Integrating novel activities, such as esports, requires organizations to learn how to position the activities to internal and external audiences using limited information. Currently sport industry professionals are unfamiliar with esports, and prevailing stigmas and stereotypes surrounding video gaming culture further complicate their integration. Despite these challenges, many sport organizations are deliberately integrating esports. This requires internal actors (i.e., those within an organization) to account for the change and ambiguity inherent in novel activities to garner acceptance.

In the current study we examine the integration of an esports organization into a National Basketball League (NBA) franchise. The NBA organization was the first North American professional sports team to own an esports team and are considered first-movers in the esports industry. We link theories of institutional creation work with sensemaking to explore how actors within the NBA organization helped create and give meaning—sensemaking—to esports, which in turn supports externally-focused sensegiving—influencing the sensemaking of others. Sensemaking is conceptually similar to institutional creation work as both focus on garnering support, but critically diverges as it relies on articulation of the unknown to be an effective strategy. By linking creation work with sensemaking, we identify how actors proactively give meaning to something new and influence the understanding of others. The NBA organization provides a fitting case to examine how actors make and give sense to legitimize novel activities.

The two research questions guiding the study are:

RQ1: How are actors within the NBA organization making sense of esports internally?

RQ2: How are actors within the NBA organization influencing the sensemaking of external audiences?

An exploratory case study is utilized to examine the sensemaking and sensegiving strategies employed by actors within the NBA organization. We integrate primary data, including semi-structured interviews with key personnel from both the NBA team franchise and esports team, with secondary data (e.g., press releases, executive public interviews, social media content) for an in-depth analysis of the internal and external positioning of the esports team.

To answer the first research question, the franchise fostered a progressive culture, which served as a precursor to developing a shared understanding of esports. The franchise embraced their position as first movers, which created a culture that empowered employees and made them unafraid to confront the inevitable mistakes and failures associated with integrating novel activities.

To answer the second research question, actors engaged in sensegiving by strategically aligning esports with the functional and managerial aspects of running a sports organization. Publicly promoting similarities in the physical and mental training provided to both their basketball and esports players served as a mechanism to have esports be perceived as sport. Yet the franchise was deliberate in their approach, limiting cross-promotion between the NBA franchise and esports team consumers.

Theoretically, our findings contrast with existing research, which suggests that sensemaking and sensegiving are cyclical processes. Rather, we observed that sensemaking was a critical antecedent to sensegiving, as a shared understanding within the organization served as a prerequisite to influencing the sensemaking of others (i.e., sensegiving).