

# The Role of Digital Marketing in the Esports Industry

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## ABSTRACT:

The eSports industry, supported by the accelerated development of digital technologies, is becoming more and more interesting to companies, as a potential place where products and services can be advertised. Given that consumers, who follow or actively engage in playing digital games and eSports, are mostly younger men, digital marketing strategies seem like a logical choice. This paper provides several theoretical viewpoints on the function of digital marketing in the industry of eSports. The authors attempted to make this topic more accessible to professionals with expertise in this field by assessing the views of 113 respondents and highlighting the possible advantages of adopting digital marketing in the eSports industry. The aim of this study is to show that companies should focus on promoting brands on digital platforms dedicated to eSports, because such activities, which are intended for players and audiences, are generally acceptable activities of business entities. Also, when carrying out brand promotion on these platforms, it is advisable to hire credible eSports influencers on social media to recommend their brands, and ultimately, to support the spread of eWOM about the company's brand.

## KEY WORDS:

consumers, digital games, digital marketing, eSports industry, eSports influencers, eWOM.

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# Introduction

With the development of digital technologies, a whole set of new digital marketing tools have appeared, which enable companies in the modern environment to operate more efficiently and reduce costs, but also enable them to communicate more accurately and adequately with their target market, which enables the establishment of an emotional connection in the brand-consumer relationship.<sup>1</sup> The rise of eSports has made the future of digital marketing much more optimistic. Today, many world-famous brands are investing in eSports, and different digital marketing strategies can be seen within this industry. This trend is certainly not surprising, if we consider that in 2020 there were close to half a billion people who watched eSports on streaming platforms, or on their television sets. By 2025, eSports is expected to have 640.8 million viewers worldwide, which is certainly a sign that its audience is rapidly increasing.<sup>2</sup> Also, according to estimates, revenues in the global eSports market will exceed 2 billion USD by 2025.<sup>3</sup>

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- 1 BALTEZAREVIĆ, R., RAVIĆ, N.: Sinteza između digitalnih marketinških strategija i strategija u igri šah. In *Baština*, 2020, Vol. 29, No. 52, p. 228.
  - 2 GOUGH, Ch.: *eSports Audience Size Worldwide from 2020 to 2025*. Released on 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2023. [online]. [2023-05-13]. Available at: <<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1109956/global-esports-audience/>>.
  - 3 GOUGH, Ch.: *eSports Market Revenue Worldwide from 2020 to 2025*. Released on 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2023. [online]. [2023-05-13]. Available at: <<https://www.statista.com/statistics/490522/global-esports-market-revenue/>>.

Investing in digital marketing activities, within the eSports industry, can be considered a very effective way for a company to communicate with its consumers.<sup>4</sup> The audience for eSports is mainly young adult men (between 17 and 25 years old), who are passionate about digital technology and digital games, which is essential information in the process of planning a digital marketing strategy and how to communicate with the target market.<sup>5</sup> It is believed that there are two main factors in the rapid development of eSports. The first is certainly the ever-growing popularity of digital games in general, and the second factor is the constant change and development of technology.<sup>6</sup> eSports can provide a company with a quick entry into a new market, rebrand and provide a new positioning of products or services, but also stimulate the sale of goods. All this, along with increasing turnover, can lead to better competitiveness and functioning of the company's activities.<sup>7</sup>

Today, many cities are racing to host eSports competitions because they can stimulate economic growth and employment. In Atlanta, which is considered the capital of eSports and an example of a city that has capitalized on the growth of eSports, hosted an eSports event in 2019 which was attended by 35,000 players and audience members. This event employed 12,000 workers and had a positive economic impact of half a billion USD.<sup>8</sup> The eSports industry is increasingly incorporating virtual reality (VR) and launching more VR-only leagues (such as the VR league). In order for eSports to reorient itself towards VR in the future, and to offer players experiences similar to those in real life, much still needs to happen. First of all, problems such as the broadcasting of such VR tournaments must be solved. Perhaps one of the biggest problems is the fact that virtual reality systems are extremely expensive and not everyone (at least for now) can afford them. Finally, virtual reality in eSports requires more physical activity from players, which nevertheless appeals to a different demographic, than is the case with today's eSports, which are played on computers and consoles.<sup>9</sup>

However, the phenomenon of eSports constantly shows its ability to develop and evolve, and experts predict that in a few years it will become the most profitable financial industry. The eSports industry is becoming increasingly powerful, and therefore an ideal place for effective consumer persuasion, which can and must be used, first of all, for marketing purposes.<sup>10</sup>

# Esports: Definition and Conceptualization

A general definition of eSports is quite difficult to produce because eSports is not a 'normal' sport. It consists of several components such as technology, sports, business,

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- 4 SUŃGA, C. A.: *The Rise of Esports (And How It Affects Digital Marketing)*. Released on 11<sup>th</sup> March 2021. [online]. [2023-05-15]. Available at: <<https://www.oom.com.sg/the-rise-of-esports-and-how-it-affects-digital-marketing/>>.
  - 5 BALTEZAREVIĆ, R., BALTEZAREVIĆ, I.: Uloga instagrama u poslovanju mladih. In *Megatrend Revija*, 2021, Vol. 18, No. 2, p. 23.
  - 6 SEO, Y.: Electronic Sports: A New Marketing Landscape of the Experience Economy. In *Journal of Marketing Management*, 2013, Vol. 29, No. 13-14, p. 1544.
  - 7 ALTON, L.: *How Big Will ESport Really Get?*. Released on 12<sup>th</sup> September 2019. [online]. [2023-04-18]. Available at: <<https://community.connection.com/how-big-will-esports-really-get/>>.
  - 8 DUNN, J.: *The Rise of Esports*. Released on 24<sup>th</sup> August 2022. [online]. [2023-03-08]. Available at: <<https://www.stlouisfed.org/open-vault/2022/aug/rise-of-esports-industry>>.
  - 9 BRYAN, Y.: *Can Virtual Reality and Esports Coexist?*. Released on 14<sup>th</sup> May 2023. [online]. [2023-05-14]. Available at: <<https://readyesports.com/vr-and-esports/>>.
  - 10 BALTEZAREVIĆ, R. et al.: Political Marketing in Digital Games: 'Game Over' for Traditional Political Marketing Methods. In *Acta Ludologica*, 2019, Vol. 2, No. 2, p. 38.

and unlike e.g., baseball or ice-hockey, combines multiple platforms together.<sup>11</sup> Not to be confused with recreational digital gaming (playing for fun), eSports is organized competitive digital gaming typically played via a game console, computer, or mobile device.<sup>12</sup> A broader definition for the eSports industry based on W. Collis' model of the entire eSports ecosystem divides eSports revenue into six categories: (a) teams, professionals and streamers, (b) streaming platforms, (c) game publishers, (d) physical products, (e) leagues and tournaments, and finally (f) digital tools. All these sectors overlap and, in some way, represent eSports.<sup>13</sup> Approximately 8 million people stream content on Twitch today. Over 1.3 trillion minutes of video were viewed by Twitch users last year. This interactive live streaming service had an annual average of nearly 2,500,000 concurrent viewers in 2022. North America and Asia currently have the largest eSports markets. The Latin American region is expected to have 130 million gamers and eSports viewers by the year 2025. China leads the way in terms of eSports participation. The eSports industry has a 47% engagement rate among Chinese citizens.<sup>14</sup>

In the late 1990s, South Korea was the first country to recognize eSports as an official sport. The Korean Esports Federation was extremely active during that period in trying to get official eSports recognition from various nations around the world. Currently, eSports is recognized as a sport in many countries, such as China, Italy, South Africa, Russia, Nepal, Finland, Denmark and the USA. Competitive gaming has developed a huge fan base and is under consideration to make its official debut as a discipline at the 2024 Paris Olympics.<sup>15</sup> If we compare traditional sports tournaments with eSports tournaments, we can conclude that the construction behind them is quite similar. Esports teams are also built much like normal sports teams. First of all, there is the owner of the team, and behind the team is the management that organizes trips, league matches or tournaments. Viewership of eSports is also extremely high, due to the fact that it is hosted online, thus allowing easy access for everyone. One platform on which it is broadcast is ESPN (an American cable sports channel).<sup>16</sup> Through several platforms, such as YouTube or Twitch, eSports gamers have the ability to broadcast their games and communicate directly with their audience in a digital environment. The eSports championships "Worlds" showed the great popularity of competitive games with a viewing rate of over 32 million people.<sup>17</sup>

In the sea of eSports streamers and players, those who stood out as the most prominent, and therefore the most interesting for companies to hire to promote their brands, in top five order are (highest followed Twitch streamers): Ninja (Tyler Blevins) with 16.9 million followers, Tfue (Turner Tenney) 10 million followers, Shroud (Michael Grzesiek) 9 million followers, Rubius (Ruben Doblas) 8.2 million followers and XQC (Felix Lengyel) with 7.6 million followers. Felix Lengyel is also considered to be the streamer who earns the most on the platform (it is estimated that he has earned more than 2 million USD to date). On the other hand, the highest paid eSports player is N0tail (Johan Sundstein), a Team OG player, who earned over 7 million USD.<sup>18</sup>

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11 JENNY, S. E. et al.: eSports Venues: A New Sport Business Opportunity. In *Journal of Applied Sport Management*, 2018, Vol. 10, No. 1, p. 35.

12 Ibidem.

13 For more information, see: COLLIS, W.: *The Book of Esports*. New York, NY : RosettaBooks, 2020.

14 RUBY, D.: *44+ eSports Statistics for 2023 (Trends, Facts & Insights)*. Released on 10<sup>th</sup> March 2023. [online]. [2023-06-02]. Available at: <<https://www.demandsage.com/esports-statistics/>>.

15 DIFRANCISCO-DONOGHUE, J., BALENTINE, J. R.: Collegiate eSport. In *Current Sports Medicine Reports*, 2018, Vol. 17, No. 4, p. 117-118.

16 KANE, D., SPRADLEY, B. D.: Recognizing eSport as a Sport. In *The Sports Journal*, 2017, Vol. 13, No. 1. [online]. [2023-04-04]. Available at: <<https://thesportjournal.org/article/recognizing-esports-as-a-sport/>>.

17 DIFRANCISCO-DONOGHUE, J., BALENTINE, J. R.: Collegiate eSport. *Current Sports Medicine Reports*, 2018, Vol. 17, No. 4, p. 117-118.

18 JAIN, K.: *The Inspiring Evolution & Growth Of eSports*. Released on 20<sup>th</sup> June 2021. [online]. [2023-03-08]. Available at: <<https://www.iuemag.com/u21/ed/the-inspiring-evolution-growth-of-esports>>.

The expansion of eSports around the world has drawn the attention of educational practitioners and researchers. In the United States alone, the number of high schools participating in eSports is 1200, which is six times more than in previous years.<sup>19</sup> Engaging in eSports can provide students with opportunities to learn basic life skills, such as communication, coordination, and team cohesion, but also to develop more general transferable abilities such as critical thinking skills and technological competence. In any case, eSports is a sphere in which an individual's skills are likely to reflect well on playing success. Many universities today offer eSports scholarships to students who are ready to compete and pursue their passion in the technology field.<sup>20</sup>

## Digital Marketing in the Esports Industry

The development of digital technology has changed the way we buy, sell, socialize, manage our health, learn and have fun.<sup>21</sup> Of course, digital media for mass communication are increasingly used in business as well,<sup>22</sup> with their help, more efficient, more direct, faster, and cheaper communication with consumers is possible. Esports events that are broadcast live on the Internet and television channels and attract huge audiences are an excellent marketing tool for promoting company brands. Furthermore, according to research conducted by eSports streaming platform Twitch, the eSports audience is considered extremely engaged and loyal, with 90% of fans being able to recall at least one non-gaming sponsor within eSports.<sup>23</sup> Heat mapping and eye tracking technology is used to measure and predict the reality of visual engagement.<sup>24</sup> Companies using eSports today provide access to 21- to 35-year-old consumers anywhere in the world. The audience is growing at a rapid rate. A few years ago, the number of spectators at the finals of the League of Legends World Championship (commonly abbreviated as 'Worlds') exceeded the number of people watching the finals of the NBA season.<sup>25</sup> The final match of the 'Worlds' had almost 100 million viewers.<sup>26</sup> Many global companies have begun to pay more attention to this industry and its incredible marketing potential, primarily due to the huge audience of eSports competitions.<sup>27</sup>

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- 19 HENNICK, C.: *eSports Programs Start to Pop up in K-12 Schools*. Released on 11<sup>th</sup> January 2019. [online]. [2023-03-08]. Available at: <<https://edtechmagazine.com/k12/article/2019/01/eSports-programs-start-pop-k-12-schools>>.
  - 20 PLUSS, M. et al.: eSports: The Chess of the 21st Century. In *Frontiers in Psychology*, 2019, Vol. 10, No. 1, p. 4. [online]. [2023-04-04]. Available at: <<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00156>>.
  - 21 SAFIEDDINE, F., BALTEZAREVIĆ, R.: Advances in Technologies Evolving New Dimensions in E-Society. In BALTEZAREVIĆ, V., BALTEZAREVIĆ, R., BALTEZAREVIĆ, B. (eds.): *The Internet as a Tool of Modern Business and Communication*. Saarbrücken : Lap Lambert Academic Publishing, 2016, p. 43.
  - 22 BALTEZAREVIĆ, R., BALTEZAREVIĆ, I.: The Role of Personal Branding in the Digital Environment on Career Development During the Covid-19 Pandemic. In ĐORĐEVIĆ, B. (ed.): *The Impact of the Covid 19 Pandemic on Economy, Resources and Sustainable Development*. Belgrade : Faculty of Management Zaječar, Megatrend university Belgrade, 2022, p. 186.
  - 23 MURPHY, M.: *Why Big Brands NEED to Shift Their Focus to eSports*. Released on 19<sup>th</sup> December 2018. [online]. [2023-05-14]. Available at: <<https://medium.com/instant-sponsor/why-big-brands-need-to-shift-their-focus-to-esports-4deb6a1dea31>>.
  - 24 BIRMINGHAM, A.: *Cover Story: The Business of Gaming Will Reshape Marketing, Technology*. Released on 7<sup>th</sup> December 2022. [online]. [2023-03-08]. Available at: <<https://www.digitalnationaus.com.au/video/cover-story-the-business-of-gaming-will-reshape-marketing-technology-588682>>.
  - 25 DAVIS, J.: *eSports Industry Has Unique Opportunity for Sports Expansion*. Released on 6<sup>th</sup> May 2020. [online]. [2023-05-15]. Available at: <<https://esportsinsider.com/2020/05/esports-sports-expansion/>>.
  - 26 MURPHY, M.: *Why Big Brands NEED to Shift Their Focus to eSports*. Released on 19<sup>th</sup> December 2018. [online]. [2023-05-14]. Available at: <<https://medium.com/instant-sponsor/why-big-brands-need-to-shift-their-focus-to-esports-4deb6a1dea31>>.
  - 27 HALLMANN, K., GIEL, T.: eSports – Competitive Sports or Recreational Activity?. In *Sport Management Review*, 2018, Vol. 21, No. 1, p. 16.

Advertising during the online broadcast of major eSports events has become a widespread practice. So, for example, the highest number of simultaneous viewers during the international competition, The International (Dota 2 Championships) event – (in 2018) had 1.2 million viewers worldwide,<sup>28</sup> while in 2022 the same event, which was held in Singapore, had 1.7 million concurrent viewers.<sup>29</sup> A few years ago, the Coca-Cola company announced a partnership with Riot Games, the organizer of the most popular eSports competition in the world in playing the game League of Legends – ‘Worlds’, and became a sponsor of the Challenger Series, a newly created professional league that is held every year. According to Coca-Cola’s internal research, after only one year of cooperation, this company has become the ‘number one’ (FMCG – fast moving consumer goods) brand associated with the ‘Worlds’. The study showed that about 80% of the players expressed an optimistic mood regarding this sponsorship campaign.<sup>30</sup> Another study, conducted to better understand how eSports fans perceive the existence of brands in eSports, whether playing, watching, or both, found that 85% of study participants expressed positive agreement with the following statements: “I always appreciate when brands try to reach me through the gaming world. [...] I might even be more likely to buy from them in the future [and] I usually appreciate when brands try to reach me through the gaming world, but it has to be done right”.<sup>31</sup>

Digital games and technologies are becoming an integral part of the market and now we can see a tendency for large multinational companies to enter this market and sometimes organize their own tournaments, such as the Mountain Dew League. The company Mercedes, which mainly manufactures luxury cars, sponsors major tournaments hosted by ESL, also provides its S-class cars for the best eSports players. Of course, IT companies are the ones who find this market the most interesting and have already occupied a large segment.<sup>32</sup> Esports is a huge business for them, and the biggest IT/computer industry sponsors today, HP and Intel, were among the first to start sponsoring eSports events. Competing players play digital games exclusively on these companies’ computers.<sup>33</sup> It is an interesting fact that today 55% of the brands that support the gaming and eSports sector are not directly related to games and, moreover, 94% of the companies that sponsor events, teams, players or competitions are not companies that are directly related to the gaming (or eSports) industry.<sup>34</sup> Almost three-quarters of eSports revenue comes from advertising and marketing that brands invest in eSports events.<sup>35</sup> A study conducted by A. Elasri-Ejjaberi, S. Rodriguez-Rodriguez and P. Aparicio-Chueca showed that sponsoring an eSports league has a very positive effect on a sponsor’s brand by influencing consumers to be more aware of the sponsor’s brand communication actions, thus getting to

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28 Newzoo Global Esports Market Report 2020 / Light Version. Released on 25<sup>th</sup> February 2020. [online]. [2023-05-14]. Available at: <<https://newzoo.com/insights/trend-reports/newzoo-global-esports-market-report-2020-light-version/>>.

29 ŠIMIĆ, I.: The International 2022 Becomes the Third Most-watched Dota 2 Event Ever. Released on 31<sup>st</sup> October 2022. [online]. [2023-05-16]. Available at: <<https://esportsinsider.com/2022/10/the-international-2022-third-most-watched-dota-2-event-ever>>.

30 OZANIAN, M., SETTIMI, C., PEREZ, M.: *The World’s Most Valuable eSports Companies*. Released on 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2018. [online]. [2023-05-15]. Available at: <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/mikeozanian/2018/10/23/the-worlds-most-valuable-esports-companies-1/#1d3194396a6e>>.

31 ROSENBERG, D.: *eSports Marketing: Start with the Consumer*. [online]. [2023-05-19]. Available at: <<https://sports.cioreview.com/cxinsight/esports-marketing-start-with-the-consumer-nid-24249-cid-107.html>>.

32 DAVIS, J.: *eSports Industry Has Unique Opportunity for Sports Expansion*. Released on 6<sup>th</sup> May 2020. [online]. [2023-05-15]. Available at: <<https://esportsinsider.com/2020/05/esports-sports-expansion/>>.

33 ERICKSON, B. et al.: *eSports: Business Models, How an eSport Team Makes Money*. 2021. [online]. [2023-05-16]. Available at: <<https://mercercapital.com/article/esports-business-models-article/>>.

34 CUESTA-VALIÑO, P., GUTIÉRREZ-RODRÍGUEZ, P., LORANCA-VALLE, C.: Sponsorship Image and Value Creation in E-Sports. In *Journal of Business Research*, 2022, Vol. 145, No. 1, p. 199.

35 BORRÁS, H.: *Gaming Marketing Trends for 2023*. Released on 8<sup>th</sup> February 2023. [online]. [2023-03-07]. Available at: <<https://www.cyberclick.net/numericalblogen/gaming-marketing-trends-for-2023>>.

know the brand better. Also, in this way the image of the particular brand is strengthened. Finally, those consumers who claim to know about the sponsored eSports competition are better able to characterize the brand.<sup>36</sup> Sponsoring an eSports team means that the company is responsible for some of the team's expenses in exchange for positive publicity and brand awareness. Companies that opt for this strategy usually have their logo on the uniforms of the players or the teams agree to consume their product whenever they are in front of the media. In this way they keep their brand fresh in the minds of their consumers. Companies such as Twitch, Red Bull, and Puma regularly sponsor eSports teams at competitions, in this way, they want to remind consumers that their favourite brands support eSports. However, this strategy is not recommended for smaller companies, which are not so internationally known. Other marketing strategies, such as advertisements describing their services or products, are a much more acceptable option.<sup>37</sup>

Companies are increasingly using digital games to connect with their consumers, due to the fact that the eSports industry is showing an upward trend.<sup>38</sup> Influencer marketing has become very popular in recent years, according to estimates, close to 90% of marketers are currently using an influencer marketing plan to increase or maintain their investment.<sup>39</sup> Companies are aware that successful eSports players are also influencers who are perceived by their followers as credible sources of information. As such, in direct communication with consumers (during video streams) they can directly or indirectly influence consumer purchasing decisions. Among the marketing activities, if demographics are taken into account (18-24 age group), the endorsement of athletes and celebrities is the most effective marketing strategy.<sup>40</sup> In addition to engaging eSports influencers, the suggestion for companies is to select and optimize the best social channels (such as Twitch, YouTube Gaming, Hitbox and GosuGamers). Also, starting a company's own eSports team to promote paid advertising for their brands can be a very useful digital marketing strategy in the eSports industry. Furthermore, the creation of partnerships would allow access to an even larger audience and if the partner is carefully chosen, it can have a positive impact on the credibility of the brand.<sup>41</sup> For example, Red Bull, Samsung and Hershey are some of the brands that have partnered with Ninja, the most followed gaming streamer on Twitch.<sup>42</sup> Organizing team events, mini-tournaments, giving gifts to consumers, promoting social responsibility, along with precise and timely creation and posting of content on social networks, can further improve consumer perception of the brands represented by these companies. If consumers are satisfied with a product or service, they will continue to spread the word-of-mouth (WOM) to other Internet users. This kind of communication in a digital environment is known as *electronic word-of-mouth* (eWOM). And very often it can have a viral effect, that is, the content posted by one user (company, influencer or ordinary internet user) is multiplied exponentially through cyber

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36 ELASRI-EJJABERI, A., RODRIGUEZ-RODRIGUEZ, S., APARICIO-CHUECA, P.: Effect of eSport Sponsorship on Brands: An Empirical Study Applied to Youth. In *Journal of Physical Education and Sport*, 2020, Vol. 20, No 2, p. 853.

37 PATEL, N.: *How to Use eSports Marketing to Grow Your B2C Reach*. [online]. [2023-03-07]. Available at: <<https://neilpatel.com/blog/esports-marketing/>>.

38 BERGER, A. et al.: Gamified Interactions: Whether, When, and How Games Facilitate Self-Brand Connections. In *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 2018, Vol. 46, No. 4, p. 654.

39 *15 Game Marketing Trends for 2023*. Released on 20<sup>th</sup> December 2022. [online]. [2023-03-07]. Available at: <<https://www.gamemarketinggenie.com/blog/game-marketing-trends>>.

40 FERNANDES, A.: *How Motivations for eSports Consumption Influence the eSports Sponsorship Response: The Favourability, Brand Awareness and Purchase Intention Effects*. [Dissertation Thesis]. Lisbon : ISCTE Business School, 2018, p. 18.

41 CLARK, L.: *eSport Marketing: 11 Powerful Strategies in for Rapid Growth in 2022 (+Examples)*. [online]. [2023-05-17]. Available at: <<https://peertopeermarketing.co/esport-marketing/>>.

42 WOOD, C.: *2023 Predictions: How Marketers Will Approach Web3, Virtual Experiences and Gaming This Year*. Released on 10<sup>th</sup> January 2023. [online]. [2023-03-07]. Available at: <<https://martech.org/2023-predictions-how-marketers-will-approach-web3-virtual-experiences-and-gaming-this-year/>>.

space (reposted at high speed). It describes any positive or negative statement made by current or potential consumers about an organization or its products using the Internet. This concept can appear in various environments such as discussion forums, weblogs, review websites and social networking sites, where consumers can post their comments, opinions and reviews regarding products and services.<sup>43</sup> Technological flexibility enables the expression of eWOM content (in forms such as opinions, online ratings, feedback, reviews, comments and online experience sharing) not only using textual information, but also using rich multimedia such as images, videos and animations. eWOM is not limited to geographical boundaries, does not disappear with time, and it can be said that the duration of eWOM content is infinite. Content is not deleted at regular intervals, unless there are legal issues related to it.<sup>44</sup> Electronic word-of-mouth differs from traditional WOM because it offers a higher speed of message transmission between users, with messages available online and visible at any time. However, eWOM can also have a negative impact on the credibility of information, as information communicators and information recipients are sometimes anonymous.<sup>45</sup>

Whether players will decide to play a game or watch a streamer is influenced by emotional factors, such as the desire to improve game playing skills, or simply sympathy for the player, who streams while playing a certain game, as well as material factors (because often streamers receive free digital bonuses in various games).<sup>46</sup> Key factors for the growth of eSports are social media platforms that provide users with easy access and no location-related boundaries.<sup>47</sup> In recent years, access to competitive entertainment has gradually shifted from television to the Internet. Streaming platforms, which allow audiences to watch digital games in real time, have become important and for this reason eSports organizations are trying to incorporate streaming into their digital marketing strategies to influence consumer purchasing decisions. Also, they allow consumers to create new content, socialize around it, and thus, reduce the distance between consumers and producers.<sup>48</sup> One study showed that 55% of young internet users want to engage with their favourite brands through social apps,<sup>49</sup> which is information that confirms the justification of such a digital approach to consumers. Gaming brands are increasingly developing their digital strategies. A multi-channel approach and data analytics to gain a better understanding of consumers are believed to be key factors in driving long-term growth.<sup>50</sup> In-game advertising can be a powerful and unique marketing strategy. With this strategy, it is possible to differentiate a brand from the competition, increase brand awareness and collect precise data on consumers.<sup>51</sup>

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- 43 HENNIG-THURAU, T. et al.: Electronic Word-of-Mouth via Customer-Opinion Platforms: What Motivates Customers to Articulate Themselves on the Internet?. In *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 2004, Vol. 18, No. 1, p. 42.
- 44 MISHRA, A., SATISH, S. M.: eWOM: Extant Research Review and Future Research Avenues. In *The Journal for Decision Makers*, 2016, Vol. 41, No. 3, p. 223.
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Marketing investment in eSports leagues is much cheaper in terms of impact per viewer than traditional sports. As for the investment risk, it is lower if the brand sponsors the competition. Companies in the industry rightly believe that investing in eSports will result in more fans mass- watching the teams play on TV and the Internet, which will lead to them buying products associated with the brand.<sup>52</sup> The eSports market revenue globally reached around \$1.8 billion in 2022.<sup>53</sup> In the coming years, based on the revenue model, the global eSports market that includes media rights, merchandise, tickets, advertising and sponsorships is predicted to grow at a CAGR (compound annual growth rate) of 22% by 2030 (representing the largest market share).<sup>54</sup> Such predictions and the potential of the eSports industry will certainly not remain under the radar of global companies. The growing cultural influence of eSports and gaming, with its massive reach, interactivity and frequency, presents many advertising opportunities for brands. On a global level, games and eSports already enjoy the interest of some of the biggest brands in all sectors, such as Intel, Monster, Red Bull, Pepsi, MTV, etc. Average advertiser spending growth of 30 percent annually in this industry implies that gaming companies are constantly expanding and can reach a diverse audience. The introduction of Web3/Metaverse-related innovations in the gaming ecosystem will enable players to experience new virtual forms of entertainment.<sup>55</sup>

In the near future, marketing experts may also include sensory marketing strategies in the digital environment. Haptic gloves will make it possible to touch virtual objects and feel their texture, while the sense of smell will be stimulated with special headphones that will cover the consumer's nose, and when the user interacts with the object (product), the scents in the cartridges of this device will be activated. In this way, consumers' senses will be stimulated, almost as in a real environment. This approach will cause emotions in consumers, which will have a positive effect on their purchasing decisions. With the development of VR (virtual reality), players can really communicate with each other almost as in real life. The possibilities are now at such a level that a user can punch a person or give 'high five'. It is undeniable that VR games add a new dimension to the world of competitive gaming.<sup>56</sup>

## Methodological Framework

In order to carry out research for the needs of this paper, we created a close-ended questionnaire that consisted of two parts: in the first part, we asked for data on the sex, age, and education of the respondents, and asked for an answer to the question whether the respondents are players or part of the audience? The second part contained 15 statements

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that were defined with the intention of ascertaining the attitudes of the respondents. The questionnaire was sent to 248 electronic addresses that are contained in the database of the Megatrend University in Belgrade, Serbia. These are the addresses of students and former students, as well as teaching staff of the University. After receiving answers from respondents, we used a total of 113 completed questionnaires for processing through SPSS software. In order to conduct empirical research, we defined three research questions that are based on the theory that we analysed in this paper:

- RQ1: Is the promotion of brands on digital platforms intended for eSports acceptable to players and audiences?
- RQ2: Should companies hire credible eSports social media influencers to recommend their brands as part of their campaign?
- RQ3: Do companies that want to advertise their brands through digital marketing have to strive to achieve positive eWOM communication?

## Results

Based on the conducted analysis, we concluded that the survey included 67 (59.3%) male respondents and 46 (40.7%) female respondents. As for their age structure, most of the respondents belong to the youngest age group of 18-25 years, a total of 41 (36.3%). The majority of the respondents have college education - 54 (47.8%).

The next question that is of particular importance for this research was the question of whether the respondents participate in playing digital games from the field of eSports, that is, are they players or part of the audience? Based on their answer, we conclude that 18 (15.9%) of the respondents are players, while 95 (84.1%) declared that they are part of the audience. Further analysis shows the following characteristics of players and audiences:

- Table 1 shows that of the total number of respondents, 18 (15.92%) are players and 95 (84.08%) are part of the audience. In relation to the gender structure, 57 male respondents are part of the audience and 10 are players, 38 female respondents are part of the audience and 8 are players;
- Table 2 gives us the information that the majority of players are from the age group 26-35, 7 of them (38.8%);
- Table 3 shows that most players have a college education, 7 (38.8) of them.

Table 1: Gender \* Audience/Player

Gender		Audience	Player	Total
Gender	Male	57	10	67
	Female	38	8	46
Total		95	18	113

Source: own processing

Table 2: Age \* Audience/Player Crosstabulation

Age		Audience	Player	Total
Age	18-25	37	4	41
	26-35	21	7	28
	36-45	3	4	7
	46-55	17	3	20
	56-65	17	0	17
Total		95	18	113

Source: own processing

Table 3: Education \* Audience/Player Crosstabulation

Education		Audience	Player	Total
Education	Primary school	1	0	1
	High school	20	9	29
	College education	47	7	54
	Master	25	1	26
	Doctorate	2	1	3
Total		95	18	113

Source: own processing

We tested all three research questions using statements for which we asked the respondents to express their views by providing answers on a modified Likert scale from 1 to 5. RQ1:

- Table 4 shows that 49 (43.4%) respondents agree with the statement and 4 (3.5%) strongly agree;
- Table 5 provides the answer about the acceptance of the statement for testing RQ1 in relation to whether the respondent is a player or an audience member. 41 (43.15%) respondents said they agree with the statement, out of a total of 95 respondents belonging to the audience segment, and 8 (44.4%) out of a total of 18 players. 4 of them (4.2%) from the audience segment stated that they strongly agree with the statement, and none from the player's segment.

RQ2:

- Table 6 shows that 46 (40.7%) respondents agree with the statement and 9 (8.0%) strongly agree;
- Table 7 gives the answer about the acceptance of the statement for testing RQ2 in relation to whether the respondent is a player or an audience member. 39 (41.05%) out of a total of 95 respondents belonging to the audience segment and 7 (38.8%) out of a total of 18 players agreed with the statement. Strongly agree 8 (8.42%) from the audience and 1 (5.55%) from the player's segment.

Table 4: Attitudes of respondents to the statement that tests RQ1

RQ1				
	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly disagree	8	7.1	7.1	7.1
Disagree	28	24.8	24.8	31.9
Neither agree nor disagree	24	21.2	21.2	53.1
Agree	49	43.4	43.4	96.5
Strongly agree	4	3.5	3.5	100.0
Total	113	100.0	100.0	

Source: own processing

Table 5: RQ1 \* Audience/Player Crosstabulation

RQ1				
		Audience	Player	Total
RQ1	Strongly disagree	7	1	8
	Disagree	23	5	28
	Neither agree nor disagree	20	4	24
	Agree	41	8	49
	Strongly agree	4	0	4
Total		95	18	113

Source: own processing

Table 6: Attitudes of respondents to the statement that tests RQ2

RQ2				
	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly disagree	14	12.4	12.4	12.4
Disagree	14	12.4	12.4	24.8
Neither agree nor disagree	30	26.5	26.5	51.3
Agree	46	40.7	40.7	92.0
Strongly agree	9	8.0	8.0	100.0
Total	113	100.0	100.0	

Source: own processing

Table 7: RQ2 \* Audience/Player Crosstabulation

RQ2		Audience	Player	Total
RQ2	Strongly disagree	13	1	14
	Disagree	10	4	14
	Neither agree nor disagree	25	5	30
	Agree	39	7	46
	Strongly agree	8	1	9
Total		95	18	113

Source: own processing

RQ3:

- Table 8 shows that 36 (31.9%) respondents agree with the statement and 4 (3.5%) strongly agree;
- Table 9 gives the answer about the acceptance of the statement for testing RQ3 in relation to whether the respondent is a player or an audience member. 27 (28.4%) out of a total of 95 respondents belonging to the audience segment and 9 (50.0%) out of a total of 18 players agreed with the statement. Strongly agree - 4 (4.21%) from the audience segment and none from player's segment.

Table 8: Attitudes of respondents to the statement that tests RQ3

RQ3				
	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly disagree	13	11.5	11.5	11.5
Disagree	29	25.7	25.7	37.2
Neither agree nor disagree	31	27.4	27.4	64.6
Agree	36	31.9	31.9	96.5
Strongly agree	4	3.5	3.5	100.0
Total	113	100.0	100.0	

Source: own processing

Table 9: RQ3 \* Audience/Player Crosstabulation

RQ3		Audience	Player	Total
RQ3	Strongly disagree	10	3	13
	Disagree	25	4	29
	Neither agree nor disagree	29	2	31
	Agree	27	9	36
	Strongly agree	4	0	4
Total		95	18	113

Source: own processing

Given that the results of the research indicated that there is no significant difference in the opinions expressed by the respondents in relation to whether they belong to the audience or to the players, we performed a check using the T-test of independent samples, which confirmed this assumption:

- RQ1: (Sig. .795,  $p > .05$ ), Mean difference .071 (Lower: .466, Upper: .608). The result indicates that there is no statistically significant difference between the attitudes of the players and the audience;
- RQ2: (Sig. .520,  $p > .05$ ), Mean difference .033 (Lower: .554, Upper: .621). The result indicates that there is no statistically significant difference between the attitudes of the players and the audience;
- RQ3: (Sig. .860,  $p > .05$ ), Mean difference .050 (Lower: .605, Upper: .506). The result indicates that there is no statistically significant difference between the attitudes of the players and the audience.

## Discussion and Conclusion

In the near future, companies will achieve a great competitive advantage if they recognize the huge opportunities of the eSports industry in terms of easy access to a large number of consumers, who can be directly communicated with, primarily in the digital environment, and whose attitudes and purchasing decisions can be influenced. This is supported by the results of studies that show that young people prefer to deal with their favourite brands through digital technologies. This target group does not use or very rarely uses traditional media; therefore, it is necessary to design marketing communication according to their needs and adapt it to the digital environment. Young audiences trust their eSports idols and want to emulate them. Companies who are also aware of this fact, hire eSports influencers (popular gamers) to recommend their products and services to their followers on social networks, or during gaming streaming sessions, which has turned out to be a very effective digital marketing method in recent years. Previous research has shown that with the younger population, hiring influencers by companies (athletes, gamers or other celebrities) is the most effective marketing strategy. In such cases, a positive image of the sponsoring company (and its brands) is built in the minds of young consumers. As can also be concluded from previous studies, consumers will always appreciate when brands try to reach them through the 'world of games', and there is a higher chance that they will buy such brands in the future. Sponsoring an eSports league has also been shown to have a very positive effect on the sponsor's brand and directly reinforces that brand's image.

The analysis of research question RQ1 showed that 43.15% of the respondents belonging to the audience segment and 44.4% of players agree with the statement that the promotion of brands on digital platforms intended for eSports is acceptable. 4.2% of the audience and none of the players strongly agreed. No significant difference was observed in the acceptance of the statement between the players and the audience.

The analysis of research question RQ2 showed that the statement that companies should hire credible eSports social media influencers to recommend their brands as part of their campaign is acceptable to 41.05% of respondents who belong to the audience segment and to 38.8% of players. 8.42% of the audience and 5.55% of players strongly agreed. No significant difference was observed in the acceptance of the statement between the players and the audience.

The analysis of research question RQ3 showed that the statement that companies that want to advertise their brands through digital marketing must strive to achieve

positive eWOM communication is acceptable to 28.4% of respondents who belong to the audience segment and to 50.0% of players. 4.21% of the audience and none of the players strongly agreed. No significant difference was observed in the acceptance of the statement between the players and the audience.

The research conducted in this paper confirmed all three statements with which we tested the justification of the formulated research questions, and the following conclusions were reached: Companies should focus on promoting brands on digital platforms intended for eSports, because such activities are for players and the audience generally acceptable activities of business entities; During the implementation of brand promotion on these platforms, it is desirable to engage credible eSports social media influencers to promote and recommend their brands, as well as to strive to achieve positive eWOM communication.

The results obtained by the authors can explain why digital marketing strategies are increasingly taking precedence over traditional strategies. However, strategies must be creative and precisely designed, because only then will they have the power to enable companies to differentiate themselves from the competition in today's turbulent market conditions, and be perceived by consumers in the desired way. The near future will most likely bring great innovations in the eSports industry. Virtual reality will cause a revolution in gaming and eSports, but the target group will also shift towards those gamers who are oriented towards more demanding physical activities, because VR games require serious physical efforts and skills. It remains to be seen how digital marketing will adapt to these new conditions in the eSports industry.

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