Building Legitimacy for E-sports: From a Perspective of Traditional Sports Business Media

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Introduction

E-sports has exhibited dramatic commercial growth and increasingly received intensive and rapt scrutiny from the society. The term of “e-sports,” in various spelling forms such as “esports” and “eSports,” has in particular become a buzzword spreading across the field of traditional sport management (see Funk, Pizzo, & Baker, 2017; Hallmann & Giel, 2017; Heere, 2017). A variety of sports business actors from team owners and sports sponsors, sports journalists, to intercollegiate athletics directors, have expressed great interest in the development of e-sports industry. In many instances, tradition sport industry stakeholders and firms have proactively connected e-sports to their business. For example, Former NFL Network and ESPN CEO Steve Bornstein told SportsBusiness Journal: “When I started at ESPN in 1980, I was hoping we’d be successful…Eventually, I knew we’d be successful, but I never imagined the incredible success ESPN had. With e-sports, I know now that we’ll be successful and I think the opportunity is ultimately as big as ESPN has become” (Lefton, 2015, para. 9). However, both the business framework and future of e-sports is source of bewilderment for some sports stakeholders. For instance, David Blitzer, the owner 76ers and Devils, talked about his entry into e-sports business: “it’s a little unclear as to what we bought. It’s absolutely the Wild West” (“The Sit-Down: David Blitzer,” 2017, para. 15). To this end, the emergence of e-sports has triggered debates and controversial discussion over the legitimacy of this new organizational form within traditional sports business field (see Funk et al., 2017; Hallmann & Giel, 2017; Heere, 2017).

In this study, we provide an analysis of how this industrial uncertainty, nay disquiet, come to be articulated within popular sport business media discourses. In doing so, we seek to develop a better understanding of (1) how the legitimacy of e-sports, along with its emerging business arrangements, has been established and contested in contemporary sports business media; (2) the implications of such public discourses as related to the legitimacy of e-sports business and the process of legitimating e-sports.

Theoretical Background—Legitimacy and Legitimation Strategy

Legitimacy is an important element in the creation and survival of new organizational forms (Aldrich & Fiol, 1994; Dacin, Goodstein, & Scott, 2002; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). Suchman (1995) defines legitimacy as “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (p. 574). According to institutional theorists (Suchman, 1995; Zimmerman & Zeitz, 2002), legitimacy can be derived from three layers—(1) regulation, rules, and expectations; (2) norms and values of a society or a level of the societal environment relevant to the new organizational form; and (3) cultural cognitive framework that addresses “the more specialized, explicit and codified knowledge and belief systems promulgated by various professional and scientific bodies” (Scott, 1994, p. 81). Furthermore, to legitimate a new organizational form, the use of persuasive language (i.e. rhetoric) has become a common strategy for entrepreneurs skillfully interpreting and exploiting contradictions embedded in dominant institutional framework to further their own interests (i.e. establishing new legitimacy criterion to modify existing institutional logie) (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). It has been argued that in the realm of mass media (Habermas, 2006), cultural intermediaries such as journalists and television celebrities can play an important role in shaping public opinion, public policy, and in some cases investment and business practices (e.g., The Wall Street Journal). In this study, we extend that line of inquiry by looking at how sport business-focused media has dealt with the rise of e-sports and its relationship with existing sport business structures, norms, and practices.

Methods

Based on the legitimacy and rhetorical strategy framework, we examine the way in which traditional sports media
discourses present both fact and opinion-based content aligning with the three aspects of legitimacy (regulative legitimacy, normative legitimacy, and cultural legitimacy) with respect to e-sports business. Our primary data include 128 articles about e-sports from SportsBusiness Journal, ranging from 2007 to 2017. We conduct a qualitative media analysis to examine both the manifest content (stage 1)—the content and information that are physically present and the latent content of the data (stage 2)—implicit meanings (Altheide & Schneider, 2012). The first stage focuses on expressions, words, and sentences related to major players and their main arguments/opinions on e-sports business. Several themes are highlighted during this stage: collegiate video gaming, city-based e-sports franchise, global investment interests, labor and governance, corruptions in e-sports, and female leadership in e-sports. The second stage of coding analysis focuses on linking the media data to rhetorical devices including logos, pathos, or ethos (Killingsworth, 2005). Other supporting documents—such as various e-sports organizations’ reports and reports from sports organizations which have vested business interests in e-sports—will be analyzed to corroborate the language and messaging used to contest the legitimacy of e-sports business as a new organizational form. Overall, these themes surface as constitutive of the contradictions inherent in sports business media discourses about the emergence and increased commercial relevance of e-sports. The analysis illustrates both the explicit and implicit agonisms and antagonisms put forward in legitimization discourses of e-sports as deviation from, or possible complement, to the traditional sports industry.

Results and Discussion
This study is still in progress; thus we do not report or discuss our results in this abstract but will present them at the conference. However, we feel that there are four major contributions the study makes. First, in this study we will provide an important first step in evaluating how the burgeoning e-sports industry is being discursively negotiated amongst intermediaries within the sport business media. Second, we will present themes within the study that will serve as specific signposts as to what business practitioners are statedly identifying as the main growth opportunities and commercial features of the ascending digital sport form. Third, in the analysis we will present a qualitative approximation as to the ‘story that is being told’ to sports business practitioners about the extent to which, and in what ways, e-sports should be perceived as legitimate sports business. Fourth, we will illustrate how these industry discourses are used to favorably or unfavorably compare e-sports to traditional sports—and thereby distinguish sport from e-sports while simultaneously exploring how traditional sports business entities can develop utilizing e-sports’ emerging business practices.