can keep the offline event simple I mean like a few fans and individual teams can have their own people, like maybe their parents can come down to watch them, but I think like offline is very costly for Esports."*
>
> - *Jack, Casual Overwatch player, Singapore*

Jack discusses cultural differences within the Esports industry. He mentions that there are not many offline matches in his country because much of the local market is more focused

on mobile gaming than computer-based gaming. He personally has not attended an offline event, but has attended local community gatherings:

> *"I think that's what really brings the community to us, things like community fundraisers is quite important, when it comes to the community involvement in local events, so yeah, this side of it things I felt like crucial".*
>
> - *Jack, Casual Overwatch player, Singapore*

This demonstrates not only that the prevailing legitimate practices within the community are not necessarily supported by everyone, but that local culture and access to the game also play an important role in which practices are considered to be more legitimate. In Singapore, where the Esports market is smaller and more focused on mobile gaming, offline events based on community gatherings and activism are prioritised over offline matches. This finding extends prior work that finds that local factors influence the practices and priorities of an otherwise broadly similar group of people (Kjeldgaard & Askegaard, 2006). As such, although this thesis will largely explore the differences between intra- and extra-community legitimation practices, differences within these communities will also be taken into consideration and discussed.

6.3.2. Extra-Community Legitimacy Introduced

This thesis defines extra-community legitimacy as the practices perceived to be legitimate by those outside the community. In the case of Esports, this includes anyone who does not regularly watch or play Esports, and, in the case of Western countries, includes the mainstream media. This extends prior work that explores how 'nonusers' perceive the legitimacy of a market (Humphreys & Latour, 2013) by including the media and established institutions in the extra-community, rather than just the "general public" (ibid., p. 774). Extra-community legitimation processes are those which aim to increase legitimacy in the eyes of those who do not participate in the market yet are necessary in the diffusion of the market's institutionalisation. One example of a practice that is seen as key to boosting extra-community legitimacy is major offline events:

> *"I think they [offline events] legitimise it, I think it's, yeah, online events as I said earlier are very important for Esports and kind of make Esports what they are,*

and really work for Esports, but I think offline events legitimise the competitive side of it and the real Esport, like you know, the sport part of it, because, I think, it's much harder to be flippant or to, like, you know just write off it as 'Oh some silly gaming thing' or people taking a game too seriously when you've got a stadium of like, you know, tens of thousands filled to capacity with people watching and, you know, however much prize money on the line and people playing, like, there and then, it's a much more real experience and yeah, it legitimises it, so I think it's very important."

- *Freddie, Amateur Dota 2 player & Director of a small Esports organisation, UK*

This was a view echoed by many interviewees. Such events help the market become more visible to those outside of the community and help them better understand Esports. The methods through which these events do this is discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

It is worth noting that a practice can be considered legitimate by those inside and external to the community at the same time, or at different times, and for similar or differing reasons. For example, whilst offline events provide a particular boost to extra-community legitimacy because they increase visibility of the market, they are considered to increase legitimacy for a different reason by those within the community:

"People historically always take online results with a pinch of salt, almost like you need like, often time it's you'll like see like an up and coming team and they'll be beating the best teams in the world online, and they'll get to a big event and they won't do it again, they'll falter under the pressure, they won't be able to do it when it really mattered, and at that kind of way you would see a change in the pecking order".

- *William, Amateur Counter Strike player, UK*

As William explains, a win in an offline event can be seen as more legitimate than a win in an online event to those within the Esports community, because it is seen as a more difficult environment in which to achieve success. Furthermore, in the early days of the Esports market, offline events provided more of a boost to intra-community legitimacy:

“From what I know from Esports history, the offline events that weren't being streamed or didn't have any online interaction were the backbone of the game up until about… the backbone of Counter Strike, not of Global Offensive in specific, but were the backbone of the game up until about a year after Global Offensive's release in 2014, pretty much everyone who was into the game professional, either watching it or playing it, would go to offline events instead of trying to engage with it solely online, and online was just kind of like a backup thing for people who couldn't make it, and then there was a turning point and it became the majority thing in the recent years.”

- *Thomas, Serious Amateur Counter Strike player, US*

As Thomas explains, before streaming became more accessible and popular, offline events were considered more legitimate and important – even to those not competing – while online events were seen as a substitute. These findings demonstrate how one practice has been considered a primary boost to both intra- and extra-community legitimacy at different stages of the market, and for different reasons. Prior work has paid less attention to the role of ‘nonusers’ in the legitimation process (Humphreys & Latour, 2013) and, as such, these findings contribute to theory by providing new insight into the differing perspectives of those inside and outside the market.

6.3.3. Conclusion

Prior work in institutional theory has focused on how a smaller group can come together to negotiate how to create or disrupt an institution, before spreading the resulting decision to a wider group (e.g. Kellogg, 2009; Furnari, 2014; Cartel et al., 2019). Essentially, one group decides what is legitimate and this is then diffused more broadly through mechanisms such as changes in policy or regulations, or a change in practice within an organisation. Instead, the findings suggest that what is considered to be legitimate by one group may not be considered legitimate by the other, and these processes of legitimacy happen at the same time and can influence each other.

Now that the three stages of legitimation and the separate processes of intra- and extra-community legitimacy within them have been introduced, how the Esports market has

legitimised over time will be explored with reference to the roles that intra- and extra-community legitimation processes have played within this.

6.4. The Legitimation Stages of Esports and the Growth of Intra- and Extra-Community Legitimation

As Esports is a global market, the extent to which it can be considered legitimate varies by country. For example, in South Korea, where the market originated, Esports is considered to be more mainstream and accepted by the general public than anywhere else in the world (Sang-Hun, 2021). As such, it is not possible to analyse the progress of the market's legitimacy as a whole. Therefore, this analysis will focus on Western Europe, the US, and South Korea, as these are the areas where the Esports market is becoming legitimate at similar rates, and wherein the entire block of the data – both primary and secondary – focus on.

6.4.1. Stage 1: Innovation and Local Diffusion

Stage 1 of the legitimation process reflects the innovation and local diffusion stages outlined by Humphreys (2010) which, as previously discussed, happen concurrently in the context of the Esports market. This stage took place before any real mainstream media interest, so our understanding of how the market operated at this point is largely gleaned through hindsight – either through documentaries predominantly produced after this stage, or through discussions with those who were part of the market at this time.

In South Korea, this stage took place in the 1990s (Kim & Kim, 2022). A financial crisis hit South Korea in 1997, and consequently many people could not afford computers at home, and few houses were connected to the internet (Jin, 2020). When StarCraft was released in 1998, it became a hit, and young people went to PC bangs – which cost less than $1 an hour – to play (ibid.). Not only would they play, but they would also watch their friends playing - something PC bang owners noticed, so they began to set up informal competitions against other PC bangs (Rea, 2019). These events increasingly grew to be held in bigger venues with larger audiences (Huhh, 2008; Rea, 2019; Kim & Kim, 2022). Growth of the market in South Korea was initially aided by the fast-growing

broadband infrastructure, which drew more people to gaming, following which cable TV providers recognised that money could be made by broadcasting events, and the Korean government established a national regulator – the Korean esports Association (KeSPA) in 2000 (Kim & Kim, 2022; Huhh, 2008; Taylor, 2012). As a result, the market moved quite quickly into stage 2 of the legitimation process – more on which later - but nevertheless, it was the early gamers in PC bangs who were primarily responsible for establishing the practice.

In the US and Western Europe, the timing of Stage 1 can be difficult to define and varies by country. In the US, the Esports market largely grew from arcade gaming and early console games (PicNicNBL - Game Video's Archive, 2020; Griffiths, 2013). In the absence of PC bangs in countries – like the US and UK – where internet cafés were not particularly popular, gamers used internet forums to discuss games and to organise tournaments (EastPointPictures, 2013a & 2013b). As the Internet infrastructure was not sufficient at the time to play online, and as the games were not built to be played online, tournaments were typically small, offline, informal affairs organised by small groups of gamers (Griffiths, 2013). The first major organised tournament in the US was the Cyberathlete Professional League (CPL), launched by 'Quake' player Angel Munoz in 1997. Over the following decade, the twice-yearly event standardised rules of the games played in the event, provided prize money for winners, gained sponsorship deals with companies such as Intel and AMD, and was part of the first global professional gaming broadcast (ibid.).

In early 2000, UK newspapers first began to report on competitive gaming as we know it today, when a gaming café in London – 'Playing Fields' – hosted a qualifying tournament to send a Brit to compete in the CPL. Both the Times and the Evening Standard reported on British man Sujoy Roy, one of the UK's first professional, paid, competitive gamers (McCandless, 2000; Sherwin, 2000). The UK Esports market was behind the US at the time:

> *The Americans, typically, had quickly spotted the dollar potential of this fledgling sport and already unveiled their first pro gamer, the (now) millionaire Dennis Fong (or "Thresh" to his enemies). Professional gaming leagues were also in place, propped up by million-dollar sponsorship deals with corporates eager to be "down with the kids".*

Over here, by comparison, the parochial attitude prevailed. Well-organised, but amateur, weekend warriors made up a ragtag scene of Sunday leagues and Internet tournaments. It didn't suit Sujoy. "I had a long break from Quake and was thinking about giving up."

- *McCandless, 2000, The Evening Standard*

This article, from the Evening Standard, emphasises the amount of money that can be made, and gently criticises the UK's slow progress in the field. Both articles highlighted that Sujoy was planning to move to Sweden due to the lack of an organised league and money-making opportunities in UK:

"In the UK, the largest tournament prize has been just £10,000, so Sujoy has had to make a difficult decision.
"There's no professional organised league here," he says, "and you have to pay for the Internet. It's not feasible to video-game for a living here. I can't make money so I'm moving to Stockholm."
So no sooner is our king crowned than he flees these shores."

- *McCandless, 2000, The Evening Standard*

"Money-making opportunities in Britain are limited at the moment and Mr Roy is even considering moving to Sweden, where there are more professional tournaments."

- *Sherwin, 2000, The Times*

This highlights the difficulties that the early industry faced – whilst legitimacy had developed within the community at the time, the lack of growth in the UK whilst the market progressed in other countries meant that the UK lost some of its early pioneers. This demonstrates how different localities progressing at different rates can be a vicious cycle – if the UK's best players had not felt the need to move abroad, would the market in the UK have been boosted by having its top players demonstrate what UK players can do? This is something that one of the research participants, Ethan from Australia, also questioned:

"There's this import rule where Australian players are counted as North American players, so, I don't know if you know the context but when you import someone, you can only have a maximum of two players, so, there's been a huge movement of these high talented players in Australian Esports moving towards North American because they see it as a better option."

- *Ethan, Casual League of Legends player, Australia*

-

He went on to add that this rule change had "tarnished the scene in Australia just a bit", at a time when the pandemic had also – according to Ethan – negatively impacted the Australian Esports scene. This suggests that the successful progress of legitimation in one region can hinder the legitimation process in another.

Returning to the UK in 2000, there was hope at the time that the market would grow, as covered in The Times newspaper:

"Hopes are high that a British professional league will soon be created, with some involvement from television companies…
Observers from Sport England, the sports funding council, have been to the Playing Fields, which runs the UK PC Games Championship, after a request from the venue's owner for game-playing to be recognised as a sport.
Edward Watson, director of the Playing Fields, which hosts the finals, believes that gaming will become a television regular. He said: "When we have motor-racing tournaments, we put on a much more exciting show than at some grands prix. The physical skills are easily a match for darts or snooker."
A new development, called Quake TV, means that any Internet user will soon be able to log on and watch a professional game as it takes place.
Unfortunately, the tournaments lack two features crucial for television: personality and sex appeal. Mr Watson admitted: "It is not like wrestling, where there are characters created. The top players, like Sujoy, are actually the nicest, quietest people."

- *Sherwin, 2000, The Times*

This passage demonstrates the desire for external validation from those outside the community, particularly in the form of regulative legitimacy (Scott, 2014) through

recognition from a governing body, and cultural-cognitive legitimacy, which refers to the shared understandings of society and culture to the extent that they are almost taken for granted (ibid.). Neither of these hopes were realised at the time, meaning the market in the UK remained in stage one of the legitimation process.

In the US during the 2000s, tournaments largely organised by gamers themselves began to grow. For example, in the Smash Bros Melee community, a series of tournaments called 'Tournament Go' were held between 2002 and 2004, bringing players from across the country initially to one player's house, and later to school halls and hotels (EastPointPictures, 2013a & 2013b). At the same time, the Major League Gaming (MLG) tournaments were being set up – its first tournament in 2003 was attended by 120 people (Griffiths, 2013), but by 2012, was filing revenues of between $5 and $25 million per year (Wilhelm, 2012) and had become a successor to the CLP (Griffiths, 2013).

Whilst early tournaments were organised by gamers themselves, the games developers began to get involved in various ways. In the US, Riot Games built their own league for their game, League of Legends. Their first cup final was held as an event in 2011 within a gaming convention, but by the second cup final the following year, they had launched their own event, especially for the game (League of Legends Origins, 2019). The findings suggest that, at this point, the Esports market was still in stage one of the legitimation process as there was little interest beyond the core community, who were still negotiating between themselves how such events should be run and ironing out teething issues (Johnson et al., 2006; Humphreys, 2010) – for example, at the 2012 League of Legends World Championship, technical issues led to Riot Games setting up their own local servers for competitive events, something which is now standard practice (League of Legends Origins, 2019).

Whilst Riot is an example of getting involved to aid the development of the Esports side of their game, other developers were not so helpful. When the 2013 Evolution Championship Series (Evo 2013) included Smash Bros Melee in their event, Nintendo, who made the game, tried to stop the organisers from including the game in the event and from streaming it online (EastPointPictures, 2013c; Pitcher, 2013). Due to pressure from fans, they reversed their decision within 24 hours (ibid.).

This is a clear example of how the legitimation of the Esports market differs from Humphreys' (2010) model in terms of innovation and local diffusion – the innovation does not typically come from the game developer, who then attempts to engage their immediate audience, as would be the case if the market followed Humphreys' model. Instead, in early Esports, the gamers themselves came together and established their own leagues. In some cases, such as in this Nintendo and Evo 2013 case, the developers themselves were opposed to their property being used for Esports, suggesting that they themselves did not view Esports as a legitimate activity (Nintendo did not give an explanation as to why it attempted to ban Evo 2013 from including Smash Bros Melee (Pitcher, 2013)). Later, seeing the growing success of competitive gaming, some games developers innovated their own Esports leagues – such as with Riot Games and League of Legends.

Whether or not the developers were supportive or opposed to Esports in the early days of the market, there was a lot of negotiating both within the gaming community and/or between the gamers and developers to establish the conventions of the market. For example, in the early Smash Bros scene in the US, there was a debate in very early tournaments as to which settings should be used during competitive play, with players from the east coast of the US having a different opinion from those from the west coast (EastPointPictures, 2013b). After a few tournaments, a decision was reached, and the standard set remains to the present day.

Finding the exact point at which the Esports market moved to the next stage of the legitimation process is difficult, especially as it varies depending on country and region. Progress in one region can also be affected by developments in another – for example, the findings suggest that Riot Games' construction of their League of Legends tournament came when the Esports market was in the latter stage of Stage 1 in the US. Between the organisers and the audience, they were still negotiating how to establish a large-scale tournament within the US, thus aligning with stage 1 practices, but Riot Games were able to use some of the practices previously established in South Korea (where such tournaments had already been established and at which point the findings suggest had moved to stage two of the legitimation process) and to build on some of the community-led tournaments that had already taken place in America. Given this stage is primarily comprised of early audiences and developers discussing and negotiating the practices that

will establish the market, intra-community legitimacy is the dominant type of legitimacy being formed in stage 1.

6.4.2. Stage 2: Diffusion

The next stage in Humphreys' (2010) model is diffusion, which occurs when the "meaning of a product or practice has narrowed considerably" (p. 15) and validation from stakeholders beyond the immediate industry and audience is sought. The findings suggest that this is the stage the Esports market has reached in the US and Western Europe – the market has been established and is now trying to grow beyond its core gamer audience.

However, this is where the variance between what this thesis terms intra- and extra-community legitimacy begins to show. In the previous stage, the market was being established through discussions, negotiations, and the creation of new practices within the community itself – both players and games developers. In this second stage, a wider audience is sought as well as validation from beyond the key stakeholders. However, this does not mean that the discussions and negotiations taking place within the community cease completely. Whilst some norms may have been established, the market continues to change and develop, necessitating further institutional negotiations.

6.4.2.1. Extra-Community Legitimation During Stage 2 – Analysing Growth

Arguably one of the biggest differences between stages one and two of the market legitimation process is that an audience beyond the early adopters and initial community is sought during the second stage of the process (Humphreys, 2010). The analysis extends prior work (Humphreys & Latour, 2013) by suggesting that the methods by which legitimacy is perceived by those beyond the immediate audience is different from how legitimacy develops within the core audience, and that these processes take place concurrently. This thesis terms this external-facing legitimacy growth 'extra-community legitimation'. The extra-community legitimation processes that have taken place within the Esports market in the US and Western Europe will now be examined. In the following section, the core Esports audience's changing perceptions of legitimacy over time will be explored.

As the Esports market has grown, so have the audiences for offline events. As will be discussed in much more detail in the following chapter, the findings suggest that offline events – especially those held in stadia originally built for the purpose of hosting traditional sporting matches - have contributed to extra-community legitimacy by making the matches more visible and accessible. Even if those outside the community have not attended these events themselves, the media reporting of Esports events filling stadia can draw people's attention.

As such, one way in which we can analyse the extent to which a market is perceived as legitimate is through how it is reported in mainstream media. Humphreys and Latour (2013) found that the way in which the media frame a market as either legitimate or illegitimate has more of an effect on nonusers – akin to what this thesis conceptualises as those in the extra-community. Analysis of the secondary research data shows that the first mention of the term 'Esports' in a UK newspaper was in 2000 (Mackintosh, 2000) and in 2003 in a US newspaper (Graham, 2003). Whilst competitive gaming in the Esports sense had previously been covered occasionally, these articles mark when discussion of the market as we know it first gained mainstream media coverage. Discussion of the market in UK and US newspapers grew dramatically from 2013:

Figure 08: Number of newspaper articles that discuss Esports, 1995-2021

As the chart shows, the number of articles grew steadily until 2019 – there was a slight dip in 2020, perhaps due to the pandemic, and data was only collected up to July in 2021. Whilst it is difficult to pinpoint the exact reason for the sudden uptick in interest in Esports in 2014, a number of large events took place that year, such as the League of Legends World Championship Final in Seoul (Wingfield, 2014a) and the Dota 2 International tournament in Seattle giving out the then-biggest prize pot in Esports history with $1 million for each player in the winning team (Wingfield, 2014b). In addition, the speculation over the potential purchase of Twitch by YouTube, who then lost to Amazon (Stevenson, 2014), appears to have spurred the media into further investigating Esports. This increased reporting by mainstream media not only aids extra-community legitimacy by helping to educate a broader audience about Esports, but is also an example of an existing institution, in this case, the newspaper industry, lending legitimacy to a new market (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

Recognition from existing institutions can aid the institutionalisation process by contributing to normative (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) or regulative (Scott, 2014) legitimacy. This is when an organisation complies with existing regulations and standards and when workers within the organisation begin to professionalise (ibid.). In the case of Esports, two examples of institutional recognition have had a particular impact on the market: government recognition, and Esports in education.

6.4.2.2. Extra-community Legitimation Gain through Government Recognition

The South Korean government was quick to show its support for Esports, setting up the world's first Esports association operating at a national level in 2000 (Jin, 2020). Regulatory bodies help to standardise the rules and regulations of a game and are considered to be one of the requirements for a game becoming a sport (e.g. Jenny et al., 2017; Guttmann, 1994). Korea's Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism worked with Korea Telecom and Samsung to create the first World Cyber Games in October 2000, not only providing the resources required to set up such a large tournament, but also providing external recognition and validation of the market (Rea, 2016). For this reason, the thesis argues that South Korea moved into stage 2 of the legitimation process around this time.

Outside South Korea, gaining recognition from external bodies has been more of a challenge. In particular, there have been issues when governments have refused visas to Esports athletes, meaning they have been unable to participate in major tournaments (Usmani, 2016). This particularly came to light during the pandemic. One research participant explained that The International – an annual Dota 2 tournament that includes players from across the globe – could not be held as planned in Sweden in 2021 because the country did not recognise Esports as an official sport:

> *"Dota 2 was no longer hosted in Sweden this year, the TI tournament, because Sweden didn't recognise Esports as an official sport, so therefore visas for the competitors weren't guaranteed, and they can't host a tournament where professional teams who are meant to be there have to risk getting a visa, they can't afford this, so they had to move country, and I think until that becomes more consistent, it's very hard for countries to catch up to that."*
>
> - *Theo, Serious Amateur Player/Team and Event Manager, Dota 2, UK*

Due to travel restrictions, the competitors required visas to enter the country – something granted to professional athletes, but with Esports not considered a sport, these competitors did not meet the requirements. Therefore, the tournament was held in a different country. Previous literature on the extent to which Esports can be considered a sport does not specify that recognition of Esports athletes as professional athletes for visa purposes is a criterion of becoming a sport. However, it is suggested that such a development is indicative of society moving towards acceptance of Esports as a sport (Jenny et al., 2017). In the US, professional Esports athletes have been able to apply for an athletic visa since 2013 (News Stream, 2015). Not only does this demonstrate some government support for the market, it also means that top players can be recruited from abroad, making the US scene more interesting to watch (Browning, 2021).

6.4.2.3. Extra-community Legitimation Gain through Esports in Education

Educational establishments are another form of institution that can aid the market's legitimation through recognition of Esports. DiMaggio & Powell (1983) highlight that one route to professionalisation of workers in a field is through formal education,

particularly at university level. This is a normative process of institutionalisation, through which norms are established by people being taught on similar courses and a network of knowledge being established (ibid.). A university education is not a requirement to become a professional Esports player – in fact, some players drop out of university or even high school to focus on their Esports career (e.g. Bryson Taylor & Chokshi, 2019; Sang-Hun, 2021; Joshua "Darnoch" Hartnett in HTC Gaming, 2016). However, a number of universities in the UK have introduced Esports courses (e.g. Hughes, 2018; Knowles, 2020), and some American universities offer sporting scholarships to students who are highly skilled Esports players, in the same way that they do for traditional scholarships (e.g. Hoyle, 2018; BBC News, 2019). The latter example in particular aids the legitimacy of the Esports market through a mimetic process (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) - by providing sporting scholarships on the same basis as traditional sports, Esports gains legitimacy.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that these normative pressures are happening via formal education in the event organisation and management side of Esports. Esports degrees in both the UK and US are not just aimed at players, but those who want to go into the industry in any role, such as event management, marketing, finance, journalism, technicians, or any of the many other roles required to make the industry what it is (Hughes, 2018; Hoyle, 2018). This was highlighted by Oliver, an Esports coach who teaches at a university in the US:

> *"We have this thing… where the students have the opportunities to work in roles that they can have careers in later on, managing teams, coaching teams, broadcasting, dealing with business issues or business communications and all those sort of things… Esports are like athletics. They're not like football... Esports is all of it, and athletics has to deal with trainers, marketing, they have to deal with so much, to where like, the football team has to deal with being good at football. And I think that is where, when you start thinking about collegiate Esports you're like, well there's so many real opportunities there, there's so many integrations between, like, our school's one of the best journalism schools, our school has a great broadcasting school, right? Our school has a great law school and business school, so those are opportunities for the students that study those*

fields to get Esports experience if they want to move into the Esports field beyond [college].”

> - *Oliver, Esports Coach, USA*

Here, Oliver highlights the value of studying Esports or participating in Esports events on campus. He demonstrates that Esports within an educational setting goes beyond playing games, as some may assume (Hughes, 2018), to include a wide variety of skills valuable not only to the Esports market, but that can be transferred to careers in other markets. As such, he demonstrates that value of Esports education beyond what some may immediately assume. He goes on to explain how the professionalisation of Esports through formal education is changing and will change the industry:

“Now if you think about it, most of the people that are currently in the Esports industry are there either because they were good at a video game, or they knew someone who was good at a video game, not because they have significant business acumen, or historical ability of success in the legal field or whatever may be. These are people who knew somebody and got opportunity because that and had success because of that. So if you play this game out for five more years, the guy who's a friend of a good player today is now going to have to go up for a job against a guy who's got two years' experience at [college] and a degree. I think we both know how that's going to work out the vast majority of the time.”

> - *Oliver, Esports Coach, USA*

Here, Oliver highlights how many of those within the industry to date have largely got there through connections or from being part of the community and highlights how the professionalisation of the industry through university means those who have the education and experience are likely to lead the industry in the future. This aligns with DiMaggio & Powell's (1983) concept of normative pressures, which primarily involves the professionalisation of staff within an organisational field. DiMaggio & Powell (ibid.) suggest there are two main routes to professionalisation: through professional networks through which information and practices can be disseminated quickly, or through formal education via universities or other institutions. Therefore, the growing professionalisation of staff within the Esports industry not only suggests increasing institutionalisation as theorised by prominent institutional scholars (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), but also fulfils

the 'professionalisation' criterion of becoming a sport (Guttmann, 1994; Jenny et al., 2017).

It is important to note that, whilst this thesis argues that these developments primarily affected extra-community legitimacy, that does not mean that they have exclusively impacted those outside the community. Those within the community also benefit from the market gaining a broader audience and acceptance. Developments such as visa acceptance and larger events provide more opportunities for those within the community. Intra- and extra-community legitimation processes are intertwined and affect each other, the difference is that intra-community legitimation largely involves and affects the core community, whilst extra-community legitimacy pushes the market to an audience beyond this core community. Some of the developments that progressed intra-community legitimation during stage 2 of the institutionalisation of the Esports market will now be explored.

6.4.2.4. Intra-Community Legitimation During Stage 2 – Progressing Legitimacy through the Integrity of Play

As the Esports market has grown, the facilitation and coordination of major events has been taken on by organisations, rather than by the players themselves. As events have grown, so has the interest and visibility of the market, and thus the community has had to grapple with issues as they arise. As discussed within the research context chapter, one of the commonly cited criteria for a game to become a sport is to standardise rules and regulations and to appoint a regulator (e.g. Jenny et al., 2017; Guttmann, 1994). As such, during the growth of the market, the community has faced a number of problems and potential scandals that they have had to navigate and find solutions to, such as doping, match-fixing, and cheating. The findings suggest that such scandals, which one may expect would hinder the legitimation of the market, have in fact aided the legitimacy of the Esports market. This will now be discussed in more detail.

The issue of doping in Esports came to a head in 2015. Professional Counter Strike player Kory "Semphis" Friesen claimed in an interview that he and his Cloud9 teammates were taking Adderall during an Electronic Sports League (ESL) tournament to try to improve their performance, saying "I don't even care, we were all on Adderall" (Launders, 2015

– the admission is made at 07:50). Although ESL had an anti-doping policy at the time, it did not specify which drugs were permitted. In response to Friesen's claim, the ESL worked with the National Doping Agency of Germany to create a new policy and the World Anti-Doping Agency to work on how to enforce the new rules (Wingfield & Dougherty, 2015; Harrold, 2015) and a month after Friesen's claim, announced that they would start using saliva tests at tournaments to test for prohibited substances, the list of which matched the already-established doping agencies' lists (Dredge, 2015). Match-fixing, when a player or team deliberately achieves a certain outcome in a match for financial gain, has also been a problem within Esports. One of the most famous incidents occurred in 2014, when Korean StarCraft II star Lee "Life" Seung-Hyun was found guilty of deliberately losing two matches, with one of the consequences being that he was banned from South Korean Esports for life (Godfrey, 2018).

As the market has grown, more regulators have been set up to monitor Esports, including the UK's Esports Integrity Coalition (Boyle, 2016), the National Association of Collegiate Esports in the US (Schonbrun, 2017), and the World Esports Association (Evangelista, 2016), all of which were established in 2016. This suggests that Esports are starting to fulfil the sportification criterion of being regulated (e.g. Jenny et al., 2017; Guttman, 1994), and thus are becoming more legitimate. Although the establishment of regulators does not completely stop scandals from taking place – Korean Esports, as discussed above, has been hit by a number of scandals despite being one of the first countries in the world to establish a nationwide regulator back in 2000 (Huhh, 2008) – the increase in regulation is generally seen as a positive by the community. For example, when Thomas, a Counter Strike player, was asked how Esports had changed since he first got involved in 2016, he said:

> *"It's definitely become more professional, which is good. It's also become more regulated which is also good, before there was a lot of like, you know, either like gambling advertisements or stuff that just have like absolutely no restrictions that normal gambling advertisements like on TV would have. And so it's become more, like, regulated and professional."*
>
> - *Thomas, Serious Amateur Counter Strike player, US*

Thomas points out here that the regulation that has come in since his involvement began has brought the rules into closer alignment with other industries, and also links this with a rise of professionalism within the industry. Therefore, scandals such as doping and match-fixing have contributed to intra-community legitimacy by requiring the community to look at ways to regulate play, which is a criterion for a game to become a sport (Guttmann, 1994; Jenny et al., 2017).

Perhaps conversely, however, publicity of scandals can aid the legitimacy of the market not only by essentially fast-tracking the need for regulation, but by further demonstrating Esports' similarity to traditional sports. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) apply their concept of mimetic processes of institutionalisation to a new organisation aligning their practices with those of an already established organisation in order to confer legitimacy onto the new organisation. However, in this case, the illicit practices that take place within Esports also take place within traditional sports, thus demonstrating the similarities between the two. These practices are frowned upon within the community, which was also exemplified in the secondary data set, for example, in this response to the ESL's introduction of anti-doping policies in 2015:

> *"Traditional sports and e-sports have a similar motivation for curbing the use of performance-enhancing drugs: legitimacy. Traditional sports leagues, like Major League Baseball, worry that performance-enhancing drugs can raise doubts about a level playing field. What value is there in sacred home run records, for example, if modern baseball players can get a big boost of strength from a drug? E-sports leagues and advocates, meanwhile, crave acceptance as a mainstream sport. By turning to some of the top anti-doping agencies, the leagues take a step closer to acting like a traditional sports league -- adding to their sellout crowds and million-dollar paydays. "The more e-sports grows, the more it is going to be sanctioned by a governing body, and it was only a matter of time before this was part of it," said Hector Rodriguez, owner of OpTic Gaming, a professional team. "We're becoming an actual sport, so that's why I welcome it. It's an indication of growth.""*
>
> - *Extract from The New York Times (Wingfield & Dougherty, 2015)*

As both the author of this article from The New York Times and the Esports team owner interviewed identify, rather than the scandal of doping in Esports delegitimising the market, by working with anti-doping agencies already established to support traditional sports, the market actually gains legitimacy, as it demonstrates its similarities to traditional sports and aligns with traditional sports' regulations. However, whilst scandals within Esports can demonstrate its similarity to traditional sports, this link is not necessarily made by everyone:

> *"Manuel "Grubby" Schenkhuizen, a world champion gamer, said that match-fixing in StarCraft was probably inevitable. "The mainstream media finds it very hard to treat e-sports in the same way that it does tennis or basketball or golf, but really it is the same," he said. "There are star players, there is big money, there is gambling, there are a few black sheep. It is sad that it happened so soon, but it was going to happen.""*
>
> - *Extract from The Times (Lewis, 2010)*

Here, the interviewee is speaking following a spate of match-fixing scandals in the early Korean StarCraft II leagues. He points out the injustice of those outside the community holding Esports to a different standard than traditional sports. This shows that the similarity of practices between the two markets is not enough to aid the legitimacy of the Esports market on its own.

Scandals required the industry and community to negotiate and decide on what was and was not acceptable behaviour during this stage of the legitimation process, thus progressing intra-community legitimacy. However, ongoing issues of dishonesty had another impact on intra-community legitimation: a reduced trust in online matches, as will now be explored in more detail.

6.4.2.5. Intra-Community Legitimation During Stage 2 – Spatial Preferences in the Fight for Integrity

As a result of cheating, there is a sense in the community that online matches are not as legitimate as offline matches. As Henry, an amateur player and coach, explains:

"Online events are pretty good… [but] there's a really big problem of cheating obviously in online events because you don't have the control over hardware and stuff for people… and there is a good incentive to cheat, because in online events, there's pretty good prize pools, there's events where you can make $10,000 like in one weekend, let's say, by being first place, and you can go even one step further and you can use hardware cheats, which is basically modifying your PC in a way that makes it much harder for anti-cheats which is just software to see it happening, and these kits can cost anywhere from like $2000 to $5000 and much higher on proper ones, but, it pays back with the huge prize pools, and it's really hard to detect, if people use it wisely, if people actually know what we're doing, if, let's say they put it this way, if you give a bad player cheats, it would be extremely obvious, because the entire kind of thinking and the entire movement and mechanics don't connect with things we do, it seems very out of place. If you give a good player 1% assistance, that's going to move them extremely higher up, because this 1% at a higher level, like, that would be a huge difference, so that's definitely a big problem."

- *Henry, Amateur Counter Strike Player and Coach, Latvia/UK*

Henry suggests that it is much easier to cheat in an online match because players participate remotely and can modify their machines to improve performance. There have been some attempts by companies to promote the installation of anti-cheat software on devices, but there are some concerns over this. Henry describes this software as akin to downloading a virus, because "they are installed on the lower level one anti-virus, so it has control over your entire system, it could look anything and send any data, and you wouldn't even know". He explains that this is accepted by players as they trust the companies, but that this trust has been broken:

"There's been a huge scandal, where ESEA, one of the competitive platforms, installed a Bitcoin miner on quite a few of their users, yep, they said it was initiative but so initiative of one of the developers or really one of the new hires who just wanted to make a quick money on the side so, after he was fired like it was fixed but that's damaged the reputation quite a bit and with Valorant there's been a huge kind of untrusting to an attitude because… it's developed pretty much by China because most of Riot's development, developing ability is happening in

China so people are like 'Yeah, I'm not really feel that confident about installing Chinese spy software', in a sense, because we do look at a lot of things… and that's how we ban people retrospectively, so we look a lot of things about you, we look over software you run, we look everything that interacts with your game in any way, in a few cheats they found like, 'Okay, this is how this exploit works, this is how we can see who uses this kind of cheat', and they retrospectively banned all the people who ever been noticed doing that. But for this to, for them to do that, they have to keep data which is linked specifically to you, which yeah, people don't feel that comfortable about".

- *Henry, Amateur Counter Strike Player and Coach, Latvia/UK*

Because of this lack of trust in anti-cheat software, and because, according to Henry, developments in AI are enabling more ways to cheat, Henry warns "people think what if FPS games might not, pretty much might not have online events, an online scene, in 5-10 years because of that, because if anti-cheats lose the battle, then anyone could be cheating on any kind of level or any kind of prize pool and you cannot tell".

William also raised the issue of cheating in online matches, which he says "is pretty much mitigated if you just play in an in-person event", and he therefore argues that, at a certain level of play, demonstrating your ability in an offline match is important and proves that you are legitimately at that level of skill:

"People who are like semi-professional, and within that region, this like, element of like legitimacy is probably more important… when you're playing, say like, you know, an online tournament with like a load of people from the UK, you'll hear the rhetoric like 'Oh do it on LAN' thrown around quite a lot, because it's, it's just, there's always like an element of doubt on whether you'd be able to do it in-person I guess."

- *William, Amateur Counter Strike Player, UK*

However, whilst offline games were generally seen by many of the interviewees as more legitimate than online matches in determining ability, there were no suggestions of wanting to end online play. As Theo explained:

"I think, not having online events is bad for the communities… [despite cheating issues] not running them is much worse, because you then lose that kind of attention on the, you lose the spotlight a bit and keeping the spotlight is really important… I think always can continue with having online tournaments, but you, I will say as well, you need to have LAN tournaments as well, those ones, you can function to a degree with only online, but LAN tournaments are where you get that real commitment, real excitement, a real contribution to the scenes."

- *Theo, Serious Amateur Dota 2 Player/Team & Event Manager, UK*

Theo's point aligns with how many of the interviewees felt about online matches: they are important to the community as they keep people engaged, but offline matches are also important in terms of the legitimacy of play. This is an example of how a phenomenon can impact both intra- and extra-community legitimacy in different ways (Humphreys & Latour, 2013). In the previous section, it was discussed that offline events can progress extra-community legitimacy by making the market more visible and accessible to those outside the Esports community. Here, the same offline events also help progress intra-community legitimacy, but instead of by growing the audience, they progress legitimacy through the integrity of play.

6.4.2.6. Intra-Community Legitimation During Stage 2 – Rejection of an Established Practice

Another example of how those within the community may perceive the legitimacy of a phenomenon differently from those outside the community is with regards to how games are broadcast. In 2016, ESPN began to broadcast Esports matches in the US (Smith, 2021), whilst Sky did similar in the same year in the UK (Sky Sports, 2016). However, matches have usually been broadcast online. Whilst making games available to watch through channels and formats that those outside the community are already familiar with may improve access, and the mere broadcasting of events on TV may lend some legitimacy to the market, it is seen as less important to those within the community:

"You know, as someone who has been involved with gaming on television before, and someone who has been involved with gaming and esports now, which takes place on the internet. You know, you're truly talking about a terrestrial audience

versus a global audience. And I think when you think about it from that regard, we've got fans this weekend watching The International in China, in -- all over Southeast Asia, in Latin America, in Japan, all over Europe, in the United States. And this is something that can be experienced that way by all of these individuals because it's delivered via a global medium, it's delivered via online media. And I think that because of the nature of competitive gaming and esports, they tend to be really long events. They tend to not necessarily take commercial breaks. There is a lot of non-traditional things that go into the production of one of these large events. So, for me personally, I'm not sure that television is the way to go. Where I think that television is important for esports is that television offers the opportunity for it to become accepted in the mainstream."

- *Marcus "djWHEAT" Graham, then Director of Programming at Twitch, in an interview with CNN (News Stream, 2015)*

Here, Graham highlights two points: first, that Esports already had large global audiences before TV networks became interested in broadcasting matches, so the community did not really need events to be televised, but secondly, being broadcast on television would bring it to new audiences. This breaks from prior work and prevailing logic which suggests that a market is more likely to be considered to have successfully legitimised once it has gained acceptance within mainstream media (Deephouse, 1996; Humphreys, 2010).

However, a development that is not seen as particularly helpful to intra-community legitimation in one region could be seen as helpful in another. For example, Esports were first televised in South Korea in 1999 (Jin, 2020). Because streaming was not yet an established practice in Esports – or indeed in many industries, as the technology was in its infancy – television broadcasting did not break with the community's tradition and benefitted both the community and a wider audience by enabling mass spectatorship of Esports events for the first time (ibid.). As such, when analysing the intra- and extra-community legitimation of a market, it is important to note that a particular development could aid both forms of legitimacy, just one form, or each form separately in different regions.

6.4.3. Stage 3: General Validation

In Humphreys' (2010) model, the fourth stage is general validation, which is the third stage in the thesis' adapted model, and means that "the product or practice is clearly defined under one frame" (p.15). Essentially, everyone is broadly in agreement with what the market is and how it is run: it has become institutionalised.

The findings suggest that only South Korea has reached this stage thus far out of the three regions of focus in this chapter – but also arguably of the world. As previously discussed, South Korea were early adopters of Esports, having achieved government support, established a national regulator, and had matches broadcast on television by 2000 (Jin, 2020). It is difficult to pinpoint exactly when South Korea moved from one stage to another – especially as I was unable to find any Korean participants to interview for the research. However, three reasons to support the assertion that the country has reached the general validation stage will be introduced and discussed in detail. These include an accessible infrastructure, broad player recognition, and the normalisation of participation in Esports.

First, South Korea has an infrastructure that makes the Esports market accessible and visible to those inside and outside the community. As discussed previously (and as will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter), PC bangs offer opportunities for anyone to take part in Esports, without requiring participants to pay the cost of expensive gaming equipment. However, the reason these are also a sign of general validation is of how common they are in the country and how normal it is to visit one:

> *"Just after 1 one Friday night, Nam Hwa-Jung, 22, and Kim Myung-Ki, 25, were on a date in Seoul's hip Sinchon neighborhood. At a fourth-floor gaming room above a bar and beneath a restaurant specializing in beef, the couple sat side by side on a love seat by the soda machines, each tapping away at a personal computer. Ms. Nam was trying to master the rhythm of a dance game called Audition, while Mr. Kim was locked in a fierce battle in StarCraft.*
> *"Of course we come to PC bangs, like everyone else," Mr. Kim said, barely looking up. "Here we can play together and with friends. Why would I want to play alone at home?"*

> …
>
> *Ms. Nam glanced up from her screen. "In Korea, going and playing games at the PC bang together is like going to a bar or going to the movies," she said.”*
>
> - *Extract from a New York Times article (Schiesel, 2006)*

The reaction of the couple to the journalist’s questions demonstrates how playing at a PC bang is simply considered to be a typical activity in South Korea, therefore suggesting that it has achieved acceptance and general validation.

Beyond PC bangs, Korea’s infrastructure includes digital stadia which are dedicated to the hosting of Esports matches (Jin, 2020). Whilst it will be argued in the following chapter that hosting Esports matches in stadia built for the purpose of traditional sports matches lends legitimacy to the market, as Esports in Korea is already a more institutionalised industry, this step is not necessarily required. Some matches are held in traditional sporting stadia – such as the League of Legends World Championship in Seoul’s World Cup stadium in 2014 (League of Legends, 2019), but the findings suggest that Esports has the popularity and audience to warrant the funding and building of stadia solely for the purpose of hosting Esports events, demonstrating acceptance in mainstream South Korean culture.

The second finding that supports the suggestion that Esports in South Korea has reached general validation is due to player recognition and lifestyle – likened in 2006 by the Sunday Express to a “David Beckham lifestyle”:

> *“"It is phenomenal in Korea and China where the top players date top models, live in big houses and have vast salaries. They have training camps and take it very seriously. The tournaments are fantastic. When you're in a big auditorium with 10,000 fans screaming, it is like a Las Vegas fight night. There are VIP rooms, champagne, glamorous models, the lot. Geeky, it is not."”*
>
> - *Tim Brown of Via Technologies, quoted in a Sunday Express article (Buckland, 2006)*

Whilst professional players in the US and Western Europe can also now expect high salaries and big audiences, it is unlikely that they would be recognised outside of an event by the general public in the way that South Korean players experience:

> *"Top pro gamers in South Korea don't get much chance to relax. Just ask Lim Yo-Hwan. Mr. Lim, 27, is the nation's most famous gamer, which makes him one of the nation's most famous people.*
>
> ...
>
> *Outside, guards for the apartment complex kept an eye out for overzealous fans. "Without covering myself up in disguise it's really difficult to go out in public," Mr. Lim said. "Because of the Internet penetration and with so many cameras around, I don't have privacy in my personal life. Anything I do will be on camera and will be spread throughout the Internet, and anything I say will be exaggerated and posted on many sites.""*
>
> - *Extract from a New York Times article (Schiesel, 2006)*

The level of recognition of professional players in South Korea when out in public is not something that is yet seen in the US or Western Europe and is another example of how the industry has achieved general validation in the country.

Finally, evidence of the general validation of Esports in South Korean comes from the normalisation of participation of young people in the country, and the high rates of aspiration to pursue Esports as a career. Esports academies have been established to support young people with their training, and Esports is the fifth most popular future career for young people in the country (Sang-Hun, 2021). That a career in Esports is considered viable – albeit incredibly competitive – suggests that general validation has been achieved, as there is a general understanding of what the market is and what such a career entails.

Although legitimacy is difficult to define, it is broadly accepted as occurring when something is appropriate within societal norms (e.g. Suchman, 1995; Suddaby et al., 2017). These findings demonstrate how normalised and accepted Esports has become in South Korea, and it is this normalisation that indicates that the market has fully legitimised in the country.

Although the Esports market in the US and Western Europe has developed hugely over the past decade, the findings suggest that it has not yet reached the general validation stage. In contrast to South Korea, the infrastructure for gamers to meet, practice, and watch matches does not yet exist outside the internet in the way that it does in South Korea. For example, Arlo, a casual Counter Strike player from Belgium, explained the difficulty he had faced in finding an Esports community offline:

> *"I remember I was once looking up, is there like a Belgian league where I could watch it and I didn't find any information, if there are events or something like that, there's like usually no real sign or no real information, like you might see a weird Facebook post from like a few years ago, but that's it, and I feel like that's probably one of the biggest reasons, like, you can't really get into it, because it will be like, unless you're passion, if you're curious, and you Google, and don't see anything, at all online, you're just going to stop looking because nothing popped up."*
>
> *– Arlo, Casual Counter Strike Player, Belgium*

Arlo's struggle to find a local, offline Esports community was an issue faced by most of the interviewees across the world, demonstrating that South Korea is ahead in this aspect.

Furthermore, unlike in South Korea, professional players are unlikely to be recognised on the street in other countries. Professional gamers in South Korea have long been able to achieve celebrity status, as was explained in the New York Times, "Top players, who can draw tens of thousands of fans to tournament finals, are as familiar to South Korean audiences as Derek Jeter and Peyton Manning are to Americans" (Cohen, 2009). This remains the case in the US and Western Europe, demonstrating that they have not reached the point of general validation as South Korea has.

Whilst some young people may aspire to play professionally, parents are unlikely to be aware of the Esports market or know how to support their child to prepare for such a career. For example, the mother of British professional Fortnite player Benjy "Benjyfishy" Fish, did not know that the Esports market existed before her son started to compete in online tournaments:

> *"As a parent, I was always trying to get him off the computer, you know. There's always that battle, you know, he's got to go to school the next day, he's got exams coming up, trying to balance that whole thing between doing schoolwork and other activities as well as playing video games. And myself as a parent didn't realize that there even was an industry out there that he could become involved. It wasn't until he did a competition called Montana Black. And I remembered it was a Sunday night. I was already in bed and he came into me and told me that he'd won $10,000. It was like, "Really? Are you sure?", and he was going, "No, no, no, we've come first", and it was like, "Oh my God, really?" And then it very quickly snowballed. We formed a limited company and we tried to open up a bank account. The answer I got back from them was very much that they were seeing it as gambling as opposed to a competitive sports, and then I had to explain, well, you know, if he was doing something like a tennis player, going to Wimbledon, winning, would you not accept that money into your account?"*
>
> \- *Anne Howard, Benjyfishy's Mum (Not A Game, 2020)*

As Anne explains, not only was she not aware of the market until her son's involvement, but she also had to educate others on what Esports entailed. This demonstrates that the market has not reached the level of general validation in the UK yet, as there is not yet the broader awareness of its existence. Furthermore, in Britain, only 12% of people consider Esports to be a real sport, compared to 81% who do not, and 8% who said they do not know (Pheby, 2024). As such, this thesis concludes that general validation has not yet been achieved outside South Korea.

6.5. Conclusion

In this chapter, existing theory (Humphreys, 2010) that suggests a new market is innovated by a producer before being diffused to a core audience has been challenged, with the finding that this does not apply in the case of the Esports market. Two forms of legitimation processes that occur concurrently have been proposed: intra-community legitimacy, which concerns the core participants of the market, and extra-community legitimacy, which includes those outside of the market's core audience. The legitimation

of Esports market in South Korea, the United States, and Western Europe has been analysed, along with explanations of how and when the Esports market reached each stage of legitimation. The role of intra- and extra-community legitimacy in these regions during each stage has also been explored. In the following chapter, these findings will be expanded upon in order to explore the role of place in the legitimation of the Esports market – how the places used in the Esports market can help or hinder both intra- and extra-community legitimacy.

Chapter 7: Findings Chapter 2 – The Role of Space and Place in the Legitimation of the Esports Market

7.1. Introduction

In the previous chapter, three stages of legitimation as applied to the Esports market were outlined, and the processes intra-community and extra-community legitimation were introduced. In summary, the previous chapter explained what has happened in the process of legitimation of the Esports market, and this chapter will build on this by explaining *how* the spaces and places used in the Esports market have contributed to the legitimation process.

Through this research, three key overarching effects of space and place on the legitimation of the market emerged. The first is that places can help to *build the legitimacy* of the market. This primarily affects intra-community legitimacy and largely takes place in the first stage of the legitimation process. These are the spaces and places which those within the community use to negotiate how they wish the market to be structured and set out what they consider to be legitimate.

The second key effect is that of places *conferring legitimacy.* This primarily affects the extra-community legitimacy, as it involves demonstrating the market to those outside the Esports community. The final key effect is of *constraining legitimacy*. Whilst places can have a positive effect on the legitimation process of a market, they can also have the effect of preventing it from legitimising further. This is particularly noticeable in the Esports market, where the industry is thriving and taken seriously online, but the market's success offline varies depending on where you are in the world.

After establishing these three key effects, the data was analysed to explore key places used in the Esports market. From this, seven roles were proposed which contribute to the key effects of building, conferring and constraining legitimation. These are outlined in the following table. Examples from specific places in the Esports market have been used to demonstrate each role in practice. However, it would be possible for a place to play multiple roles in the legitimation of a market.

Key effect on legitimation	Role of place	Place	Primarily affects intra- or extra- community legitimacy?
Building	Including	PC bangs/internet cafés	Intra
	Democratising	Reddit	Intra
	Testing	Tournaments	Intra
Conferring	Showcasing	Stadia	Extra
	Bolstering	European Football Clubs/ US Universities	Both
Constraining	Pausing	Regulatory area	Extra
	Precluding	Server area	Both

Table 09: The roles of place in legitimation and their effects on the process

In this chapter, each key effect will be outlined. Each role will then be explained in turn and the relevant places analysed using Lefebvre's (1991) spatial triad, as discussed in the literature review. Primary and secondary data will then be used to demonstrate the way in which the places discussed perform this role, and how this results in the relevant key effect. It will also be explained whether it is intra- or extra- community that is primarily affected by this role – or, indeed, if both are affected.

7.2. Effect: Building Legitimacy

First, the research has shown that a place can have the effect of building the legitimacy of a market. The findings suggest that this is particularly evident in the initial stages of a market – stage 1 of the legitimation process discussed in the previous chapter – and primarily affects intra-community legitimacy. Previous theory has explored how institutional actors can use space to come together to discuss how to create or disrupt an institution (e.g. Kellogg, 2009; Cartel et al., 2019; Furnari 2014). However, the focus of this work has been on the institutional work performed by these actors, rather than the attributes of the spaces in which such discussions are held and how these may aid or influence the work. In this section, the places used by the Esports community to build the legitimacy of the market will be explored, and how these places in particular aided or influenced this process will be discussed.

In the context of the Esports market, there are three places in particular which have played a role in this initial stage of legitimation: PC bangs or internet cafés; Reddit forums; and early offline tournaments. On analysing the roles these have played, it is proposed that each in turn has the role of ‘including’, ‘democratising’, and ‘testing’ in legitimation, all of which contribute to the building of legitimacy. Each of these three roles will now be discussed in more detail.

7.2.1. Role: Including

The findings reveal that a place can play an ‘including’ role in the legitimation of a market. This means that the place in question enables people from various backgrounds to take part in the market, such as by introducing them to the market or by providing the resources needed to participate. This is of primary importance at the stage of building the legitimacy of a market as it helps to increase the number of participants, often supporting the creation of a community of participants along the way.

Within the context of the Esports market, the places that are most central to this role of inclusion are PC bangs and internet cafés. The thesis does not include PC bangs in the general term of ‘internet cafés’ because – as discussed in more detail in the Research Context chapter – PC bangs have a special and important role to play in the development of the Esports market.

PC bangs and internet cafés perform this ‘including’ role in two ways: they provide access to the resources required to participate in the industry, and they are a physical manifestation of a largely online phenomenon, which means they can act as offline ambassadors for the industry. This is in contrast to prior work, which has tended to focus on communities coming together online to share resources because they struggle to find their community in the real world, such as cosplayers collaborating and sharing tips online (Seregina & Weijo, 2016) or ‘fatshionistas’ supporting companies who meet their needs (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). In addition, Wright et al’s (2021) work on places of social inclusion focused on how custodians of publicly-funded places (in their case, an emergency department) managed the tensions between inclusion of service users and challenges to inclusion, such as finite resources. In contrast, the findings suggest that PC

bangs and internet cafés play a role in 'including' people by recruiting new members and providing resources necessary for participation, and it is argued that this has played a role in building the legitimation of the market. Before discussing the role that PC bangs and internet cafés play in the legitimation of a market, they will be analysed using Lefebvre's (1991) spatial triad as the lens.

Representations of space/conceived space

Internet cafés and PC bangs are most likely to be located in town or city centres, on a commercial street just like any other shop or café. As such, they are visible and accessible to the general public. However, they are not public spaces as they are privately owned and entry is typically subject to the payment of a fee. They can therefore be classed as territories – bounded places with controlled entry, which can both protect and empower the people and practices within them (Castilhos et al., 2017). As such, they provide a safe place for the community in which they can practice and improve without the risk of criticism from detractors.

Research participants from Asia and Eastern Europe reported that internet cafés used for the purpose of gaming were common, whereas interviewees from Western Europe, America, and Australia said that they were more likely to play at home. For example, Jacob, who grew up in India but now lives in the UK, has experienced different types of access to the Esports market based on the country he is in:

> *"I played competitively at a very amateur level and it was one of those competitions which was held at say a local LAN cafe, and this was when I did not live in the UK, so I played in India when I lived there… I did not watch competitive gaming as a live thing, until I moved here, because I lived in India which has terrible internet, so it was everything on YouTube… I started watching live events when I came here, and it was Twitch and YouTube."*
>
> \- *Jacob, Casual Counter Strike and Fortnite player, UK/India*

Spatial practice/perceived space

A typical PC bang or internet café will have rows of computers that allow for solo play or for friends to sit together. Food and drink are also consumed, with ramen being particularly common in Korean PC bangs (League of Legends, 2016). The availability of

food suggests that it is expected and encouraged that consumers will spend some time in the café.

Representational space/lived space

As these are cafés, whilst they may not have the same layout as normal cafés, they do still have the connotations of a place to meet friends, socialise, and spend time. PC bangs in particular represent the history and legacy of Esports, as they are the location of early tournaments, and many pro-players trained in PC bangs before becoming professionals.

Based on these attributes, three ways in which PC bangs and internet cafés increase inclusion in the Esports market and help to build the market's legitimacy will be outlined.

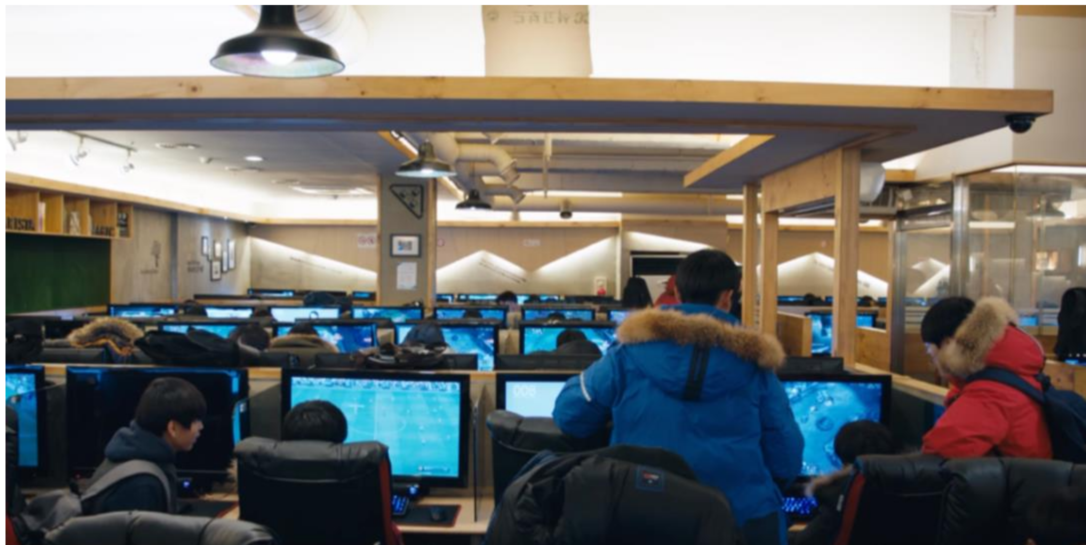


Figure 09: Inside a PC bang in South Korea (League of Legends, 2016)

In the 1980s and 1990s, the South Korean government invested heavily in the country's high-speed internet infrastructure, resulting in it having a higher penetration of high-speed broadband than any other OECD country (OECD, 2001). As a result, online gaming became popular in South Korea before many other countries as it had the bandwidth and speed to be able to cope with online games. In the 1990s, PC bangs – internet cafés primarily used for playing online games – became increasingly popular. In 2001, there were approximately 22,000 PC bangs in South Korea (Watts, 2001). It was in PC bangs that the first video game competitions were held and the first Esports athletes trained (The Gamechangers: Dreams of Blizzcon, 2018).

PC bangs provided both the resources required to train and a place for people to come together to compete. They are in large part responsible for making Esports mainstream in South Korea in the early 2000s, long before competitive video gaming became a popular activity anywhere else in the world (Stuart, 2008). This makes them a very important place in the legitimation of the Esports market, because some of the practices we see in Esports today began in PC bangs, as explained by Caster Nick Plott in a documentary about StarCraft, a game popular in South Korea:

> *"Teams started to form, and rivalries between PC bangs started to form as well. They fed off of each other and eventually turned into the esports that we see here today. Those early PC bang teams really turned into the pro teams, the pro houses, which made all of esports that the world looked up to."*
>
> - *Nick "Tasteless" Plott, StarCraft Caster (The Gamechangers: Dreams of Blizzcon, 2018)*

As Nick describes, the rivalries between PC bangs formed the foundations of the Esports practices we see today, meaning it can be argued that they were vital to building the legitimacy of the Esports market – had these places not become popular, and had competitions not been established between rival PC bangs, it is possible that Esports would not have developed into what it is today. As discussed in more detail in the previous chapter, prior work has tended to focus on how legitimacy is built by an organisation focusing first on its immediate audience and early adopters, before broadening its audience and legitimising its product or service more widely (Suchman, 1995; Humphreys, 2010). The origins of Esports in Korea's PC bangs explain why this thesis argues that this is not the case in Esports. Instead, the practice was initiated and built by the players themselves.

PC bangs and internet cafés also help more people be included by providing access to the necessary resources. Henry moved to the UK from Latvia a few years ago, and he pointed out the difference in access to resources:

> *"There is not that much need here [in the UK] for internet cafes historically because people acquired computers quite early on, people could afford them. In*

Eastern Europe, even in Latvia and Russia, computers were much less affordable at the time… so there's been quite a few internet cafes, and that's helped a lot, because people come there to play, they meet people who play the same game, they kind of make friends, and there's local tournaments".

- *Henry, Amateur Counter Strike player and coach, Latvia & UK*

-

Without players, there can be no Esports market. As Henry points out, not everyone can afford to buy the equipment required to play online video games. Therefore, PC bangs and internet cafés provide an important function as they allow people in such circumstances to still be included in the Esports market.

PC bangs and internet cafés are an offline, physical manifestation of an industry considered to be an online phenomenon. As such, they have an important role to play. Valen explains how her first contact with Esports was via a PC bang that she entered without even intending to play:

"The first time I came into contact with e-sports was because I was the class monitor in the school and the teacher needed me to go to these Internet cafes in front of the school to catch the students who were playing games, and then I went to my mother, 'I'm sorry, I took a peek and found that it seems to have a very attractive feeling'. In fact, I also developed some curiosity and was also attracted by this esports".

- *Valen Zhou, CEO Elixir Gaming, China (Grow uP eSports, 2018).*

Although Esports is an online phenomenon, not everyone will discover the industry via the internet – especially if they do not readily have access. As PC bangs and internet cafés can typically be found alongside other shops in the commercial districts of towns and cities, they are visible and accessible. This enables more people to become involved in Esports by acting as an advert for those not aware of Esports, as in Valen's case above. This was especially important for building legitimacy in the early days of Esports, before the big offline events that happen today.

Figure 10: A PC bang in a row of shops, South Korea (League of Legends, 2016).

As PC bangs and internet cafés are territories because they are not public spaces, they protect the community (Castilho et al., 2017), offering a safe place for those involved in Esports to freely participate. Riot Games interviewed some young people at a PC bang to find out what they liked about being there:

> *"**Korean PC Bang Visitor 3:***
> *If I play LoL at home and yell, I get hit by my mom. "Be quiet!!" and I'd be like, "Sorry, mom!!" and if I get hit like... then I'd go "Ah!"*
> ***Korean PC Bang Visitor 12:***
> *"Why aren't you going to bed?" "Study some more"*
> ***Korean PC Bang Visitor 10:***
> *Ah, so frustrating. Ah! Frustrating. Ah!*
> ***Korean PC Bang Visitor 3:***
> *"I told you to be quiet, be quiet!!""*
>
> - *Three teenage boys who regularly visit a PC Bang in South Korea (League of Legends, 2016)*

PC bangs and internet cafés can be a place of sanctuary for those who feel misunderstood or held back in their training by family and friends outside the industry. Throughout the primary and secondary research, there are many examples of Esports players being told

by their families that they are playing too much. Whilst in some cases these can be classic cases of parents wanting their teenagers to prioritise homework over fun, distracting activities, in some cases, the numerous hours players put into practicing can lead to families going to more extreme lengths. One example of this is from a documentary that explores how gaming impacts people's lives – pro-player Jeronimo's father explains how he tried to fight his son's playing habits:

> *"**Jeronimo's Father:***
> *Later, this starts becoming what we could call almost an obsession. Twelve hours a day, low grades at school, etc. Lots of things happened. We had to, we cut off the internet, threw the router out of the window.*
> ***Jeronimo "HYDR4" Figueroa, Content Creater/Streamer/Pro Gamer, Fortnite, Spain:***
> *He would cut the cable of the modem, or hide the PC power cord. At 12, I spent 9 hours at an internet cafe because I didn't have a router to play."*
>
> - *A pro gamer and his father discuss the teenage years (Not A Game, 2020)*

Jeronimo turned to an internet café because he no longer had the resources or the support to continue gaming at home. This is one example of these places being used by participants to create a community of understanding and a safe place to practice, thus including participants and excluding those outside the community. Hayday et al. (2020) found that Esports communities were safe spaces for their members who felt misunderstood by those not involved in Esports. Whilst they conceptualise community as a space in itself (ibid.) rather than identifying the places in which Esports communities gather, this thesis argues that PC bangs are a physical, offline manifestation of community spaces that provide participants a safe physical place away from those who do not understand their participation in Esports.

While the role of PC bangs and internet cafés in getting people involved in Esports can largely be seen as a positive thing, it is also important to recognise the negative impacts of these places, as a poor reputation could put off potential members of the community or risks delegitimising the market. The only female participant of the research, Maxine, explained how the internet cafés in her country could be places of toxicity:

"Here in the Philippines computer shops have a lot of issues with toxicness and trash talking since, it's very prevalent here in the Philippines like trash talking, be toxic to your enemies and even your own team mates if you aren't doing well so I think it's not too good, if for reputation for someone who doesn't play but it's still popular".

- *Maxine, Casual Valorant player, Philippines*

Here, Maxine is supportive of internet cafés, which she says are common in the Philippines, but then points out that they can put off those outside the Esports market because they can be toxic environments. Thus, whilst internet cafés can be inclusive places by providing access to resources and the community, that inclusion does not necessarily extend to all people. Prior research on toxicity in Esports has tended to focus on toxicity within online spaces (e.g. Adinolf & Türkay, 2018; Ruvalcaba, 2018; Sengün et al., 2019), however some scholars have begun to examine how toxicity occurs in US collegiate Esports programmes and how it could be tackled in these places, given that "colleges' existing diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts, combined with their need to abide by Title IX expectations, meant they would have a pressing interest in crafting diverse esports programs" (Cote et al., 2023, p.1). Whilst universities already have the structures and regulations in place to tackle toxicity, the findings suggest that extending a crackdown on toxicity to PC bangs and internet cafés would be the next logical step, given venue proprietors' power to restrict access to those who misbehave.

Internet cafés and PC bangs have also been accused of fuelling an addiction to gaming. In 2005, a 28-year-old in South Korea died from heart failure after playing for 50 hours straight at a PC Bang (Kennedy, 2006). There have been reports of people dying after long, continuous gaming sessions in internet cafés, such as a 30-year-old Chinese man who died in 2011 after a 3-day session (Parkin, 2015). These negative sides of PC bangs and internet cafés are important to recognise because such stories have been used against the Esports industry. For example, out of the 1,226 UK newspaper and TV news articles collated for this study, 14% included discussion of gaming addiction. Examples of headlines include 'Can Games Kill?' from The Times (Rowan, 2002), 'The PlayStation Priory; Exclusive Inside the Rehab Clinic for Kids Addicted to Computer' from The Mirror (Kennedy, 2006), and 'Playing games on a computer is an addiction…

exactly like drink, drugs and gambling' from the Daily Mirror (O'Connor, 2018). These are mainstream news sources that those outside the Esports community are likely to engage with. As such, the prevalence of such stories may put off potential players, or could cause families of players to become more concerned about or opposed to the player's activities.

To conclude, PC bangs and internet cafés are places that enable a broader range of people to be included in the Esports market. By providing access to the resources required to game competitively – in particular, good PC equipment and high-speed internet connection – those who cannot afford or who do not have access to these at home can still take part in Esports. Internet cafés also provide physical places within the real world for people to see – they invite in those who are curious about Esports and demonstrate to others that this is a thriving market. They are territories that protect the people within them (Castilhos et al., 2017), which is important to the Esports community as they often feel misunderstood by family and friends not involved in Esports (Hayday et la., 2020).

By providing a place for participants to discover and practice Esports, PC bangs and internet cafés play and have played an important role in building legitimation of the Esports market, particularly intra-community legitimation. It is here that the very early Esports community began to establish the rules of competitive video gaming, and where their successors have trained before becoming professional players.

7.2.2. Role: Democratising

The research demonstrates how a place can play a democratising role in the legitimation of a market. This means that the place enables discussion and debate of key topics by various stakeholders and hierarchy is put to one side as everyone can participate. Previous work has examined how institutional actors from different parts of their organisation's hierarchy can come together to discuss institutional change, such as by creating an experimental space in which actors can shed their statuses and typical practices in order to conceptualise new ideas (Cartel et al., 2019), or by using relational spaces, such as a work canteen, to discuss new practices with other colleagues (Kellogg, 2009). However, the findings suggest that the power hierarchy is less prevalent in Esports – players may be reliant on developers to make and support games, but developers are also reliant on

players to play them, meaning power can be more equal amongst the various stakeholders. For example, games such as Heroes of the Storm no longer receive full support from developers, who also cancelled the game's Esports tournaments, based on a declining number of players (Balbo, 2024). Because of this shared power and responsibility, it is important that there is a space for the stakeholders to come together to discuss, debate, and negotiate the legitimacy of practices within the market. This is particularly important in the early stages of a market, when legitimation is being built, because the community needs to establish the legitimate practices that they will carry forward. For example, the Smash Bros Melee community needed to negotiate the practice of turning on or off a certain game setting when they began holding tournaments, and their decision remains in place to this day (EastPointPictures, 2013a). Therefore, these discussions will have more of an effect on the intra-community legitimacy, as few beyond the community will be involved at this stage. The research has shown that much of this work has taken place on Reddit.

Reddit is a social media platform on which anyone can start a forum – a subreddit – about a particular topic. It is an example of a social media site that Boyd (2010) terms a 'networked public' – "While there are limits to how many people can be in one physical space at a time, networked publics support the gathering of much larger groups, synchronously and asynchronously" (ibid., p. 54). When Reddit was launched in 2005, the internet was in the so-called 'Web 2.0' era, which saw "a large-scale shift toward a participatory and collaborative version of the web, where users are able to get involved and create content" (p.985) which empowered and democratised its users (Beer, 2009). As discussed in the previous chapter, the findings suggest that, at this time, Esports in the US and Western Europe was in the first stage of legitimation, and that intra-community legitimacy was dominant, as participants worked together to negotiate the creation and growth of the market. Reddit was a place used for these activities. Many players, commentators, developers, and event organisers in the Esports industry – both then and now - use it to discuss events, share opinions, and make announcements. This coming together of stakeholders in one place means that Reddit plays a democratising role in the legitimation of the Esports market, because everyone can contribute regardless of their role or position, and can choose to be anonymous or open in their identity, meaning contributors can express themselves without fear of retribution if necessary. In a market where the lines between producer and consumer are often blurred, this is particularly

important. First, Reddit will be analysed using Lefebvre's (1991) spatial triad as an analytical lens.

Representations of space/conceived space

Reddit is a social media website that can be accessed from anywhere in the world – with the exceptions of Indonesia, Russia, and China, where it is banned (Croft-Cusworth, 2014; Chong, 2015). Therefore, it can be accessed by almost anyone in the world who has an internet connection – one does not need to be invited. Subreddits are the forums that make up Reddit. Each subreddit is dedicated to a specific topic – in the case of Esports, these are usually certain games or leagues. Each subreddit is moderated by a group of people from the community, who set the rules of the forum (Chandrasekharan et al., 2018). As such, there are boundaries of what can be discussed in the forum – the moderators can choose to delete posts or block someone if they post about something that contravenes the rules of the subreddit. Therefore, whilst Reddit is easily accessed, there are territorial boundaries that can place restrictions on participation. The nature of a subreddit as a territory means that dissenting voices can be removed from the subreddit at the discretion of the moderators. However, should this happen, the person who has been removed can simply create their own subreddit and recruit those who agree. As such, the territorial nature of a subreddit means participants are both protected from dissenters and empowered by creating their own community of those who agree with their view (Castilhos et al., 2017). Subreddits can be made private, meaning they can only be viewed by members, but are often open to be read by anyone. As such, all of these discussions and opinions can be viewed, regardless of whether or not one is a member of the subreddit, making it a place from where a wide variety of opinions can be gathered.

Spatial practice/perceived space

Each subreddit is dedicated to a certain topic of discussion. Anyone can create a subreddit, meaning anything can be discussed, no matter how niche the topic may be. A subreddit has moderators – members of the community who voluntarily monitor the content of posts and contributors' behaviour. Each subreddit typically has an FAQ section – written by the moderators – that typically set out the rules of the group and the accepted norms of behaviour (Burnett & Bonnici, 2003). Posts and comments can be upvoted or downvoted by members of the community – this is a common way to express approval or

disagreement with the post. Reddit is often used by organisations involved in Esports – such as developers and league organisers – to communicate with the Esports community.

Representational space/lived space

Reddit is known as a place where a variety of topics can be discussed, including sensitive topics such as health and mental health (Record et al., 2018; Sit et al., 2024). It is also known as a site for community activism, such as when moderators have severely restricted access to their subreddits (or "gone dark") in protests against the company of Reddit itself (Matias, 2016; Gerken 2023). However, it can also be a site that enables and supports toxic behaviours (Massanari, 2017). As such, Reddit symbolises a place that has something for everyone, is largely free from strict rules, but that can attract toxic participants as a result.

Reddit's role in democratising how the Esports market has legitimised has been important for an industry so online and global in scale, but like any democracy, it is not perfect. Using the spatial attributes outlined above, three ways in which Reddit has supported the democratisation of the legitimation process of Esports will now be outlined.

Reddit is primarily used by gamers as a place to come together as a community and discuss topics related to their game of choice. Because Reddit is divided into subreddits, it is easy to search for and find specific communities, as well as create your own community. Oscar, who is less involved in the Esports scene than he used to be because he is now a parent, explained that Reddit is one of the ways in which he keeps in touch with his community:

> *"I follow the Reddit forums, and so I'm also, you could call that involvement in the Starcraft community as such, where, on Reddit, we discuss things like strategy, things like, you know, we discuss the events in the Esports scene, so who is beating who, and stuff like that."*
>
> \- *Oscar, Casual StarCraft player, Denmark*

Out of those who took part in this research, Oscar has had one of the longest involvements in Esports, having played since the early 2000s. He is less involved now due to his parental responsibilities, but he still spends hours a week watching games and

contributing to discussions on Reddit. It is something he takes seriously. There is no real offline Esports community in his town, so Reddit is how he keeps in touch with his community, and he spends hours a week doing so. This is something echoed by Isaac:

> *"When I'm on Reddit where you found, where I found you, I feel like, when I have followed Esports, the discussions have become more and more sports-like. Like there is some like, I would, like academic value to them somehow where people are doing proper analysis of games… it doesn't differ too much from like the way football fans talk about it anymore."*
>
> - *Isaac, Casual Counter Strike Player, Denmark*

Isaac explains how discussions have become more 'sports-like' over time. This shows how Reddit has helped to build legitimacy of the Esports market, by providing a place for contributors to post and discuss analysis, which is especially important for those who do not have a community in their offline lives to discuss such matters with, in the way that, say, football fans might discuss a match at the pub.

In the Esports market, the line between producer and consumer is often blurred, with some performing both roles at once. For example, a streamer playing a game live on their Twitch channel is at once both consuming the game and producing content for others. Furthermore, Esports cannot exist without players. Developers may produce the games, but without players and competitors, the games are just games, they are not Esports. Previous consumer culture literature has termed this 'prosumption', which "involves the interrelationship of production and consumption where it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to clearly and unequivocally distinguish one from the other" (Ritzer, 2015). Andrews and Ritzer (2018) argue that participants of the Esports market perform different forms of prosumption: professional players consume the games they are playing, but are primarily producers as they play matches, which produces events for others to watch. Meanwhile, they argue that amateur players perform more of a consumer role, as they primarily consume the games and watch the matches, but are producers in the sense that they generate capital and, in the case of streamers, produce online content. However, Andrews and Ritzer (2018) have based their analysis on the more recent Esports market in the Western world – the era that this thesis labels as being stage 2. In this stage, whilst participants are prosumers, these differences in roles across the prosumption continuum

(Ritzer, 2015) are arguably more distinct than they were in stage 1. In stage 1, when Reddit was a place used for democratising the negotiations required to establish the market in the western world, leagues were only beginning to be established, developers were typically not involved in the Esports scene, and there were few professional players – and even those that did exist were professional in the sense that they may have earnt some small prize money in early, community-led tournaments. As such, at this stage, even those within the community who were not professional players had more of a producer role than Andrews and Ritzer (2018) ascribe, because they were involved in creating the market itself. Reddit, therefore, was a place where all of these stakeholders were able to come together to discuss and negotiate the practices of the nascent market, democratising the process at a time when the roles across the prosumption spectrum (Ritzer, 2015) were more distinct.

Reddit is the place where this whole spectrum of stakeholders could come together, producer and consumer alike. This helped to democratise the building of legitimacy in the market, because it provided a place for all stakeholders to discuss and debate how leagues and events should run. As Noah explained:

> *"Reddit becomes the newspaper or, sort of the newspaper where you can also give your opinion and start a discussion about everything. And I start to notice that community managers of different companies start paying more attention."*
>
> - *Noah, Casual Overwatch Player, Guatemala*

While a number of interviewees cited Reddit as a place where they discuss events and game strategies, Noah's use of the word 'newspaper' indicates how seriously these forums are taken. In fact, gaming organisations have been known to use Reddit to make big announcements. Examples include:

> *"In a post on Reddit, ESL's head of communications Anna Rozwandowicz said that the body will match the list of prohibited substances compiled by German agency Nationale Anti-Doping Agentur (Nada) and the World Anti-Doping Agency (Wada)."*
>
> - *ESL announce their new anti-doping policy on Reddit (Dredge, 2015)*

“In a statement on Reddit, Epic Games said: ‘We know you want to get back out to the Playground LTM. We've got multiple teams working to get this mode back into your hands so you can let your imaginations run wild.’”

- *Fortnite’s developers take to Reddit to explain a server outage (Cuthbertson, 2018)*

That companies use Reddit for key communications to players demonstrates the importance of the site as a place for communication between the stakeholders. However, a place of communication means that people can also communicate when they are unhappy. For example, when Smash Bros. Melee was due to be played competitively at a major event in 2013:

“July 9th, 3 days before the start of Evo2k13, Nintendo of America orders Evolution to not stream Melee. News of Nintendo’s action spreads. In a matter of hours, it becomes the number 1 story on Reddit.

[screenshots of lots of angry comments]

With intense backlash, Nintendo backs down. After just 5 hours.”

- *On-screen caption description of fans expressing anger towards Nintendo (EastPointPictures, 2013c)*

Reddit is known for incidents of community activism, such as the recent ‘Reddit blackout’ in protest of the site’s API changes (Gerken, 2023). In the example above, Reddit was the site of protest against Nintendo because it was the place where the community congregated and where news spread.

Figure 11: Examples of the anger directed towards Nintendo on Reddit (EastPointPictures, 2013c).

Whilst this is an example of a community overturning a perceived injustice, there can be a darker side to the community's use of Reddit. If a player does not perform well in a match, the majority of spectators will be watching from home via a livestream – but that does not mean they cannot make their voices heard. An example of this was seen in a BBC documentary that followed London-based team Excel competing in the European League of Legends championships:

> *"**Kieran Holmes-Darby, Excel Esports Founder***
> *For a pro-player, Reddit is a horrible place to be. Some of the comments are just nasty.*
>
> ***Son "Mickey" Young-Min, Mid-laner***
> *It was really hard, that I thought about resigning as a pro player."*
> - *Example of how professional teams can be affected by Reddit ('Keeping the Dream Alive', 2021).*

Whilst this toxicity may be hurtful to the players, this is also part of the legitimation process. Unfortunately, toxicity from fans is also a common part of traditional sports – there are numerous examples in football alone, such as Everton fans throwing their shirts at players after they lost a match (Lambourne, 2022). Thus, by having some fans who are

so passionate about games that they turn to anger, Esports is actually more akin to many traditional sports than if hate did not happen. Furthermore, Huston et al. (2023a) argue that toxicity in Esports can provide a way of socialising new players into the community, such as by making them undertake a type of test or hazing ritual, which experienced players feel they also had to go through when they started.

While toxicity is an issue within Esports as a whole – as detailed further in the Research Context chapter – as a subreddit is a territory, it can play a protective role (Castilhos et al., 2017) and so can provide safe places for the communities who are the most common victims of this toxicity. There are numerous subreddits for girl gamers, LGBTQ+ gamers, and gamers of colour, including places for members of these communities who play specific games. Therefore, Reddit provides a place for these minorities who are often overlooked in Esports to come together as a community too. However, toxicity in Esports is not just directed towards minorities, but also toward new players. Huston et al. (2023a) studied how consumers are socialised within a toxic consumption community and, using Esports as their research context, suggested that there are four practices employed in the socialisation of new players, all but one of which can be found on Reddit. 'Learning' is the practice of new players interacting with the broader community to help them better understand the game – many such posts can be found on Reddit, as can subreddits dedicated to supporting new players. Similarly, 'scaffolding' involves the production of resources to help new players understand the game – such resources can either be hosted on Reddit, or Reddit can be used as the place to signpost towards them. 'Indoctrinating' is the practice of experienced players directing toxic behaviour towards new players who are not performing well. This is done on the basis that toxicity is an accepted part of gaming and is an experience they also had to go through when they were learning the game. Huston et al. (2023a) found an example of this on Reddit, when a user posted about treating a new player kindly:

> *"'Like spoiling a child. The best way is to f*ck him up a new a**hole. If he leaves dota he doesn't deserve it here. If he sticks around, he will find ways to not let it happen to him again and he will strive to improve'. reddit user (Dota)"*
>
> - *Huston et al., 2023a, p. 1468 (censoring in original)*

This demonstrates that toxicity is a legitimised practice within Esports – it has come to be expected and is perpetuated through generations of players. However, as described by Huston et al. (2023a), positive practices also occur. It also aligns with the assertion that Reddit plays a role of democratising within the process of legitimation – different approaches and attitudes towards new players are allowed to exist within the same place.

To conclude, Reddit is a place accessible to most people in the world, but provides dedicated places to discuss specific topics, with the ability to prevent people from posting if they go off-topic. This provides a safe space for the community to discuss their interests. It is used by a wide range of stakeholders within the industry, allowing discussion and debate between those in various roles, regardless of rank. As such, this thesis proposes that Reddit has a democratising role in the building of legitimacy, as few are left out of the conversation. However, whilst previous work has focused on how various stakeholders can come together in a space to discuss one particular institutional change (e.g. Cartel et al., 2019; Kellogg, 2009), the institutional work performed via Reddit is an ongoing discussion that contributes to intra-community legitimacy – Reddit has long been used as a place for Esports discussion and continues to be today. Nevertheless, there are issues. Toxicity on Reddit can make some feel excluded, but subreddits for specific communities can also provide safe spaces for minorities and new players to come together.

Given Esports is largely an online phenomenon, Reddit is akin to a town square, a place where everyone can come together to discuss and debate their views and protest decisions made by developers and event organisers. It therefore plays an important role in building the legitimacy of the Esports market – especially in the early stages of a game or league – as various stakeholders tussle over the path to be taken.

7.2.3. Role: Testing

A place can play the role of 'testing', which means that it can be used for trialling and finessing practices before norms are established. This is something that, in hindsight, happened in many of the early offline Esports tournaments. Such tournaments could be considered 'field-configuring events', defined by Lampel and Meyer (2008) as time-limited events in which people gather in-person to "generate social and reputational resources that can be deployed elsewhere and for other purposes" (p. 1027). They are

events at which various stakeholders can congregate to meet, exchange information, and shape new or existing technologies or markets (ibid.). Furthermore, prior work has suggested that institutional actors can create bounded, experimental spaces in which institutional norms and roles are shed in order to discuss change (Cartel et al., 2019). The findings suggest that early Esports tournaments in particular could be considered experimental spaces in order to create, rather than change, institutions, and could also be considered field-configuring events. Parallels with existing literature are drawn, whilst elucidating the role such events played in the Esports market and how the use of place in these cases contributed to the legitimacy of the market. In particular, two tournaments in the early US Esports scene will be examined, because we have documentary evidence and first-hand accounts of them: Smash Bros. Melee's TG5 and TG6, and the League of Legend's second World Championship Playoffs in 2012.

Super Smash Bros. Melee (from herein referred to as 'Melee') is a fighting game developed by Nintendo that was released in the USA in 2001. It was not designed to become an Esport (EastPointPictures, 2013a), but in 2002, the first major US tournament was held. This was the first of the Tournament Go (TG) series, arranged by player Matt Deezie and held in his house in California. There were six TGs held between 2002-2004, which are credited with setting precedents for following Melee tournaments. As player Jv3x3, who participated, explains:

> *"Tournament Go was one of the very first tournament series. It was really the first kind of "national" tournament series we ever had in our community. It was Matt Deezie, who would just throw tournaments in his house, and, y'know, it'd be some setups on the middle floor, some setups on the bottom floor, and everyone would sleep there. Like, this guy would just house anyone that would fly in from anywhere, drive in from anywhere. He would give you a place to stay, they'd set up tents outside in his backyard and It was like, I dunno, like, "Woodstock of Gaming" or something where, like, all these people would show up and he'd be super friendly, open his house to them, and house them for a weekend, just to throw Smash tournaments."*
>
> - *Jv3x3, Melee player (EastPointPictures, 2013a)*

Melee was played on the Nintendo GameCube, and so did not have internet capabilities. Furthermore, YouTube had not yet been launched in the TG series era. Therefore, these Melee tournaments provide an interesting case study of the pre-streaming and pre-online gaming era of Esports in the West. On the other hand, League of Legends was one of the first games that its developers engineered with Esports in mind. Riot Games – the developers and owners of League of Legends – held the first World Championship Final at Dreamhack Jönköping in 2011. Therefore, the second World Championships the following year were the first time that the event was held in and of itself. It was held in an event space in the courtyard between the Staples Center (now the Crypto.com Arena) and Nokia Center (now the Peacock Theater) in Los Angeles. Twitch was first launched in 2011, so streaming was also beginning to grow at the same time. These findings extend prior work on field-configuring events (e.g. Lampel & Meyer, 2008; Lange et al., 2014) as places in which actors can gather in order to negotiate and test new practices. In the case of Melee tournaments, the findings demonstrate that a field-configuring event can be an informal gathering as opposed to the formal events that have provided the contexts for prior research (e.g. Hardy & Maguire, 2010; Oliver & Montgomery, 2008; Graves & Lauer, 2020). In the case of early League of Legends tournaments, this finding demonstrates that field-configuring events can be used as spaces in which producers can test out new practices whilst gaining immediate feedback from consumers.

Figure 12: Part of the audience at the League of Legends World Championships Quarterfinals, 2012

Before discussing the analysis of these events that brought me to the conclusion that they played the role of testing within the legitimation process, the places used will be analysed through Lefebvre's (1991) spatial triad.

Representations of space/conceived space

TG5 and TG6 were held in a private residence – they had to be invited into the home to participate. This means that the location was territorial in nature (Castilhos et al., 2017), protecting and empowering those present to negotiate the proceedings of the tournament. On the other hand, the Staples/Nokia Centers' courtyard used to host the League of Legends World Championships Semi-Finals in 2012 is a place that was purpose-built for holding events. This elevated it above many previous early tournaments, which were often held in hotels (Wingfield, 2014). Nevertheless, it was also the first time that this event had been held as its own event – the previous year, the tournament had been held within the Dreamhack event in Jönköping – and the practices being tested within the matches were new to the Western Esports market.

Spatial practice/perceived space

In TG5 and TG6, multiple consoles were set up in various rooms in the house. Spectators would gather around the TV sets to watch the matches. This was a very informal set up, more akin to playing at home with siblings than a sporting tournament.

At the League of Legends event, practices were being tested as they are being put in place for the first time. Many practices are borrowed from traditional sports, such as having a prominent analyst desk and live commentary. Such practices later became the norm in Esports events.

Representational space/lived space

TG5 and TG6 being hosted in someone's home gives connotations of community, as people were invited in to someone's private space to take part in a shared activity. This means it was also a territory as access was controlled, meaning players were protected (Castilhos et al., 2017) and able to meet as a community for the first few tournaments without scrutiny or dissent from those outside the community.

The event space in which the 2012 League of Legends World Championships semi-finals was held is a courtyard between two arenas: the then-Staples Center – the home of the LA Lakers and LA Clippers basketball teams and the LA Kings hockey teams – and the then-Nokia Center – which is where the Emmy and American Music Awards are held and, at the time, hosted the People's Choice Awards. These two places therefore have strong connections with both sport and entertainment, and the place between them represents the coming together of the two – just as Esports is both sport and entertainment.

Both Melee and League of Legends tournaments will now be analysed to explain how they demonstrate the role of testing in the building of the legitimation of Esports.

As Melee was not intended by Nintendo to be played competitively, there were no rules for serious competitive play. Furthermore, the fact it could not be played on the internet meant that different rules were established in different regions. Before national tournaments became better attended, groups formed in local areas so members could get together to play. One of the players who pioneered this practice explains:

> *"Crews weren't really, like, heavily established at the time. We were kinda one of the forerunners, actually, 'cause we wanted to show that, as a group, we had the most skill compared to any other group of players... that's pretty much what started, like, the whole "crew rivalry" aspect, probably, was the fact that we had this other group of players... and they were, y'know, they also had, like, a name. They were very, like, established."*
>
> \- *Chillin, Melee player (EastPointPictures, 2013a)*

Local crews may have had rivalries between each other – as Chillin describes above – but the scope of these changed when playing on a national level, as one of Chillin's rivals explains:

> *"TG5, when it first happened, everyone was pretty hyped since the best East Coast players at the time, best Midwest players at the time, all going to one place [the West Coast], and Matt Deezie's hosting it. "Who's better: Ken or Azen? Ken or Azen?" This tournament was gonna resolve that all."*
>
> \- *Ken, Melee player (EastPointPictures, 2013b)*

As Ken describes, there was a desire to see whether he (considered the best player on the West coast) could beat Azen (considered the best on the East coast). As the game could not be played online, it was only possible to find out through an in-person tournament. But it was not just individual rivalries that people wanted to see played out – Ken and Azen became proxies for an East Coast versus West Coast rivalry. This is where the rules established locally became a topic of debate. Chillin (an East Coast player) and Ken (West Coast) recall:

> *"**Chillin***
> *The funny thing about this tournament was items were on, which we were not fans of.*
> ***Ken***
> *Yeah, there was constant debate about the West Coast versus the East Coast, about items and no items and stuff.*
> …
> ***Chillin***
> *Hearing the stories about the tournament, items definitely had an effect on the outcome. So we wanted a tournament on our turf with our rules where we still had Ken and Isai represented and prove to them that, basically, on our home turf with our rules, you can't beat us.*
> ***Ken***
> *They wanted, y'know, West Coast players to come over there. Obviously, the only two West Coast players they wanted to come over there was me and Isai."*
>
> - *The East v West Coast debate over items (EastPointPictures, 2013b)*

'Items' are essentially weapons or power-ups that fall from the sky during the game. A player can pick up this item and use it against their opponent. The players from the East Coast did not turn on the ability to have items when they were competing; the West Coast players did. When Azen – the East Coast's best player – got knocked out of TG5 (held on the West Coast and following West Coast rules), the East Coast players did not consider the tournament to be a legitimate and fair fight. TG organiser Matt Deezie lost a number of games in TG5 because of items. As a result, despite having previously been supportive of items as a West Coast player, items were turned off in TG6.

This example demonstrates how early offline tournaments provide a place to test the rules and regulations of a tournament, much like in the case of a field-configuring event, which brings actors together to help evolve a field (Lampel & Meyer, 2008). Furthermore, such events could be considered experimental spaces (Cartel et al., 2019), as institutional actors came together in a bounded space to experiment with rules and practices to build a shared understanding. Until players from across the nation came together to play against each other, it was not possible to put these rules to the test, as they could not play online. The result is an agreement and standardisation of the rules, which helps to build legitimacy.

The later League of Legends World Championships in 2012 did not have the same issue as the developer, Riot Games, decided on and dictated the rules and regulations – standardisation of this aspect was already set. However, this early tournament did set a standard on the production side of future Esports events. Those in charge of the event explain:

> *"**Dustin Beck, VP Esports, Riot Games***
> *Everything was going great, amazing team fight, the game was about to be decided.*
> ***Brandon "Ryze" Beck, Riot Games Co-Founder***
> *And all of a sudden, the internet goes out.*
> ***Jatt, Shoutcaster***
> *You get this little blurb on your screen, "Attempting to reconnect." That's bad.*
> ***Dustin Beck, VP Esports, Riot Games***
> *Just saw "Attempting to reconnect" and teams lagged out, players lagged out and everyone's kind of up in arms and like, "What the heck just happened there?" Normally, like if there is a pause or a lag issue, we can kind of fix it at the time and our guys are just like nodding their heads like "I don't think we're gonna get this back.""*
>
> \- *League of Legends Origins (2019)*

In the middle of a key quarter-final match, the internet failed. Despite repeated attempts to restart the match, the internet continued to fail mid-game.

> ***“Brandon "Ryze" Beck, Riot Games Co-Founder***
> *Imagine you're in any pro sporting game and you have to just start over after you're sweating and you're out there for 30 minutes that's what happened.*
>
> ***Snoopeh, Former League of Legends Pro Player***
> *A typical League of Legends game should go on for about maybe 35 minutes to 45 minutes, an hour at most. We played this one game in the group stages for seven hours… And we're sitting on stage saying, "Riot, is this game going to happen?"*
>
> ***Jatt, Shoutcaster***
> *Where's the competitive integrity, where is all this other stuff? These teams were playing, what are you going to, what are you going to do about it?”*
>
> \- *League of Legends Origins (2019)*

Riot Games decided to end the event and were able to appease the in-person audience by giving them ticket refunds and free merchandise, but this error required them to make changes for future events. They built an offline server so that they did not have to rely on the internet – this is now standard practice in professional Esports tournaments.

To conclude, these findings extend prior work on experimental spaces (Cartel et al., 2019) to demonstrate how a space can be used to test out new practices – in this case, early offline tournaments provided places in which the community could debate the rules and regulations, and where mistakes could be made. It can also be argued that these events were field-configuring (Lampel & Meyer, 2008), and were an opportunity to conventionalise practices (McInerney, 2008). These examples show precedent-setting incidents that have standardised how tournaments are regulated and operated, thus building the legitimacy of the Esports market. Prior work has been extended by using Lefebvre’s (1991) spatial triad to examine the spatial elements of the places used in these examples and how they specifically contributed to the role of testing.

7.2.4. Conclusion

In summary, it is proposed that places can play three roles – including, democratising, and testing – in the process of building the legitimacy of a market. In the case of the Esports market, PC bangs and internet cafés perform the role of including participants, Reddit performs a role in democratising the process of building legitimacy between stakeholders, and early offline tournaments perform the role of testing new rules, regulations, and practices that can be standardised for future events.

These roles largely affect the intra-community legitimation. Building the legitimacy of a market is most likely to take place in the early stages of the legitimation process, at which point it is largely the participants of the market that are involved. The three roles played by the places discussed thus far have been examples of this – community members and key stakeholders grappling to define and shape their industry. The next section will examine how the market can be made more legitimate to those outside the Esports market.

7.3. Effect: Conferring Legitimacy

The findings reveal that a place can have the effect of conferring legitimacy onto a market. This corresponds with DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) mimetic processes of institutionalisation, in which they argue that organisations can institutionalise by adopting practices used by those that have already institutionalised. Furthermore, one way of increasing the legitimacy of a product, service, or market is to help a consumer better understand its category. Consumers often categorise organisations to help them make sense of them, and so they can more easily compare products and competitors (Zuckerman, 1999; Durand & Paolella, 2013). Categories do not have to be based on the products an organisation sells, but can be based on the understanding of the cultural context (Glynn & Navis, 2013). Many of the interviewees expressed that their friends and families outside the Esports community were unaware of what Esports was or why people participated – as further discussed in the Research Context chapter with the ongoing debate over whether or not Esports can be considered a sport. By using the spaces and spatial practices of already legitimate activities, those outside the community can better categorise Esports by linking it to activities with which they are already familiar, thus increasing the market's legitimacy. It is suggested that this primarily affects extra-

community legitimacy and largely takes place in stage 2 of the legitimation process – once those inside the community have decided amongst themselves how they want the market to work, the next step is to prove to those outside the industry that it is legitimate.

In the Esports market, there are two key places which perform this role of conferring legitimacy: the stadia in which major offline events are held, and institutions such as football clubs and universities that create Esports teams. Stadia play the role of showcasing Esports to the extra-community, whilst football clubs and universities are bolstering the market. Both of these places will now be analysed in turn to demonstrate how this conclusion has been reached.

7.3.1. Role: Showcasing

A place can play the role of showcasing a market. This means that it is used to demonstrate and display the market, particularly to those unfamiliar with it. In the Esports market, stadia are a good example of this role. Although stadia purpose-built for Esports have existed in South Korea since the mid-2000s, this is not yet commonplace in Western countries. Instead, major offline events tend to be held in stadia that have been built to host traditional sporting events. For example, the 2017 League of Legends World Championship Finals were held at Seoul World Cup Stadium, which had been built for the city's hosting of the FIFA World Cup, and the 2017 edition of the event was head at the 'Bird's Nest' Stadium in Beijing, which had been built to host the Olympic Games.

Figure 13: Players competing at the 2014 League of Legends World Championship Finals (League of Legends Origins, 2019).

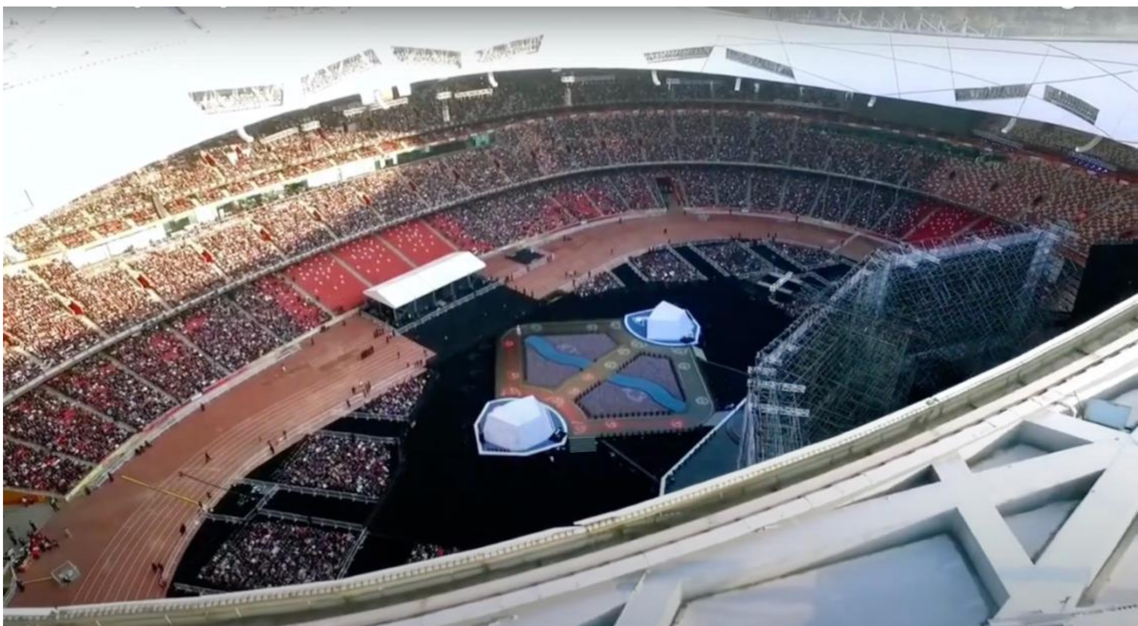


Figure 14: Aerial view of the Bird's Nest stadium when it played host to the 2017 LCS Final (League of Legends Origins, 2019)

By holding Esports events in stadia built to host traditional sports, the thesis argues that these places are showcasing the industry, which has the effect of conferring legitimacy onto the Esports market. First, stadia will be analysed using Lefebvre's (1991) spatial triad.

Representations of space/conceived space

Stadia are large event spaces typically located in towns and cities with good road and public transport connections to facilitate the movement of audiences. They typically hold tens of thousands of spectators at a time. Seating is arranged such that all audience members are facing towards where the action is held.

Spatial practice/perceived space

Esports events perform very similar practices to traditional sporting events that would normally be held in the same stadium. For example, they use analyst desks and commentators, use similar broadcast production techniques to help audiences both within the stadium and at home get a closer look at the action, and often have big spectacles such as half-time shows.

Representational space/lived space

Stadia are typically built for the purpose of hosting big sporting events. As such, they are often associated with and symbolise elite levels of sporting competition. These symbols can be conferred onto Esports events that take place in stadia.

Based on these spatial elements, this thesis argues that the practices and symbols of stadia confer the legitimacy of traditional sports onto Esports, thus increasing extra-community legitimacy. This will now be discussed in more detail.

Stadia are very visible places within a town or city – when an audience is heading towards a match, the surrounding streets are often filled with traffic, both of foot and vehicle (Edensor & Millington, 2010). As such, any event is very visible to the local people. When it comes to Esports, it is not just the locals who notice, but also the media, who often report on such events in the form of explaining the phenomenon to the reader, such as in this example from The Sun newspaper:

> *"A WHOPPING 25,000 people crammed into a German football stadium last week to see the game streamed live on giant screens.*
> *But they were not there for the World Cup. They were cheering on eSport - one of the world's fastest-growing sports.*

More than 71million people worldwide watch competitive gaming while the International 4 event in Seattle next month offers a prize pool of £10million."

- *Nightingale, 2014*

This demonstrates how the size and visibility of these events held in stadia attract attention from those outside the Esports community, showcasing the industry's popularity. BBC journalist Joe Tidy made a link between the venue that held both the Fortnite World Cup and the US Tennis Open:

"[The Fortnite World Cup] was a real coming of age moment I think for a lot of people who don't play games, they didn't really know what eSports was. And then suddenly you've got this massive event, the biggest prize purse in eSports history. It's also being held in a stadium that people know for the US Open Tennis so, suddenly it brings all this interest into eSports and lots of people are starting to take it seriously."

- *Joe Tidy, Cyber Security Journalist, BBC News (Not A Game, 2020)*

There are many spatial practices performed at an Esports event held in a stadium that are near-identical to those performed at a traditional sporting event in the same venue. For the audience, the process of queuing to enter, finding their seats, and purchasing food, drink and merchandise resemble those at a traditional sporting event, such as football (Edensor & Millington, 2010). For the event organisers, while the sport may be different, the kind of show they are putting on is very similar. The person in charge of broadcasting League of Legends' early Esports tournaments explained:

"I was the guy that had the broadcast experience, and I'd worked at NBC and had worked on sports before Esports. There were a lot of aspects of broadcast sports that we were able to bring into this new frontier, where there were these young people who are so passionate about playing this game it was like opening up a new world for them, that added some of that drama of live TV."

- *Ariel Horn, Global Head of Esports Content, Riot Games (League of Legends Origins, 2019)*

In constructing their championships, Riot Games purposely borrowed broadcast techniques already used in traditional sports because these had already proven that they could bring drama and entertainment to the game. One way in which this is done is through the use of cameras.

Figure 15: A player enters the arena, flanked by cameras ('Esports', 2018).

In the image above, a player is followed by cameras as they walk to their position, much like how a wrestler would be introduced before a wrestling match. This brings the audience closer to the players, raising the stakes.

Figure 16: Technical director mixes the show in the gallery of a League of Legends Championship game (League of Legends Origins, 2019)

Cameras catch various angles of the action during play. Many of these are similar to the angles used in traditional sports, such as wide shots of the teams and audience reactions. Some additional shots used for Esports include close ups of the players' faces – not possible in traditional sports in which the players are constantly on the move during play – and footage of the game itself. Thus, whilst Esports broadcasting techniques have been borrowed from traditional sports, practices unique to Esports have also been used to further enhance the experience. These practices are important to those watching in the stadium, so they can see the action close up, but they are also used to stream to people watching from home, in the same way that traditional sports might be broadcast on television. This is something that those creating the Esports broadcasts were aware of:

> *"We had to grow our talent pool, our on-air personality pool, before we could even host an analyst desk, and that's something we wanted to do from the get go, because we're big football fans and we know that it's not just about watching the game, it's about watching the analysis."*
>
> - *Whalen Rozelle, Director of Esports, Riot Games (League of Legends Origins, 2019)*

Using hosts and an analyst desk – both common practices in traditional sporting events – are now commonplace in Esports. Shoutcasters provide commentary from the stadium in the same way a commentator would in a football game. As Whalen Rozelle says above, this was based on existing sporting event practices to elevate the experience from simply watching a game to getting into the detailed analysis.

Esports teams playing in stadia also conduct similar pre-match practices to those in traditional sports. For example, Team Excel's psychologist would conduct breathing and wellness exercises with the team before a match to help them calm their nerves and focus their attention.

Figure 17: Team Excel are guided through a pre-match breathing exercise ('The Champion's Mind', 2021)

Post-match practices are also similar, especially at a Final. There are post-match interviews, a big trophy for the winner, and plenty of spectacle, such as in the image on the following page at the end of the Fortnite World Cup held in the Arthur Ashe Stadium in New York – more famously known as the home of the US Tennis Open.

The mimicking of these traditional sporting event practices aids the development of extra-community legitimacy in particular, because it helps people better understand Esports. If someone is unfamiliar with the industry, but they see part of an Esports match held at a stadium, they connect the practices with those they are already familiar with – they are able to categorise Esports as akin to 'sports', and thus can better understand it (Durand & Paolella, 2013). Therefore, the legitimacy of the traditional sporting event is conferred onto the Esports event to some extent.

Previous consumer culture research has explored the how marketplace rituals shape the consumption experience. The process described above of entering a stadium, spectating a game, and participating in the spectacle is an example of a marketplace ritual. Hill et al. (2022) identified a four-stage process of football fans entering a stadium and examined how these rituals helped to create the atmosphere within the stadium. Whilst such an atmosphere is also important within Esports (*"If you haven't been to an offline event, you*

just, you miss out on everything… it's like asking people 'Would you rather watch football on TV, or would you rather be in the stadium?'. The atmosphere is so important to how you relate to the game", Theo, a Dota 2 player, explained), Hill et al., (2022) also found that too many stimuli such as lights and pyrotechnics can be seen as an attempt to artificially create an exciting atmosphere. If this is a view shared by Esports spectators, it is not one that event organisers are aware of, as spectacle continues to play a big role in Esports events – especially cup finals, as the picture below demonstrates.

Figure 18: Kyle "Bugha" Giersdorf wins the Fortnite World Cup at the Arthur Ashe Stadium, New York (Not A Game, 2020)

However, whilst such spectacle and ritual showcases Esports to those outside the community, those within the community do not necessarily believe large events are of vital importance to the market.

> *"One of the ways Esports is sold to people who don't play games... is by showing them the stadiums packed with people and the confetti and the light show and the music, and you show them that, and they'll go, 'Oh, I know that, that's sports!'"*
>
> *– Oscar, Casual StarCraft Player, Denmark*

Above, an interviewee, Oscar, seems a little dismissive of these big stadia events, describing them as "one of the ways Esports is sold to people who don't play games". A number of the participants in this study cited such events as a way to demonstrate both

what Esports is and its popularity to those outside the industry, but not everyone believed they were of vital importance. Those who had yet to attend such an event often expressed a desire to, so they could have the experience and meet like-minded people, but many acknowledged they lived too far away from a venue where one would be held. However, most participants put heavy importance streaming – be that of matches being held offline or online – to maintain their participation in Esports. For example:

> *"If it's not streamed I don't think it's important at all. If you can't watch it anywhere in the world I don't think it's going to work properly, but if you have an offline event and you stream it, I think it's good."*
>
> - *James, Casual Valorant player/Former Board Director of local Esports organisation, Denmark*

As James demonstrates, streams give audiences access to matches, and like James, many participants reported that the streams and broadcasts of the events were the main way they kept in touch with matches in their preferred games, and big events were often seen as a nice if not vital part of their participation in the market.

Nevertheless, while it is argued that the role that stadia play in showcasing Esports is particularly important in the development of extra-community legitimacy, interviewees with participants indicated that offline matches are seen as more legitimate than online matches by those within the community. As one of the interviewees, Teddy, explains:

> *"Now in Counter Strike, the Covid era, they call it the online era, and there were a lot of different teams were on top in that era than before, which like, people makes them think like there's no stress of stage fright, there's no stage fright for example in play, there's way less pressure when you're playing online in front of your computer than on the stage with people shouting and yelling and you hear the casters and there's a big stage, it's totally different, and I think that's, offline events are just so much more important than online events because of that fact, because that's the real test of like, this is, like can you handle the stress, can a pro handle the stress, can they perform while they're under this massive stress?"*
>
> - *Teddy, Amateur Valorant and Counter Strike player, Belgium*

This is an example of how the same place, event, or practice can affect intra- and extra-community legitimacy differently – those within the community already understand Esports and consider it to be legitimate, and so such events do not help with the categorisation process that those outside the community need to go through to better understand the market. Nevertheless, they consider offline events to aid the legitimacy of the market as they are opportunities for players to prove their skills.

To conclude, Esports events held in stadia play the role of showcasing the industry, which primarily affects extra-community legitimacy. It allows those outside the community to better understand the market through categorisation, but those within the community already understand the market, and so may view a gain in legitimacy in a different way – such as by seeing offline events as more difficult to compete in than online events. The size, visibility, and location of a stadium makes it obvious when an event is happening, and when those outside the community – including the mainstream media – see or hear that a video game competition can fill a large stadium, it demonstrates to them how popular the industry is. For those outside the community, the practices of these events – including broadcast techniques, game analysis, and pre- and post-show rituals – will be very familiar to them from cultural association with traditional sporting events. As such, these events offer a familiar route into Esports, but also by mimicking practices developed in traditional sports, the market can be better understood and categorised accordingly, and thus the legitimacy of existing sport is conferred onto Esports.

7.3.2. Role: Bolstering

A place can play the role of bolstering a market, which means that the existing legitimacy of a place is used to support the new market.

In Western countries, few Esports teams are tied to a local area as is seen in traditional sports. Whilst there are some teams that claim a locality in their title, they rarely have players or deep ties to the area – for example, 'London' Royal Ravens, a Call of Duty Esports team, recently moved to North Carolina and became the Carolina Royal Ravens (Rogers & McLaren, 2023). However, there are some cases where football teams and universities have an Esports team or teams, which existing fans can support. It is argued that these institutions have a bolstering effect – by using their existing legitimacy to

support Esports teams, legitimacy is conferred onto the Esports market. This affects both intra- and extra-community legitimacy. Those outside the community can be introduced to Esports and better understand the market by categorising it within the sports or entertainment field (Durand & Paolella, 2013). Meanwhile, those already in the community might be able to find a local team to support or train with.

For the purposes of this analysis, the focus will be on European football teams and US universities. This is because universities in the US take a very different approach to their sporting teams than we do in the UK – as will be discussed further shortly – which has important ramifications for Esports teams. First, these institutions will be analysed using Lefebvre's (1991) spatial triad.

Representations of space/conceived space

European football clubs are typically housed in stadia situated within the community they represent. As such, they have a physical presence within the local community. Similarly, US Universities typically have large campuses with facilities used for traditional sporting events, to which the local community is invited to attend. As such, these places provide a local, offline entry point to a market that exists on a global scale online (Castilhos et al., 2017).

Spatial practice/perceived space

European Football clubs tend to have supporters that are tribal, with home and away fans seated in separate parts of the stadium during matches. Supporters of a small club are more likely to be locals, whereas large clubs can have fans from all over the world. At US Universities, it is common for locals to support their college's traditional sporting teams – especially in American football, as players can go on to be professionals.

Representational space/lived space

European football clubs typically maintain connections with their local roots even if they become globally famous, due to their location within the towns that established them. They become a symbol of local identity (Gómez-Bantel, 2016). As football is the national sport in many European countries, they also hold a large cultural significance. Sport is taken seriously at US universities – many players receive athletic scholarships, which can

be seen as a route to university for those who would not otherwise be able to afford it. Thus college sports symbolise high-level competition and aspiration.

Based on these analyses, how each institution plays the role of bolstering Esports will be analysed, with reference to the resulting effect that legitimacy is conferred onto the market.

European football teams have increasingly supported Esports in recent years in two ways: by recruiting players for their own Esports teams, and by backing EA Sport FC (formerly known as FIFA) Esports leagues. These findings suggest that these clubs therefore play a role in bolstering the Esports industry, which has the effect of conferring legitimacy onto the market. This primarily affects extra-community legitimacy, as it promotes Esports to those outside the industry and further aids their understanding of the market.

A number of European football clubs – including Manchester City, Paris Saint-Germain, and AS Roma – have recruited players to their own Esports teams over the last decade. One of the first UK players to be recruited was David Blytheway, who signed a deal with German club Wolfsburg in 2016 (Quinn, 2016). The teams created by football clubs are not just in footballing Esports – games including Call of Duty, League of Legends, and Rocket League are also represented (Hattenhouse, 2017). When a popular football team signs a new player, it is typical for the media to pick up on the story. The same is true when said player will not be playing traditional football for the club – in fact, the story can become big enough to not be resigned to the sport section, such as this article from the Sunday Telegraph, which appeared on page 10:

> *"As the latest signings of an elite European football team, it might seem unsurprising that three young players have been put up in bespoke surroundings where their every need is catered for so they can focus solely on their training. But this trio will never set foot on a football pitch, don football boots or even kick a ball for their team, Italian giants AS Roma. Instead they will represent the club via the football video game FIFA 19".*
>
> \- *Wright, 2018*

The slight incredulity in the tone of such articles and the need to explain to those unfamiliar with Esports brings more attention to the story. If it were not a football club signing an Esports player, it would not receive this level of media attention, especially in the context of British sport. Therefore, by creating their own Esports teams, football clubs are helping to increase extra-community legitimacy by bringing it to the attention of those outside the industry.

Football clubs also use their existing infrastructure to support Esports. Isaac, a casual Counter Strike player from Denmark, reported that many local football clubs have set up their own Counter Strike teams because the game is popular in the country. Therefore, leagues can be created based on existing league structures. This confers legitimacy onto the Counter Strike leagues, as they then have a formal structure that is already familiar to those outside the industry.

FIFA Esports – now played on the game EA Sports FC since the franchise no longer uses the FIFA license – has a number of official tournaments, including the ePremier League. However, instead of football clubs recruiting and signing their players, the competition is open to all UK residents over 16. Players pick who they wish to represent from 20 Premier League clubs who support the event. By using a very similar name to the traditional league, news outlets have been able to report on the Esports league with a twist, for example:

> *"As we turn the spotlight now onto England's Premier League, though, perhaps not as you know it. The league is combining with Esports and all that entails. So we can tell you, it's not their feet that do the talking. In this case, it's their fingers. They're the players in the inaugural ePremier League grand final, now on Thursday. All 20 Premier League clubs were actually represented by a gamer in a competitive FIFA tournament."*
>
> - *CNN Newsroom (2019)*

Even though the clubs are not recruiting the players themselves, by supporting the ePremier League and allowing players to represent the club, they are helping to develop the extra-community legitimacy of Esports – those outside the community are able to

support their team in a way they could not if each player did not have an existing institution to represent.

A similar phenomenon is taking place in the US. College sports are big in the US, with the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA, who run the college leagues) generating £1.15 billion in 2021 (Associated Press, 2022). They are particularly popular in towns and cities that do not have their own professional teams, and are known for training future sporting stars – especially in American Football and Basketball (Lilly, 2012; Zimbalist, 2023). Therefore, college sports are taken seriously. In recent years, some colleges have started to recruit Esports teams, but they are held to the same standards as college athletes recruited to traditional sporting programmes:

> *"Academics are the number one priority here. You don't make the grades, you don't play. It's just as simple as that. You think of a sports programme. You have physical training, and you have study halls. Why don't you have that as part of the esport programme? It's a varsity programme. So yeah, we expect you to get good grades and we expect you to be active."*
>
> - *Chad "HistoryTeacher" Smeltz, Director of Esports, Harrisburg University (A Rising Storm, 2020)*

Chad Smeltz was brought in to build the Esports programme at Harrisburg University. Prior to that, he was a League of Legends coach in California. His decision to make the programme similar to other sports in terms of training and expectations of their students confers legitimacy of existing programmes onto the new Esports programme. This helps develop extra-community legitimacy, as when those outside the community hear that Esports student athletes also train and study hard, and that some receive scholarships because of the playing ability, they see that this is something that is taken seriously. However, this also aids intra-community legitimacy, as it both demonstrates to those in the community that institutions are starting to understand and support the industry, and also provides a clearer route into a potential Esports career.

One of the people interviewed for this research was an Overwatch coach at a top athletic college in the US. He explained how local people often view college teams:

"Our collegiate Esports is the same as like your soccer clubs. You know, they're all, a school is regionally bound. So everyone in that town loves that school and that school's brand and what that school brings to the town. So yes, it's associated to the college, but it's almost liked the city identified club for lack of a better term."

- *Oliver, Overwatch Coach, USA*

The local ties that the community has to their local college team can help develop extra-community legitimacy. First, by advertising that there are Esports matches that the local community can support their team in, they are being exposed to Esports for possibly the first time. Second, by investing in a team and their training, the college is demonstrating their support for the activity, and thus legitimacy gained from successes in traditional sports is conferred onto Esports.

7.3.3. Conclusion

To summarise, the findings demonstrate that a place can confer legitimacy from an already-institutionalised market onto an emerging one. In the case of Esports, legitimacy is conferred from traditional sports. The places involved in this conferral of legitimacy are stadia – which play the role of showcasing Esports by using borrowed spatial practices and symbols from the traditional sports that usually use them – and institutions including European football teams and US universities, which use their existing infrastructure and clout to bolster the Esports market. This helps those unfamiliar with Esports to better categorise the market, thus making sense of it and viewing it with greater legitimacy (Durand & Paolella, 2013; Zuckerman, 1999).

As a result, extra-community legitimacy is primarily affected, as people outside the industry can be introduced to Esports through the places and institutions they are already familiar with and respect. By showcasing and bolstering Esports, these places demonstrate to those outside the community that the market is both popular and taken seriously.

7.4. Effect: Constraining Legitimacy

Most prior institutional research that has applied space and place theory has focused on how space and place can be used to change or disrupt an institution, with the space or place often used as site that allows freedom from the constraints of institutional norms, roles, and practices (e.g. Cartel et al., 2019; Kellogg, 2009). However, the final key effect of a place on the legitimacy of a market that this research has found is that of constraining. The findings demonstrate that whilst places can aid legitimacy, they can also have a negative effect. This can happen at any stage of the legitimation process and can affect both intra- and extra-community legitimacy.

Within the Esports market, the findings reveal that there are two places that have a constraining effect on the market. The first is the regulatory area. This thesis defines a regulatory area as a region with specific boundaries in which certain regulations apply – in most cases, this would mean a country, but in some cases can mean a state within a country or an area where regulations are set by a local government. It is suggested that regulatory areas can play a role in pausing the legitimacy of the Esports market, which can affect both the intra- and extra-community legitimacy.

The second place is a server area. This is a region with boundaries that are less rigid. Whilst we think of the internet as being a virtual space, the physical location of servers (the big computers that make up the internet) is very important in gaming. The closer a gamer is to the server, the less lag or delay they will experience when they play – this is particularly important in high-level competition. If a server cannot be accessed at all, then the game cannot be played. It is therefore argued that server areas play a role of precluding people from Esports, thus constraining the market's legitimacy. Each of these roles will now be discussed in further detail.

7.4.1. Role: Pausing

A place can play to role of pausing the legitimacy of a market. This does not mean that the market's legitimation process is stopped or reduced, but simply that the process does not progress and stagnates temporarily.

For the purposes of this thesis, regulatory areas are defined as defined, bounded places in which regulations are set by a government or legislature. These are often countries, but the distinction has been made because the findings suggest that, in some cases, states or regions within a country could be their own regulatory area. As regulatory areas have clear boundaries, they are therefore territories, which can have a constraining role on a market because of enforced regulations and norms (Castilhos et al., 2017). Esports is considered an online global phenomenon, yet one's physical location within the world can restrict access to the market. Furthermore, the progress of the process of legitimation within a country can be heavily affected by the regulations set by the government, as not having the support of authorities can affect regulatory legitimacy (Scott, 2014). This affects both intra- and extra-legitimacy. Whilst those within the community are likely to have access to the market online, their ability to participate and develop their skills can be limited if there are not many opportunities to practice with others or to get support from being part of a team. Meanwhile, if the growth of the market is constrained in the country, those outside the community are less likely to hear about it, let alone take it seriously.

Therefore, it is argued that regulatory areas can have a constraining effect on the legitimation of the Esports market. Because the internet enables access to the online Esports market, it is rarely the case that the market cannot even start to develop in a country (a place cut off from the internet, such as North Korea, may be a rare exception). However, that findings suggest that if the offline market is unable to sufficiently grow because of regulatory factors, the overall legitimation process is essentially paused. Before the ways in which this can happen are discussed, regulatory areas will first be analysed through the lens of Lefebvre's (1991) spatial triad.

Representations of space/conceived space

Regulatory areas are physical locations within the real world, thus restricted by their location within the world. Features or constraints of a location can influence what takes place within it (Massey, 1994; Pred, 1983). Regulatory areas typically have boundaries that cannot be crossed without permission, such as a visa, making them territories (Castilhos et al., 2017).

Spatial practice/perceived space

Regulatory areas have laws, regulations, and norms which must or should be followed as deviation could result in legal issues or social exclusion. This also means that if a practice is not considered popular within the area, one may be less likely to hear about it. For example, Esports is very popular in South Korea so many people know about it, but if the opposite were true, one would be less likely to be exposed to the market organically.

Representational space/lived space

When a government invests in a cultural practice, it is often an indication that it supports it, and it can gain regulatory legitimacy (Scott, 2014). Conversely, if a government does not provide support, it can indicate to the general population that it is not worthy of their support either. Furthermore, government support can also come with funding and regulatory support, both of which can help the market grow.

There are few examples of governments doing anything that explicitly bans or restricts access to Esports – South Korea used to have 'Cinderella laws' that banned children from playing overnight, and China has very strict rules on gaming and working with foreign companies, which means games such as Overwatch and StarCraft are no longer available in the country. If a country were to pass rules restricting Esports, the market may be delegitimised in that area.

Most countries do not yet fully support Esports in the way they do traditional sports, and it is argued that, whilst this does not delegitimise the market in a way restrictions on the market likely would, the lack of support essentially constrains any further development in the market's legitimation. This is in line with DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) concept of the regulatory pillar of institutionalisation. They argue that when regulations are brought in to incentivise a market or to make access easier, said market is essentially being sanctioned by those in power, thus increasing its legitimacy. The idea that governments and regulatory bodies can affect the legitimation of a market, practice, or organisation is not new. For example, Humphreys (2010) points out that gaining approval from government authorities is an important part of the local diffusion stage of legitimation, as it helps assure people that an industry is being held to account. She argues that the regulatory pillar becomes less important in the legitimacy process over time as an industry becomes more generally accepted by the public. Koch & Ulver (2022)

explored how the plant-based milk industry had legitimised their product in competition against dairy milk, and how the plant-based milk industry placed themselves in conflict with governmental authorities because of their support for the dairy milk industry, in forms such as financial support for farmers and school milk programmes.

In parallel with this prior work, the findings show that governments do have a role in the legitimation process of the Esports industry. However, the findings relate more to the spatial legitimation of an industry. The role of governments in the case of Esports comes in at the point at which the market tries to establish itself offline. The Esports market is already legitimate online, in the globalised virtual world where governments have little control over what becomes an established, legitimate market. However, when the community begins to try to establish the Esports market offline, the extent to which this is possible and the speed with which this can be done relies in part on a government's willingness to support the market. In the case of South Korea, where the government supported the Esports market from its early days, the role of the government in the legitimation process was more akin to this prior work. However, today, now that the market's legitimacy has been established online, we are much further along in the legitimation process, and therefore governments play this different role.

Furthermore, prior literature has tended to focus on how governments have actively played a role in the legitimation process, either by supporting the market or by actively resisting it or supporting a competing market instead (e.g. Koch & Ulver, 2022; Huff et al., 2021). These findings reveal that governments can also pause legitimacy through passive inaction which is not necessarily intentional.

One way in which governments have previously contributed to the pausing of legitimacy for the Esports market in their regulatory area is through the denial of visas for Esports athletes. Theo explained one key example:

> *"It needs to be recognised as a sport in many countries which, if you're not aware, Dota 2 was no longer hosted in Sweden this year, the TI tournament, because Sweden didn't recognise Esports as an official sport, so therefore visas for the competitors weren't guaranteed, and they can't host a tournament where*

professional teams who are meant to be there have to risk getting a visa, they can't afford this, so they had to move country."

- *Theo, Serious Amateur Dota 2 Player/Team & Event Manager, UK*

As Theo points out above, as Esports is a global phenomenon, players come from all over the world. However, if they cannot enter a country because of visa issues, this restricts where major offline competitions can be held. As outlined in the previous section, these major events can increase extra-community legitimacy, so if they cannot be held in a country, the legitimacy in that regulatory area is unlikely to grow further; it will be paused. Some countries have started to change their rules – such as the US, which started to accept Esports athletes under the same visa scheme used for traditional sports athletes in 2013 (Wingfield, 2014).

Another way in which legitimacy can be paused by a regulatory area is the economic situation. Joshua, an interviewee who lives in Tunisia, was first introduced to Esports by a cousin who lives in Germany. He is surprised at the growth of Esports considering his country's socio-economic situation:

"It's amazing how, it's not very, it's not growing very fast, but it's grown in like an amazing pace, you know, because of, my country is like, not a very good country, economically and socially, so it amazes me how such like a small thing like, it's not very popular amongst the like adults and like, I don't know, like, politicians, you know, but it's actually, I think this year, we had our first actual legitimate like, institute, that, like, it makes like Esports legal and, you know, actually like players are getting paid for the first time in my country's history, I don't know what they call it in English, but there like, it's an institute, I don't know, it's legitimate, you know, like the government knows about it and everything, so this is the first year that it had the first season, it's very amazing."

- *Joshua, Serious Amateur Valorant/Overwatch player, Tunisia*

Although Joshua points out that legitimacy is growing in part because of the recognition from the government in line with DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) regulatory pillar of institutionalisation (despite also pointing out that politicians do not necessarily like it), he

feels that even when his generation are older, they won't be able to afford to participate, but will likely watch:

> *"I don't think like a lot of my generation when they are adults, they will be playing it, because of the, like, situation in my country, I don't think if they can afford a lot of the, like, the hard, the high-end PCs and stuff to play, so they end up watching."*
>
> - *Joshua, Serious Amateur Valorant/Overwatch player, Tunisia*

This therefore suggests that support from the government helps develop the legitimacy of the Esports market, even when the socio-economic situation of the country restricts active participation to those who can afford it. Interestingly, Joshua also says that there are an increasing number of internet cafés in Tunisia which allow more people to be included in Esports – as discussed in the first section of this chapter. Even when players can afford to participate, a regulatory area's socio-economic situation can affect its ability to hold tournaments. Lucas, an Operations & Project Manager from Turkey, explains:

> *"We have like regional leagues in Turkey, but they're like one or two years' time span, they like, do one year, then break, then another year, because of the economical situation in Turkey, it's not so great, I can say that".*
>
> - *Lucas, Operations & Project Manager, various games, Turkey*

Consistency is considered important to building a legitimate league, as the creators of League of Legends' Championship series explain:

> ***"Whalen Rozelle, Director of Esports, Riot Games:***
> *As a player I had watched League of Legends Esports since season one of competitions at Dreamhack. And at the time, my impression of League of Legends tournaments, honestly, is that they were very unreliable. This is just not worthy of a fan's time. We knew at that point, we wanted to create a formal league.*
> ***Dustin Beck, VP Esports, Riot Games****:*
> *We built out what we thought the LCS could be. We knew it needed a consistent schedule of events, a weekly regular season with a playoffs, with a world final event."*
>
> - *League of Legends Origins, 2019*

Having an inconsistent league affects both intra- and extra-community legitimacy – it is difficult for those outside the community to maintain interest if fixtures are inconsistent, and those inside the community can end up leaving for other countries – Turkish interviewee Lucas said "[Turkish] players generally look to Europe and Europe-based tournaments, also Europe-based organisations as well".

As it is difficult to analyse a lack of data caused by regulatory areas not supporting a market, case studies of countries that have supported Esports will be used to further elucidate the constraints on the market caused by a lack of regulatory support. South Korea, as discussed throughout this thesis, is considered to be the country in which the market has most advanced and become mainstream. Instead, the analysis will focus on a country that is currently fast progressing in making Esports widely legitimate: Denmark. Oscar, a Danish StarCraft player of over ten years, explained the journey that his country has been on:

> *"If you go back ten years, we did have the discussion in Denmark, is Esports a sport, or a game? and this was a very, very important discussion because we subsidise everything through the state, everything. And, and so, definitions really matter when it's taxpayer money on the line, and back then the arguments were so stupid, it was like, 'Well if you don't break a sweat, it's not a sport' [LAUGHS] I've seen you play golf!"*
>
> \- *Oscar, Casual StarCraft player, Denmark*

As discussed in the Research Context chapter, many have long debated whether or not Esports can be considered a sport. Whilst this thesis does not seek to answer that question, Oscar's point highlights the importance of categorisation in regulatory terms. Following the discussion Oscar talks about, Esports were classified as a sport in Denmark – partly spurred on by the success of Danish Counter Strike team Astralis. This official designation of Esports as a sport has had wide-ranging benefits to the legitimacy of the industry in the country. As Isaac explains:

> *"In Denmark it's becoming more and more serious for each passing year. We have, do you know about the efterskole in Denmark? It's like after you graduate your middle school… there is like a gap year kind of thing you can take before*

you go to the high school, where you go to something called efterskole or after school, and those are usually like, there they focus on music or arts or on sports and stuff like that, and in recent years a lot of these efterskole have started having Esports programmes… for each passing year in Denmark you can see like it's getting more and more exposed and like, politicians and the regular sports fans and the members of the sporting communities in Denmark started to regard the Esports as being, yeah, a real thing, like, of course it's, that's a strange way of putting it but they take it as a proper, they add some value to the method as well… in these programmes they also teach the kids to exercise properly and stuff like that so it's not only about computer games anymore it's like, beyond that, also like mental health and physical health and stuff."

- *Isaac, Casual Counter Strike Player, Denmark*

Isaac explains how, now that Esports is considered a sport in regulatory terms, it is starting to be taken more seriously in Denmark, with similar training programmes and inclusion in the curriculum, as well as awareness beyond the Esports community. This regulatory support has not only helped improve the funding and infrastructure of Esports in the country, but will have also helped those outside the community categorise the market in their own minds (Zuckerman, 1999) as discussed in more depth in the previous section. This has clear benefits to the extra-community legitimacy, but also helps intra-community legitimacy, as it provides further local opportunities to those within the community.

This demonstrates that regulatory areas can have a positive effect on the legitimacy of a market. However, the findings show that the lack of understanding and support seen from most governments means that, currently, regulatory areas are more likely to have a constraining effect by pausing the growth of the market from an online phenomenon to an offline one. However, even in areas that are supporting Esports, there can still be teething troubles:

"There's still a lot of ideas and debate on how to do the infrastructure between smaller teams and that because there's no, you have Esport Denmark that's trying to make a model for it but not everyone agrees to it so they want to make

their own between the clubs and they're still finding about how it's going to be. They're working on it."

- *James, Casual Valorant Player and Former Local Esports Organisation Board Director, Denmark*

This demonstrates that even when a government does lend regulatory support to the market, there is still work to be done to progress its legitimacy – regulatory support is no quick fix. This is to be expected, given there is no clear definition or metric to measure the point at which something can be considered 'legitimate' (Suchman, 1995), and the ongoing debate and negotiation within the Esports community itself demonstrates that legitimacy is an ongoing process.

To conclude, a regulatory area can constrain the legitimation process of the Esports market by pausing the progress from online to offline participation. By not passing supportive regulation – such as treating Esports athletes similarly to traditional athletes – they risk preventing major events taking place in their country and restrict further regulatory legitimacy (Scott, 2014). When a government does recognise its support of Esports, there can still be issues with the progress of legitimation if the economic support is lacking. In those countries that are increasingly supporting Esports, extra-community legitimation is growing.

7.4.2. Role: Precluding

A place can play the role of precluding a market. This means that the people within the place are preventing from fully participating in the market, thus resulting in the legitimation process of the market being constrained in that place.

Esports are a global phenomenon, played by people all over the world – as evidenced by the participants of this research coming from almost every continent. However, whilst the market is largely based online, physical location is still important. All online games are hosted on a server – a physical computer that is located somewhere in the real world. Most games will have multiple player 'regions' – this essentially means that they have servers across the globe, and players join the server closest to them. Prior work – largely in the computer science field – has explored how the locations of servers can cause

problems for gamers in terms of latency issues (Chen et al., 2011), which can particularly be an issue in games where large numbers of players play at the same time, such as MMORPGS (Lee et al., 2005; Fritch et al., 2005). The effects of such problems and others caused by inadequate access to servers on the legitimation process has yet to be explored. Server regions are essential to online gaming, therefore if one cannot be easily joined, it has the role of precluding a player from the market, which constrains the extent to which the game can become legitimate in the region. Before discussing how this impacts players, server regions will first be analysed using Lefebvre's (1991) spatial triad.

Representations of space/conceived space

Server regions are difficult to define and consistently pinpoint, as there are no clear boundaries at which connection is no longer possible. Additionally, the more players try to connect to a server, the more difficult it is to ensure gameplay quality is not affected (Lee et al., 2005), regardless of the distance between the server and the player. As such, although server areas are intangible and abstract, they have real consequences for those trying to connect to a server.

Spatial practice/perceived space

Joining a server is a simple first step to playing a game – most players will simply pick the region most applicable to them and will not dwell any further. In reality, joining a server is a complex set of computer processes that essentially involves players connecting their devices to the internet, which is also connected to a physical server where the game takes place (Abdelkhalek et al., 2003).

Representational space/lived space

Although in most cases, joining a server is a case of joining the nearest server in order to better access the game, some more hardcore gamers may consider certain server regions to be better than others. For example, a server region that includes South Korea is often considered to be more difficult to play in as the country is home to some of the world's best players.

It is rare that servers will be placed across the world immediately once a game is released. This means that anyone outside the server regions that have been set up either have slower connections to the game or cannot connect at all. Ethan gave a good example of this:

"I guess historically it's always been that, Australia has always been one of the last countries to receive a server to play the game, or to play League of Legends and, I think that just sets us back and maybe, the attention's so different, I mean, sorry not to mention but, exposure towards players, it's not really that high in Australia compared to Korea and China, so, I guess the interest levels, and just, because of the interest levels being low, there's like low competition here, compared to, you know, China and Korea."

- *Ethan, Casual League of Legends player, Australia*

Ethan feels that there are "probably five players that have made it internationally" and puts this down at least in part to the fact that Australia tends to be the last region to get a game server. As a result, players from other server regions have an advantage as they have more time to master the game, and interest in the game is lower. This affects intra-community legitimacy, as there are fewer opportunities for Australian players to become professionals, but also affects extra-community legitimacy as overall interest in the game is lower. Ethan told me that good players often leave for North America where there are more opportunities – this will have an impact on the legitimacy of the market in Australia, as their top talent leaves the region.

In addition to the location of a server, the support provided by the owners of a game is also important to the server region. Edward explained how the variety in support can affect participation:

"India obviously is a very populous country and one smart move that I think Riot has made is trying to bring that audience in, which is something that I don't think there was any support, you know, I mean, at least, to my knowledge, I don't think there was any support from the developers from the get go and such, because Rainbow Six Siege, even to this day, doesn't have like an Indian-specific server, we play on the South East Asian servers, and there were community tournaments but there was nothing that would actually give us some chance to represent us on a global level but, this thing I think can really lead to, you know, for the developers first of all, I think it would just lead to a higher number of people who are tuning in to whatever it is that they're trying to show, so, and number two is like, it's great

on a global level as well because you have a greater number of teams and a more number of talent that's just like pooling in."

- *Edward, Amateur Valorant/Rainbow Six Siege player, India*

Edward contrasts the support that Riot Games has given to the region in his current game, Valorant, to the lack of support his region received from the players of his previous game, Rainbow Six Siege. He suggests that the support benefits both the developers and the players – the developers will get more people playing if they support the region, while the community in the region can better improve, meaning they will more likely be able to compete on a global stage. Without strong support from the developer or a server dedicated to a certain region, intra-community legitimacy is particularly affected as it is more difficult for players in the region to develop their skill to the highest levels.

To conclude, a server region is difficult to define, but those who do not have strong connections to a server which receives good support from the developer have fewer opportunities to compete at a global level. As such, server regions – or being outside of one – can preclude people from participating in the Esports market, which has the effect of constraining the legitimation of the industry in that area as it is not easily accessible.

7.4.3. Conclusion

In summary, a place can have a positive effect on the legitimation of a market, but it can also restrict this process. In the context of the Esports market, the findings show that two places have a particularly constraining effect. Regulatory areas can pause the progress of legitimation if they do not support Esports – either in terms of regulation or finance. This is further demonstrated by the growing legitimacy of Esports in countries where governments have lent their support. Server regions can also constrain legitimacy by precluding those who do not have sufficient access to servers, or whose access to servers is delayed. Now that these findings have been laid out, the following chapter will summarise the results, highlight the theoretical and practical implications of the research, and suggest avenues for future research.

Chapter 8: Discussion

8.1. Introduction

The overall aim of this study was to explore the role of space and place in the legitimation of the Esports market. The findings reveal that the places used in Esports play roles that result in three key effects: building, conferring, or constraining the market. In pursuit of this exploration, the findings also indicate that there is a difference in what those within the community and those outside the community consider to be legitimate, and that offline spaces largely influence and shape this predominantly online market. In this chapter, the key findings will be summarised, the findings will be reviewed against the research questions, and the findings will be contextualised within existing literature. Following this, the theoretical and managerial contributions of the study will be outlined, the limitations of the research will be discussed, and avenues for future research will be suggested.

8.2. Summary of Key Findings

This research has produced three key findings. First, Humphreys' (2010) model of market legitimation has been adapted by combining her first two stages of innovation and local diffusion into one stage. This thesis argues that these two stages happened concurrently in the case of Esports, as it is a consumer-driven market (Martin & Schouten, 2014). The adapted model has been used to analyse the Esports market and how it has legitimised over time.

Secondly, this thesis proposes two types of legitimation processes: intra-community legitimacy, which primarily concerns what those within a community consider to be legitimate, and extra-community legitimacy, which concerns the extent to which a market is perceived to be legitimate by those outside of the community. In the case of Esports, the thesis defines those within the community as anyone who participates in the market, from professional players to casual spectators. Prior work has under-explored how the media affects how 'users' and 'nonusers' perceive the legitimacy of a market (Humphreys & Latour, 2013). This study extends this work by examining the role of the places used

by Esports on consumers' perceptions of legitimacy, with 'nonusers' (or, in this thesis' terminology, the 'extra-community') including the media and authorities – i.e. anyone not in the Esports community. The findings reveal that either one or both of these legitimation processes can be more prevalent at different stages of the overall process of legitimation. This thesis argues that intra-community legitimacy is more prevalent at stage one. Extra-community legitimacy is more prevalent at stage two, although intra-community legitimacy is still important at this stage. Based on the findings, it is suggested that extra-community legitimacy is most prevalent at the third stage. Although the thesis argues that only South Korea has reached this stage so far, it is currently difficult to conclusively understand this stage. The findings reveal that these types of legitimacy, whilst separate, take place concurrently and influence each other. Furthermore, the results show that one phenomenon can impact both intra- and extra-community legitimacy, sometimes in different ways. Finally, this thesis proposes that space and place can have three key effects on the legitimation of a market, that is building, conferring, or constraining legitimacy. These effects are achieved as a result of a number of roles various spaces play, as outlined in the table below:

Key Effect on Legitimation	Role of Place
Building	Including
	Democratising
	Testing
Conferring	Showcasing
	Bolstering
Constraining	Pausing
	Precluding

Table 10: The role of place in the legitimation process and its resulting key effects

8.2.1. Responses to Research Questions

RQ 1: How do offline spaces contribute to the legitimation of a market?

The findings reveal that a number of offline places can contribute to the legitimation of a market in three key ways. First, the findings suggest that place can have the effect of building the legitimacy of the market. Prior work has explored relational (Kellogg, 2009)

and experimental (Cartel et al., 2019) spaces, whereby institutional actors create a temporary space in which they can conceptualise alternative practices free from their usual norms and power hierarchies. Furthermore, prior work has examined the role of field-configuring events (Lampel & Meyer, 2008), in which actors temporarily gather to establish new regulations or practices (e.g. Hardy & Maguire, 2010; Graves & Latour, 2020; Oliver & Montgomery, 2008) or to produce or share knowledge (Brewer, 2017; Lange, 2021). This thesis contributes to this prior work by arguing that early offline tournaments played a 'testing' role which resulted in the effect of building legitimacy. Second, the findings reveal that offline spaces can have the effect of conferring legitimacy onto a market. Prior work has focused on the mimicking or borrowing of practices from established organisations or markets to gain legitimacy (e.g. DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Kjellberg & Olson, 2017). This thesis extends this prior work to examine how spatial practices of an established market can be used to gain legitimacy. Finally, the findings illustrate that offline spaces can have the effect of constraining the legitimacy of the market. Prior research has focused on how a government can affect the institutionalisation of a market by actively resisting lending its support (e.g. Huff et al., 2021; Koch & Ulver, 2022). The findings show that legitimacy can also be constrained in a region where a government has yet to provide regulatory support to a market, even in situations in which it is not actively resistant or opposed to doing so.

Before starting this research, the importance of online spaces to the Esports community was not in doubt – it is well documented that this was a largely online, global phenomenon. The findings suggest that previous assumptions of the Esports market neglect the importance of offline spaces and their effect on the legitimation process. As such, the findings regarding offline spaces have provided a particularly interesting and unexpected insight.

RQ 2: How do online spaces contribute to the legitimation of a market?

The findings of this study have primarily revealed the ways in which offline spaces have contributed to the legitimation of the market – an unexpected finding, given the nature of esports as an online phenomenon. Nevertheless, the analysis shows that an online space contributes to the effect of building the legitimacy of a market. In the case of Esports, one such place is Reddit, which can play a democratising role in this process by providing a place in which multiple stakeholders can negotiate the terms of the market. This is

consistent with prior work, which has demonstrated that institutional actors can create offline spaces in which their usual norms and hierarchies are abandoned in order to allow the freedom to negotiate new practices (e.g. Kellogg, 2009; Cartel et al., 2019).

RQ 3: How is the legitimacy of a growing industry aided by the use of places that have already gained legitimacy in a different market?

Consistent with prior work on the concept of mimetic processes of institutionalisation in which a new organisation or market uses the established practices of existing organisations or markets to gain legitimacy (e.g. DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Kjellberg & Olson, 2017), the findings show that a similar process can occur in the spatial legitimation of a market. In particular, the research demonstrates that stadia can play a showcasing role in the legitimation of the Esports market, whilst existing institutions such as European football clubs and US universities can play a bolstering role. Both roles have the effect of conferring legitimacy onto the market.

This section has provided a restatement of the key findings and brief, direct responses to the original research questions. In the following section, the contributions this thesis makes to existing theory will be discussed in more detail.

8.3. Theoretical Contributions

This thesis contributes to three streams of research: institutional theory in the fields of marketing and consumer research, space and place theory, and the growing body of Esports literature. The theoretical contributions to each of these streams will now be outlined in more detail.

8.3.1. Institutional Theory in Marketing and Consumer Research

This research primarily contributes to the field of institutional theory in the fields of marketing and consumer research. Although it also uses space and place theory, this is primarily used as a lens through which the places used by the Esports market have been examined and analysed.

8.3.1.1. Adapting Stages of Legitimation for a Consumer-Driven Market

A key piece of research that was challenged and extended in this thesis is Humphreys (2010). Humphreys builds on existing institutional theory to suggest how markets legitimise through social institutionalisation processes. By using Johnson et al.'s (2006) four stages of legitimation, she explores how managers and organisations in the casino industry legitimised the market in the United States. Based on the findings of this study, this model was adapted to combine the first two stages into one. Humphreys' model (2010) is based on the example of a firm-driven market, whereas the findings have demonstrated that the Esports market lies towards the consumer-driven end of the market development spectrum (Martin & Schouten, 2014). As such, this thesis argues that the first two stages are not distinct in the Esports market. No one organisation innovated the Esports market and then developed local validation by interacting with an interested audience – these happened concurrently, with interested audiences innovating the competitions, negotiating the regulations, and growing the initial audience. Therefore, three stages of legitimation in the Esports market are proposed, as depicted below. By adapting these stages of legitimation, it was possible to analyse the Esports market at each stage of the legitimation process in a way more fitting for a more consumer-driven market.

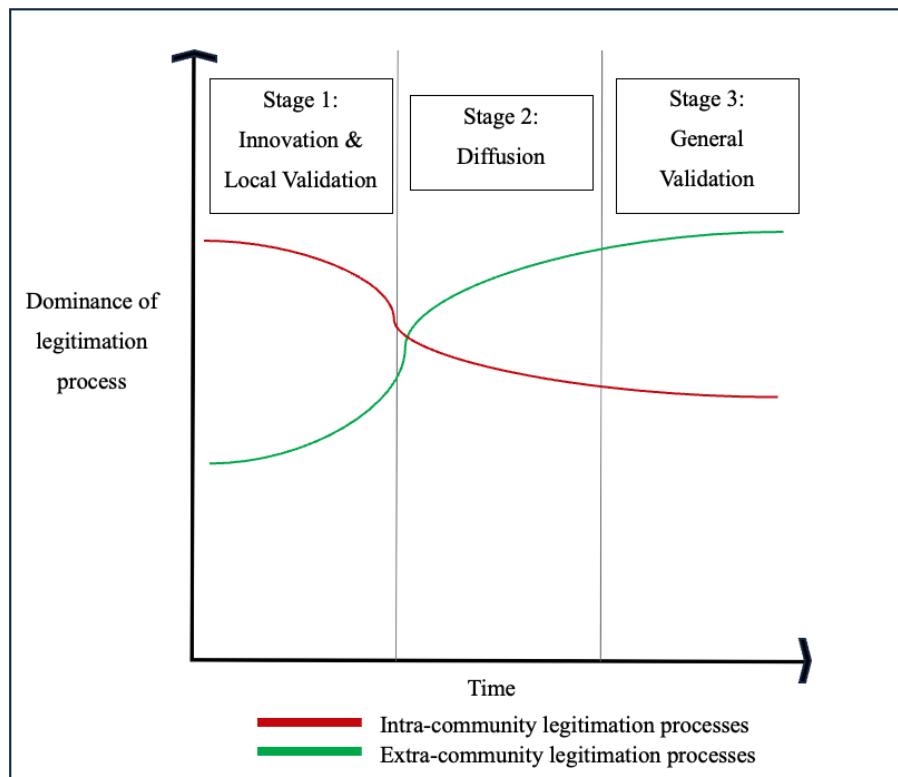


Figure 19: Adaptation of Humphreys' (2010) Model

This study builds on prior market co-creation processes (e.g. Brandstad & Solem, 2020; Giesler, 2008) by providing a case study of the Esports market, and further extends prior work by exploring the role of space and place in market co-creation. The analysis illustrates how online spaces such as subreddits were used as a democratising place in which consumers, producers, and other stakeholders came together to negotiate market practices. Furthermore, early offline tournaments provided places in which players could test new ways of competing, for example, in the case of early Smash Bros Melee tournaments. Such places were also used by producers to test new tournament practices in the case of early League of Legends tournaments, with consumers in the audience able to provide immediate feedback with regards to their preferences. As such, this research has further illustrated the processes of market co-creation and the role that space can play within these.

8.3.1.2. The role of Space and Place in Institutional Theory

This thesis contributes to institutional theory by filling a gap whereby spatial influences on institutionalisation have been under-explored. Based on the findings, this study demonstrates that space and place can have the effect of building, conferring, or constraining a market's legitimacy, and seven specific roles that places can play to achieve these effects have also been proposed.

First, the analysis illustrates how places used by Esports have helped to build the market's legitimacy. Consistent with prior research on institutional actors' creation of relational (Kellogg, 2009) and experimental (Cartel et al., 2019) spaces within which their usual roles and practices are set aside, the findings show that place can play a democratising role in the building of market legitimacy. Within the Esports market, Reddit is used by players, games developers, and other market stakeholders to discuss and negotiate market norms. As such, Reddit provides a place in which all stakeholders have the opportunity to communicate, regardless of their status. This was key to the Esports market due to its nature as a co-creation between consumers and producers (Branstad & Solem, 2020).

Furthermore, prior work has examined the role of field-configuring events (Lampel & Meyer, 2008), in which actors temporarily gather to establish new regulations or practices (e.g. Hardy & Maguire, 2010; Graves & Lauer, 2020; Oliver & Montgomery, 2008) or to

produce or share knowledge (Brewer, 2017; Lange, 2021). This study builds on this prior work to illustrate how early offline tournaments – which can be considered field-configuring events – can play the role of testing new practices in order to help build the legitimacy of the market. Prior work has largely focused on formal events such as trade shows, conferences, and industrial gatherings (e.g. Brewer, 2017; Hardy & Maguire, 2010; Graves & Lauer, 2020). This thesis extends this work by highlighting that such events do not necessarily need to be formal affairs. Early Smash Bros Melee tournaments involved players meeting in a house belonging to a member of the community (EastPointPictures, 2013a). The players constructed the format of the tournament themselves and negotiated regulations and practices. Despite the informal nature of these tournaments, many of the spatial practices established at these tournaments remain the standard in professional Smash Bros Melee competitions to this day (EastPointPictures, 2013b). This study also illustrates how field-configuring events can be used to negotiate between producers and consumers. Early League of Legends tournaments were organised and hosted by the developer of the game, who tested out new practices. As the consumers were present in the audience, it was possible to test which practices were not preferable to the consumers, and which were favourable. Again, many of the practices established in these early tournaments remain in place to this day (League of Legends Origins, 2019).

This thesis also extends the literature on the role of spatiality within marketing and consumer research. Prior work has conceptualised four spatial types, of which public space and emancipating space are considered to be inclusive, while market space and segregating space are considered to be exclusionary (Castilhos & Dolbec, 2018). This study instead suggests that market spaces can play a role of including the community, which helps build the legitimacy of a market. PC bangs and internet cafés constitute commercial market spaces owned and governed by market actors (Castilhos and Dolbec, 2018). They are also exclusionary in the sense that entry is governed by the rules and discretion of the owner (ibid.). However, the findings also highlight that these places have played an including role in the Esports market as they have enabled more people to access the market who may not have otherwise had the resources to do so. Furthermore, the research has shown that these places increase the visibility of the market by being a physical manifestation of a largely online market, which results in more people being invited in (Grow uP eSports, 2018). As such, the findings suggest that it is possible for market spaces to also become emancipating spaces, as they can not only be inclusive, but

can "serve as spaces of safe expression for communities defending marginalized positions" (Castilhos & Dolbec, 2018, p. 160). As those who participate in the Esports industry can face disapproval from family and friends (League of Legends, 2016; Not A Game, 2020), PC bangs and internet cafés can provide a sanctuary in which those who feel misunderstood can come together as a community.

Second, the research illustrates how space and place can have the effect of conferring legitimacy onto a market. Prior research has shown how the mimicking of established organisational practices (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) and practices borrowed from historic and parallel markets (Kjellberg & Olson, 2017) can aid the legitimacy of a new organisation or market. This study builds on this prior research by bringing spatial elements into this work. The findings show how a new market using spaces traditionally associated with an established market can aid the new market's legitimacy. In the case of Esports, this involves the use of stadia typically built and used to host traditional sports matches. As such, this thesis argues that stadia play the role of showcasing the market to those unfamiliar with Esports. This contributes to the effect of conferring legitimacy onto the market as it enables unfamiliar consumers to align Esports with the practices and symbolic meanings of traditional sports with which they are more familiar.

The findings provide insight into prior work on the professionalisation of an industry. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) argued that the professionalisation of workers within an organisation through industry training or university degrees results in a standardisation of practice and of the expectation of staff within their roles. This is a form of normative legitimacy (Scott, 2014) whereby preferred norms and values are prescribed. Consistent with prior research, the findings show an increasing number of opportunities to study Esports at university, or to receive scholarships to participate in collegiate Esports in the US (e.g. Hughes, 2018; Baker & Holden, 2018; Hoyle, 2018). As a result, it is argued that this plays a bolstering role which results in legitimacy being conferred onto the Esports market. As professionalisation is considered a key criterion of a becoming sport (e.g. Jenny et al., 2017; Heere, 2018), the increase in formal education also helps the legitimation process by moving the market closer to being categorised as a sport. Additionally, UK football teams are increasingly creating Esports teams to compete in their name (Quinn, 2016; Hattenhouse, 2017). In doing so, an established institution aids the professionalisation of players by providing more opportunities to play at this level,

and confers legitimacy onto the market as players compete under the name of an established brand.

Finally, this thesis finds that space and place can have the effect of constraining the legitimacy of the market. Prior work has found that gaining support from a government or authority aids legitimacy by increasing the regulatory legitimacy (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2014). Prior research has explored the effect on the institutionalisation of a market if a government actively resists lending its support or approves a competing market instead (e.g. Koch & Ulver, 2022; Huff et al., 2021). This thesis extends this work by exploring the consequences of an authority passively denying support through inaction on its part. As a result, it is suggested that a regulatory area can play the role of pausing the legitimacy of the Esports market, which results the process of legitimation being constrained. In the case of Esports, this is largely an issue when the market attempts to move from online to an offline region. For example, if professional Esports competitors are denied visas to compete in a country because the government has yet to recognise them as athletes, this can result in the area missing out on the economic benefits that Esports events bring (ESL Faceit Group, 2021), and the market will struggle to further expand in the region. The findings also reveal a context that ostensibly has yet to be considered. Despite the Esports market being an online phenomenon, all gameplay takes place on physical servers which must be located in the offline world (Abdelkhalek et al., 2003). The longer the distance between the player and the server, the more likely there are to be latency issues. More pertinently, some interviewees expressed frustration at their region being one of the last to receive a server, or their closest server receiving less support from the game publisher. Based on these findings, it is suggested that server areas can play a role of precluding the legitimacy process in these areas due to a lack of access to the market.

8.3.1.3. Acknowledging the Perspectives of those Inside and Outside the Esports Community

Prior work has examined the roles of marketers (e.g. Humphreys, 2010; Giesler, 2012), and consumers (e.g. Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013; Kjeldgaard et al., 2017) in the legitimation of a market. However, the perceptions of legitimacy of the general public outside a consumption community remains under-explored (Humphreys & Latour, 2013).

For example, previous studies found that nonusers' (defined in the article as the general public) perceptions of legitimacy are affected by media framing in a different way from users' perceptions (ibid.). This thesis contributes to this area of research by providing insights into the legitimacy perceptions of nonusers of the Esports market. First, two distinct but interdependent processes of legitimacy have been conceptualised: intra-community legitimation processes, which include the practices considered by those within the Esports community to be legitimate, and extra-community legitimation processes, which includes the processes by which those outside the Esports community consider the market to be legitimate. Extra-community legitimation processes differ from Humphreys and Latour's (2013) 'nonusers' in that the extra-community includes any entity that is not part of the Esports community, such as traditional media, in addition to the general public. This thesis further extends prior research by examining the role of space and place on both the intra-community and extra-community legitimation processes. The findings reveal that a particular practice can be considered legitimate by both the intra- and extra-communities, but for different reasons, or at different stages in the legitimation process. For example, the findings show that major offline events held in stadia can aid extra-community legitimacy by demonstrating the similarities between Esports and traditional sports with which the general public are more familiar. However, those within the Esports community can consider such events to be more legitimate as they believe it is harder to perform at offline events.

8.3.2. Space and Place Theory

Prior work in consumer research has examined how markets and consumption practices have globalised. This work has included examination of how consumers often adapt or resist globalisation forces rather than be suppressed by them (Sharifonnasabi et al., 2020; Thompson & Arsel, 2004), and how consumers combine global influences and local culture to create a sense of self (Kjeldgaard & Askegaard, 2006; McMillin & Fisherkeller, 2009). This study contributes to this body of work by raising the issue of localising a global market, and finds that regulatory and server areas can constrain legitimacy in the process of the market moving from online to offline. As a result of fewer territorial boundaries and regional differences in the online space, Esports has arguably globalised through a homogenous process (Ritzer, 2001; Levitt, 1983; Antonio, 2016). However, the findings suggest that the market has not yet globalised in the offline world, as evidenced

by interviewees explaining the difficulties they face finding acceptance or Esports infrastructure in their countries. The findings demonstrate that it becomes difficult to develop the market offline when existing norms and practices are met with regional differences and regulations. Therefore, the thesis argues that it is possible for a market to globalise before it has localised, and suggests that the next challenge for the Esports market is to find structure and legitimacy in the offline world.

8.3.3. Interdisciplinary Work

Academic interest in Esports has increased rapidly over the past decade, creating a growing, multi-disciplinary field of research that includes scholars from business studies, sports science, law, and more (Reitman et al., 2019). This thesis contributes to this growing body of work by exploring how the market has legitimised over time, without being bound by discussions of the extent to which Esports can be considered a sport (e.g. Jenny et al., 2017; Cranmer et al., 2021; Jonasson & Thiborg, 2010; Abanazir, 2019).

To conclude, this thesis contributes towards a gap in existing institutional theory literature that has under explored how space and place affects the legitimation of a market. In particular, this study builds on literature that has explored how institutional actors use space and place to change or disrupt an institution to demonstrate how actors can also use space and place to create and build a market. Furthermore, the findings reveal that space and place can have a constraining effect on the market, an area of theory that is currently under-explored. In addition, two distinct but interdependent and concurrent processes of legitimation have been proposed - intra-community and extra-community – and the role of space and place on these processes has been examined. This extends previous work (Humphreys & Latour, 2013) by analysing how space and place can affect both consumers and the general public's perceptions of legitimacy. Finally, it is argued that the Esports market must now localise offline, despite having already globalised online, and the challenges of this process have been highlighted. The following section will outline the practical implications of the research and will make recommendations to managers both within and beyond the Esports market.

8.4. Practical Implications

Having laid out the theoretical contributions of the thesis, the practical implications of the research will now be discussed. There are three stakeholders to whom the recommendations are directed. First, the implications of the findings for managers within the Esports industry will be discussed. Second, suggestions for ways in which governments and authorities can both support the Esports market and benefit the regions for which they are responsible will be outlined. Finally, the broader implications of the findings for managers seeking to create or grow a new market other than Esports will be discussed.

8.4.1. Managerial Implications for the Esports Industry

First, the findings suggest that league organisers and event managers should carefully consider the locations in which they hold offline events, especially if their aim is to increase the visibility and perception of legitimacy of their Esport in the eyes of those outside the Esports community. Particular attention has been drawn to the use of stadia during league finals, which this thesis argues confers legitimacy onto Esports by virtue of being the places in which already legitimised sporting events are held. This follows the mimetic process of institutionalisation (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) through which a new institution can gain legitimacy by mimicking practices and procedures used by institutions that are already established – this thesis has extended this theory to include the use of place.

Secondly, the benefits of working with existing institutions in order to increase legitimacy have been highlighted. For example, through the formation of the ePremier League, the Esport of the EA SPORTS FC Pro game (formerly named FIFA) has gained extra-community legitimacy through the support of existing, established football clubs (CNN Newsroom, 2019). In the US, where collegiate sport is taken seriously, the Esports market has also gained extra-community legitimacy where universities have established formal Esports teams to represent them (e.g. A Rising Storm, 2020; Associated Press, 2022). Future research may find that there are other institutions that the Esports market can work with to help further establish itself with those in the extra-community. It is suggested as a result of the findings that institutions tied to local areas, much like football clubs in

Western Europe and universities in the US, are best suited to this as it is then possible to gain support from the local community that they represent.

Third, based on the findings of this research, it is recommended that Esports authorities continue to work with or lobby governments and authorities to help them better understand the needs of the market. The research has shown that the Esports market achieves broader legitimacy much faster in countries whose governments support the industry, such as South Korea (Jin, 2020). The primary challenge in achieving this is overcoming the debate around whether Esports can be considered a sport (Usmani, 2016). In many cases, if a country decides that Esports is not a sport, visas for Esports players and funding for support can be denied. One way in which this could be overcome is by highlighting the economic benefits that Esports can bring to a region (ESL Faceit Group, 2021).

However, the points made thus far largely focus on growing extra-community legitimacy. Furthering extra-community legitimacy is good for the market as a whole - including those within the Esports community - because bigger audiences can bring in more money, and better understanding will likely reduce the tensions that some players report they have faced from parents. However, it is important that Esports developers, league organisers, and event managers do not neglect intra-community legitimacy. Without the Esports community, there is no Esports – especially due to the status of many Esports participants as prosumers who both consume the game and produce content for others to spectate (Andrews & Ritzer, 2018). The findings reveal that many people within the Esports community do not particularly see the value in broadcasting matches on television. If a league organiser decided to broadcast their events on television rather than streaming online, where the Esports community currently watch events in a way that is free and accessible to most, the organiser would risk losing the community itself. Whilst this is a hypothetical example, it demonstrates the importance that managers do not lose sight of what is important to the community in the quest to gain extra-community legitimacy.

Finally, it is recommended that developers carefully consider the placements of their servers and the amount of support that they provide to each server area. The findings demonstrate that legitimacy even within the Esports community can be delayed by the wait to get a game server in their region, and that players can feel less favourably towards

a game that they can access, but which the developers provide less technical and community support for. As a result, despite there being demand for their game in certain areas, developers are missing out on that region's market because they have not put in the necessary support.

8.4.2. Policy Implications for Governments and Authorities

Although this research has focused on how those within the Esports market have contributed to the growth of the market's legitimacy over time, the findings reveal that governments and regulatory authorities also have an important role to play. An Esports event can generate millions of dollars for the region in which it is held. For example, Dreamhack Dallas 2019 brought $3.6 million to the Dallas economy, and the Intel Extreme Masters Katowice 2019 contributed nearly $14.5 million to the local economy, in addition to over 83% of international attendees reporting that they had only heard of the Polish city because of the event (ESL Faceit Group, 2021). Market growth also leads to job creation, which further benefits the local economy (Villegas, 2023).

The research has illustrated how governments and authorities of regulatory areas can pause the legitimacy process of the Esports market in their region through a lack of support for the market, such as by denying visas to professional players. The findings have also shown that categorisation is important. For example, one of the interviewees from Denmark explained that the debate in his country over whether or not Esports is a sport had concluded that it is a sport, and that this was necessary to determine whether or not taxpayer's money could be spent supporting the market, and which pot of funding such support should come from. Therefore, this thesis recommends that governments and authorities do not unintentionally cause further delay to the growth of Esports in their regions, through either a lack of understanding of the market or through an inability to decide in which category the market falls. Esports is both a popular and lucrative market, and governments should encourage its growth in their regions.

8.4.3. Implications for New Market Creation

While 'Place' is one of the 'Ps' included in the famous 'marketing mix' that has been taught in business schools for decades (e.g. Kotler et al., 2019), this focus on place for

marketers has tended to be on how to reach consumers. Although there are some exceptions to this focus on place within prior consumer research literature (e.g. Castilhos et al., 2017; Maclaren & Brown, 2005; Hirschman et al., 2012), this thesis has shown that marketers and managers should give more consideration to place in terms of its potential effects on the legitimation of a new or growing market. In particular, the findings reveal that occupying places used by already legitimised markets similar to the new market can confer legitimacy onto the new market. In addition, marketers and managers should be aware of any restrictions that space can impose on the legitimacy of the market they wish to grow. In the case of Esports, the research demonstrates that moving the market from online to offline places can be restricted by authorities who do not yet understand the market and thus do not put in place the necessary support to help it thrive in their region.

To conclude, five implications of the research for managers within the Esports market have been laid out, each recommending ways in which they can further grow the legitimacy of the market. These include the use of and partnering with spaces and institutions already established within traditional sports in order to confer legitimacy onto Esports. A warning has also been issued against the pursuit of extra-community legitimacy at the expense of intra-community legitimacy. In addition, recommendations to governments and authorities have been made to accept and support the Esports market in their regions so that they can benefit from the money and jobs that it brings. Finally, the research serves as a reminder to all marketers that the consideration of place in marketing should not just be on how to reach consumers, but also on the potential impact of place on the legitimacy of a market.

8.5. Limitations and Future Research

As with any research project, there are a number of limitations to this study, which will now be outlined with reference to suggestions of how future research could further explore this topic. Firstly, this research has only examined one market. The Esports market has provided a particularly interesting context for this research for two reasons: its nature of existing in both online and offline spaces, and that it has become a global phenomenon before necessarily gaining popularity or legitimacy in local regions. This has enabled the examination of the variety of spaces and places involved in the legitimacy

of the Esports market, and the challenging of the common understanding that largely suggests that markets legitimise locally before they do globally. Future research could examine whether these proposals only apply to the Esports market given this particular context, or if they also apply to other markets. It is suggested that the findings are more likely to be applicable to other markets that have developed primarily online before moving into the offline world, such as fantasy football, or to social media communities, such as influencer fandoms.

Secondly, as the research is limited to the Esports market, there may be further ways in which place can play a role in the legitimation of a market. As such, in addition to testing whether or not the proposals apply to other markets, future research could find further roles that spaces and places play in the legitimation of a market – or may, indeed, find that the same places that have been discussed in the legitimation of the Esports market play different roles in other markets.

Third, whilst interviewing people from across the globe has enabled an interesting international study of this global phenomenon and has allowed comparisons of markets in different countries, this has limited the thorough examination of one or two specific markets. In particular, it would be helpful to interview Esports participants from South Korea, which is the only country this thesis argues has reached the general validation stage of legitimacy. However, this has stemmed solely from analysis of secondary sources, and from interviewees' views of Korea, rather than anyone who has experienced the Esports market in South Korea directly.

Fourth, this research was restricted by the Covid pandemic. The original data collection plan had included conducting ethnographic research at offline Esports events, however these were cancelled before this research could commence. As such, it has not been possible to directly research offline events, and the study instead relies on secondary data and the experience of those interviewed. Therefore, future studies could conduct research at offline events to better understand the spatial properties of the Esports market.

Future research could also explore the spatial legitimation of the Esports market in a post-pandemic world. The data for this thesis was collected during the pandemic, in 2020 and 2021. Whilst this provided interesting insight to the spatial legitimation of the market as

it highlighted what could happen in the absence of offline events, future research could explore how the pandemic affected the market. For example, avenues for research could include whether the growth of gaming during the pandemic increased audiences, whether the highlighting of Esports by the media as the one sport that could continue during the pandemic has affected the legitimacy or if the spotlight has faded since a return to normality, and whether or not the reliance on online events during the pandemic has made the Esports community value offline events more or less.

8.6. Conclusion

To conclude, prior work has explored processes of market legitimation (e.g. Humphreys, 2010; Johnson et al., 2006), however the role of space and place in these processes remains under-explored (Lawrence & Dover, 2015; Wright et al., 2023). Therefore, this research sought to contribute to this research gap. The Esports market was chosen as the context for the study due to the variety of spaces used by the market, both online and offline. Semi-structured interviews with Esports participants and archival data were used to explore how these spaces affected the legitimacy of the market. As a result, the thesis proposes that space and place can have the effect of building, conferring, or constraining the legitimacy of a market. The findings also reveal that different places can play specific roles that result in these effects. Reddit can play a democratising role, which extends prior work that has explored how actors use space to negotiate new practices (e.g. Cartel et al., 2019; Kellogg, 2009). Early offline tournaments can be considered a field-configuring event (Lampel & Meyer, 2008) that enabled stakeholders to test new practices. PC bangs and internet cafés play an including role by providing a safe place for people to participate in the market away from disapproval of family and friends (Castilhos & Dolbec, 2018; Not A Game, 2020). These three roles contribute to the effect of building legitimacy as they involve enabling people to join the Esports community and to discuss and test new practices.

A further two roles contribute to the effect of conferring legitimacy on a market. Stadia play a showcasing role by helping the general public make sense of the market by showing the similarities between Esports and traditional sports through mimicry and adoption of spatial practices used in the latter (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). UK football

clubs and US universities play a bolstering role by using their resources and established practices to provide support to the Esports market. Finally, the effect of constraining the legitimacy of the market is caused by regulatory areas, which can play the role of pausing legitimacy when the market does not receive government support (e.g. DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Huff et al., 2021). Server areas can preclude legitimacy by denying full access to the market in the first place. Furthermore, the thesis provides further insight into the legitimacy perceptions of nonusers of a market (Humphreys & Latour, 2013) by proposing that the overall legitimation process is comprised of two distinct yet interdependent processes: intra-community and extra-community legitimacy. The thesis demonstrates how a practice can be perceived as legitimate by both the intra-community and extra-community but for different reasons.

Finally, suggestions for future research have been made. Due to the particular nature of the Esports market as one that exists in both online and offline spaces, as it has achieved global legitimacy online but not necessarily offline, these findings may not be applicable to all markets. However, with the internet an increasingly dominant phenomenon, it is suggested that Esports is just one of the first markets to take on this particular spatial form, as the boundaries between online and offline spaces become increasingly blurred. With new technologies ever-changing the way we interact with others, the way we conceptualise and analyse space will surely also need to change.

"I'd love to see how technology, how that influences Esports in the future… whether you are in a stadium and instead of people playing like on computers, like everyone in the stadium is using augmented reality or even virtual reality, and instead of playing on like a stage, there's like a massive volcano in the middle of the stadium and they're all like, you know, throwing a ball to each other whilst scaling whatever you want really"

- *Logan, League of Legends League Organiser, UK*

Appendix 1 – Sample Participant Information Sheet

Participant information sheet

For further information about how Lancaster University processes personal data for research purposes and your data rights please visit our webpage: www.lancaster.ac.uk/research/data-protection

I am a PhD student at Lancaster University and I would like to invite you to take part in a research study about Esports events. Please take time to read the following information carefully before you decide whether or not you wish to take part.

What is the study about?
This study aims to explore how both online and offline events have contributed to the success of the Esports industry, and how the cancellation of events due to the pandemic has affected the industry.

Why have I been invited?
I have approached you because you are involved in Esports and can therefore offer interesting insights into the research topic. I would be very grateful if you would agree to take part in this study.

What will I be asked to do if I take part?
If you decide to take part, this would involve taking part in an interview that will take approximately 30-60 minutes.

What are the possible benefits from taking part?
If you take part in this study, your insights will contribute to our understanding of how online and offline events contribute to the Esports industry and its success.

Do I have to take part?
No. It's completely up to you to decide whether or not you take part. Your participation is voluntary.

What if I change my mind?
If you change your mind, you are free to withdraw at any time during your participation in this study. If you want to withdraw, please let me know, and I will extract any ideas or information (=data) you contributed to the study and destroy them. However, it is difficult and often impossible to take out data from one specific participant when this has already been anonymised or pooled together with other people's data. Therefore, you can only withdraw up to 2 weeks after taking part in the study.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?
There should be no disadvantages or risks involved with taking part in this study. However, the interview will likely take up to an hour of your time, which I recognise is not insignificant.

Will my data be identifiable?
After the interview, only I, the researcher conducting this study, and my two PhD supervisors will have access to the ideas you share with me.

I will keep all personal information about you (e.g. your name and other information about you that can identify you) confidential - that is, I will not share it with others. I will remove any personal information from the written record of your contribution. This will include any company you work for and your exact job title, to reduce the possibility of your identity being inferred through this supplementary information.

Lancaster University

How will we use the information you have shared with us and what will happen to the results of the research study?
I will use the information you have shared with me only in the following ways:
I will use it for research purposes only. This will include my PhD thesis and other publications, for example journal articles. I may also present the results of my study at academic conferences.
When writing up the findings from this study, I would like to reproduce some of the views and ideas you shared with me. I will only use anonymised quotes (e.g. from my interview with you), so that although I will use your exact words, you cannot be identified in our publications.
If anything you tell me in the interview suggests that you or somebody else might be at risk of harm, I will be obliged to share this information with my supervisor and/or colleagues. If possible I will inform you of this breach of confidentiality.

How my data will be stored
Your data will be stored in encrypted files (that is no-one other than me, the researcher will be able to access them) and on password-protected computers. I will store hard copies of any data securely in locked cabinets in my office. I will keep data that can identify you separately from non-personal information (e.g. your views on a specific topic). In accordance with University guidelines, I will keep the data securely for a minimum of ten years.

What if I have a question or concern?
If you have any queries or if you are unhappy with anything that happens concerning your participation in the study, please contact myself or my supervisors:

Primary Researcher – Charlotte John
c.john1@lancaster.ac.uk
07821379377
Charles Carter D02
Lancaster University Management School Lancaster University
LA1 4YU

Supervisors:
Hayley Cocker - h.cocker@lancaster.ac.uk

Alexandros Skandalis - a.skandalis@lancaster.ac.uk

If you have any concerns or complaints that you wish to discuss with a person who is not directly involved in the research, you can also contact:

Gillian Hopkinson – Head of Department
g.hopkinson@lancaster.ac.uk
Charles Carter
Lancaster University Management School
Lancaster University
LA1 4YU

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Lancaster Management School's Research Ethics Committee.

Thank you for considering your participation in this project.

Appendix 2 – Sample Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

Project Title: Esports Events
Name of Researcher: Charlotte John Email: c.john1@lancaster.ac.uk

Please tick each box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	☐
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time during my participation in this study and within 2 weeks after I took part in the study, without giving any reason. If I withdraw within 2 weeks of taking part in the study, my data will be removed.	☐
3. I understand that any information given by me may be used in future reports, academic articles, publications or presentations by the researcher/s, but my personal information will not be included and I will not be identifiable.	☐
4. I understand that my name/my organisation's name will not appear in any reports, articles or presentation without my consent.	☐
5. I understand that any interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed and that data will be protected on encrypted devices and kept secure.	☐
6. I understand that data will be kept according to University guidelines for a minimum of 10 years after the end of the study.	☐
7. I confirm that I am 18 years old or above.	☐
8. I agree to take part in the above study.	☐

________________________ ____________ ________________

Name of Participant Date Signature

I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.

Signature of Researcher /person taking the consent ______________________________

Date__________ Day/month/year

One copy of this form will be given to the participant and the original kept in the files of the researcher at Lancaster University.

Appendix 3 - Codes

Appendix 3.1. Initial codes

Name	Files	References
Accessibility	2	3
Decline	1	1
Effect of pandemic	32	35
Future of Esports	31	35
Growth	23	24
If offline couldn't happen	32	34
Important to community	29	47
Importance to industry	32	61
Legitimacy	5	7
Local community	4	4
Local infrastructure	30	39
Mimetic legitimacy	0	0
Offline spaces	29	29
Online and offline spaces	3	3
Online spaces	26	28
Regional differences	2	3
Streamers	29	30
Thoughts on franchising	18	19
Why Esports	3	3

Appendix 3.2. Final thematic categories

Code	Emerging Themes
Accessibility	• Barriers to entry: cost of/access to equipment, proximity to servers, regions where games aren't released/little to no developer support
Decline	• Little fear of this – most expect stasis or growth
Effect of pandemic	• Some believe the idea that the market has grown as people stuck at home • Scepticism – that numbers will hold post-pandemic; that numbers are as big as claimed
Future of Esports	• Majority believe it is bright – one does not, as they feel scene is losing money • Some think certain games will die because they're no longer being updated – people will get bored • Some games are quite complicated so more difficult to get outsiders interested
Growth	• Veteran players have seen a lot of change – big growth even in 4 years to interview date • Growth of players • Growth of event production value • Growth of market awareness
If offline couldn't happen	• Would be fine – community would sustain online • Would decline without the spectacle of offline events • Professional competition would struggle due to ping • Would grow because it could survive online – could take advantage of traditional sports fans looking for new entertainment
Importance to community	• Generally both online and offline events seen as important, but offline events seen as more important to helping outsiders recognise Esports • Online seen as important for community building/developing amateur players
Importance to industry	
Legitimacy	• "More mainstream" – more awareness from those outside the Esports industry
Local community	• Few currently have access to a local Esports community
Local infrastructure	• Majority supportive of more local infrastructure/teams – feel it would help bring more people in. But recognize there are a lot of barriers to this.
Mimetic legitimacy	• Offline events make Esports familiar to those outside the industry by being similar to traditional sports events • University scholarships – like traditional sporting scholarships • Traditional sports teams supporting/franchising their own Esports team(s) • Inclusion in school curricula

Offline spaces	• Sense of community • Spectacle/excitement of being in the crowd
Online and offline spaces	• Both considered important
Online spaces	• Online competitions generally considered less important than offline • Online spaces seen as important for the community
Regional differences	• Games/servers come later to some regions (e.g. Australia) • Popularity of games/the competitive scenes of games can vary in different regions
Streamers	• Had a big impact on the market • Concern more money can be made from streaming than playing professionally • Can help introduce people to Esports/a new game within the Esports scene (e.g. Valorant)
Thoughts on franchising	• Most hadn't heard of it • A lot of negativity – considered unfair • Some supportive – helps keep leagues financially stable
Why Esports	• "To achieve potential" • Community/friendship • Strategic thinking

Glossary

Battle Royale	A multiplayer game in which players compete online until only one player or team is the last man standing. Examples include Fortnite and PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds.
CS:GO	Counter Strike: Global Offensive – the fourth game in the Counter Strike series. Multiplayer tactical first-person shooter.
First person shooter (FPS)	A game centred on shooting weapons and viewed from the first-person perspective. Examples include Halo, Counter Strike, and Call of Duty.
Loot boxes	Virtual 'boxes' which contain in-game assets, such as skins. Until the box has been opened, the contents are typically unknown. In some games, these boxes cost real money.
Massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs)	An online role-playing game in which multiple players can participate at once. The most famous example is World of Warcraft.
MOBA (Multiplayer Online Battle Arena)	An online strategy game in which teams compete against each other in a battlefield. The most famous example is League of Legends.
PC Bangs	A type of internet café found in South Korea primarily used for playing and watching others play video games.
Shoutcasters	The equivalent in Esports of a commentator in traditional sports.
Sports games	Games that are based on an existing sport. For example, EA Sports FC (formally FIFA) is a video game based on football. Some sports games also have a simulation element – for example the Formula One Esports Series sees players sit in racing car simulators.
Real-time strategy (RTS)	A game in which players play simultaneously – without being able to see what the other is doing – to gather resources and build armies/weapons to eventually fight each other. The most famous example is StarCraft.
Tilt	A colloquial expression used by gamers to describe the feeling of frustration when underperforming in a game. This can lead to anger or toxic behaviour being directed towards others.

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