[Inner endpaper]

HEC MONTRÉAL
École affiliée à l'Université de Montréal

Two Essays on Phygital Consumption Experiences

par
Alex Baudet

Thèse présentée en vue de l'obtention du grade Ph. D. en administration
(option Marketing)

Mars 2024

HEC MONTRÉAL

École affiliée à l'Université de Montréal

Cette thèse intitulée :

Two Essays on Phygital Consumption Experiences

Présentée par :

Alex Baudet

a été évaluée par un jury composé des personnes suivantes :

[First name] [Last name]
HEC Montréal
Président(e) rapporteur(se)

Marie-Agnès Parmentier
HEC Montréal
Directrice de recherche

Yannik St-James
HEC Montréal
Membre du jury

Zeynep Arsel
Concordia University
Membre du jury

Jenna Drenten
Examinatrice externe

[First name] [Last name]
HEC Montréal
Représentant(e) du (de la) directeur(trice) de HEC Montréal

Résumé

Avec l'avènement des technologies numériques, le marketing expérientiel est devenu de plus en plus sophistiqué, offrant des rencontres personnalisées et immersives à travers des mondes virtuels et physiques. Ma thèse examine la combinaison d'éléments virtuels et physiques dans les parcours de consommation et les expériences des consommateurs, en utilisant le contexte du jeu vidéo compétitif.

Dans un premier essai, j'explore comment la popularité croissante des jeux vidéo impacte les dynamiques familiales, en me concentrant sur la manière dont les joueurs et leurs familles négocient l'intensification de la pratique. En enquêtant sur les expériences à la fois des joueurs et des non-joueurs, je retrace comment le parcours de consommation de l'un est affecté par les autres et vice versa, et je propose le concept de "parcours de consommation périphérique". Je mets en avant les défis soulevés par le manque de congruence entre les expériences virtuelles et physiques et explore comment les écarts entre les réalités virtuelles et physiques peuvent conduire à des conflits sur les règles et les normes au sein d'un foyer, menaçant la poursuite de la pratique.

Dans un deuxième essai, j'explore le concept d'expériences "phygitales" en direct, où des éléments virtuels et physiques convergent pour créer une expérience holistique dans laquelle certains individus sont immergés dans la virtualité, tandis que d'autres sont ancrés dans la réalité physique. À travers un examen qualitatif des tournois d'esports, j'examine les défis liés à la gestion de l'immersion virtuelle avec celle de la présence physique, explorant les dynamiques entre les performeurs, les audiences, et les producteurs. Cette deuxième étude élargit la littérature sur les expériences phygitales en mettant en lumière les défis de la présence simultanée et co-localisée dans les réalités virtuelles et physiques, tout en discutant du rôle de l'agentivité et des espaces transgressifs dans la formation des interactions des consommateurs. À travers les résultats, je fournis des recommandations pratiques pour les entreprises cherchant à capitaliser sur les opportunités offertes par les expériences phygitales et à répondre aux besoins des différents groupes de consommateurs.

Mots clés : parcours de consommation, expérience consommateur, esports, théorie des cultures de consommation, théorie de la pratique

Méthodes de recherche : Ethnographie, Netnographie, Entrevues, analyse de données d'archive

Abstract

With the rise of digital technologies, experiential marketing has become increasingly sophisticated, offering personalized and immersive encounters across virtual and physical realms. My dissertation investigates the combination of virtual and physical elements in consumption journeys and in consumers experiences, using the context of competitive video gaming.

In a first essay, I explore how the growing popularity of video games impacts household dynamics, focusing on the negotiation between gamers and their families. By investigating the experiences of both gamers and non-gamers I retrace how one's consumption journey is affected by others and vice-versa, and propose the concept of "peripheral consumption journeys". I put forward the challenges of aligning virtual and physical experiences and explore how discrepancies between virtual and physical realities can lead to conflicts over rules and norms within households, threatening the pursuit of one's practice.

In a second essay, I explore the concept of live "phygital" experiences, where virtual and physical elements converge to create a holistic experience in which some individuals are immersed in virtuality, while others are ground in physical reality. Through a qualitative examination of esports tournaments, I examine the challenges of unifying virtual immersion with physical presence, exploring the dynamics between performers, in-person audiences, and producers. This second study extends the literature on phygital experiences by highlighting the challenges of co-located and simultaneous presence in virtual and physical realities, while also discussing the role of agency and transgressive spaces in shaping consumer interactions. Through the findings, I provide actionable recommendations for firms seeking to capitalize on the opportunities presented by phygital experiences and address the needs of diverse consumer groups.

Keywords: consumption journey, consumer experience, consumer culture theory, esports, practice theory

Research methods: Ethnography, Netnography, Interviews, Archival data analysis

Table of contents

List of tables

List of figures

À Willow & Elie

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Elie for instilling in me the belief and courage to transition from the industry back to academia. Your unwavering support and encouragement have been instrumental in this journey. Thank you also to my daughter, Willow, for being the most amazing child, and for sleeping at night! To my parents, brother, and sister for their support. Special thanks to Rookie and Jasmine, my beloved furry friends, for their constant companionship and comfort.

I am also very grateful for my supervisor, Marie-Agnès, for welcoming me into the program, guiding me and mentoring me throughout. Your expertise, kindness, and support have been pivotal to my growth and success in this journey. I also extend my appreciation to Zeynep for her thorough training in qualitative methods, her insightful feedback on my work, and her kindness. To Yannik and Jenna, I am thankful for your encouragement and constructive feedback. I feel incredibly fortunate to have had the guidance and support of four exceptional researchers and individuals in evaluating my thesis.

My heartfelt thanks go out to my fellow PhD colleagues, with a special mention to Sara-Maude, for helping to create an atmosphere of camaraderie, humor, and support in our office, to Katie for our invigorating walks and coffee breaks, and to Lena, your friendship and brilliant mind have been truly inspiring. Thank you also to Aya, I'm so glad I got to meet you so early in the program and embark on projects together! Friends, you have made the challenges more manageable and the successes more enjoyable.

Preface

The studies presented in this thesis emerged from observations I made about my personal interactions with connected technologies, the ones of my friends and family, and my professional experience in the video games industry. I have always been fascinated by the way we, as individuals, socialize using technology, immerse ourselves in virtual realms, and how such immersion, despite allowing for online socialization, can disconnect us from co-located people or even disrupt their experience.

For example, how does filming a TikTok video in a bus affect surrounding passengers? How does playing video games at home influence family dynamics? And how does watching a friend play a horror game on VR affects everyone's experience?

I felt that it was important for us as individuals, practitioners, or policy makers to understand the effects that connected or immersive technologies can have co-located individuals, whether these individuals take part to some extent in the virtual experience or not.

Introduction

Customer experience (CX) has been and remains a priority for companies. According to a 2021 survey from Qualtrics' XM Institute of 151 CX practitioners at large companies, 59% of respondents defined customer experience as a 'significant' or 'critical priority' for their organizations. The Customer Experience 2021 report by eMarketer (Goldman, 2021) points out two key elements to delivering a positive customer experience: the omnichannel experience, which focuses on creating a seamless CX across multiple touchpoints; and the personalization, increasingly facilitated by data collection and technology advances.

The fast rate at which connected and virtual technologies are being developed is also having a profound impact on the consumption of entertainment products and services such as online multiplayer video games, social media, and virtual worlds. Flavian et al. (2019) argue that while CX are being reshaped into 'hybrid' experiences by Virtual-Reality (VR), Augmented-Reality (AR), and Mixed-Reality (MR), research has yet to understand how boundaries are experienced between physical and virtual environments. Such argument is also echoed in research pertaining to 'phygital' experiences, a term used to describe the seamless integration of physical and virtual elements in customer experiences, notably in service and retail settings.

So far, the focus of most studies on virtual, 'hybrid' or 'phygital' experiences revolve around three main topics: (1) the classification of virtual and physical realities (e.g., Milgram and Kishino, 1994; Jeon & Choi, 2009; Mann, 2002; Schnabel, Wang, Seichter, & Kvan, 2007), (2) the application and influence of digital technologies on consumers' experiences and the differences between virtual and physical experiences (e.g. Denegri-knott & Molesworth, 2010; Flavian et al. 2019), and (3) the integration of physical and virtual elements into hybrid or phygital experiences (e.g., Batat 2019, 2022, De Souza e Silva 2006; Armstong and Rutter, 2017; Batat 2019; Lawry 2021; Banik, 2021; Akter et al., 2021; Hossain et al., 2020; Lee & Kim, 2010; Ansari et al., 2008; Wallace et al., 2004; Breidbach, Brodie, & Hollebeek, 2014; Kumar, Dixit, Javalgi, & Dass, 2016; Patrício, Fisk, & Falcão e Cunha, 2008). Yet, while studies pertaining to the integration of physical

and digital technologies by firms provide some insights into its effect on consumers' experiences, they often focus on the individual experience of consumers along the reality-virtuality continuum (Milgram and Kishino, 1994). As a result, how individuals' immersion in one reality affects the experience of co-located individuals present in another reality has mostly been overlooked.

I investigate competitive video gaming – or esports – in two different perspectives. In a first essay, I study the consumer journey of competitive gamers and the peripheral journeys of household members, as they negotiate the intensification of virtual practices, and the increased immersion of gamers in virtual realities. Thus, this first essay concentrates on the tensions and opportunities arising between consumers immersed in virtual reality, and co-located individuals I term 'peripheral consumers'. In a second essay, I focus on a specific type of experience along the competitive consumer journey – esports tournaments or LANs - whereby different groups of individuals (performers and audiences) join the same experience but from different realities. By investigating such context, I theorize how producers of such experiences manage and reconcile the virtual and physical elements that make up for this global phygital experience.

Each chapter is organized as an individual paper, and a combined list of references as well as appendices are provided at the end of the manuscript.

Chapter 1
Focal and Peripheral Consumption Journeys across Virtual and Physical Realities: A study of Competitive Gaming

Abstract

Technological progress is reshaping the landscape of leisure activities within households. Social media and video games have risen as predominant entertainment sources for younger demographics, creating a significant consumption gap between generations. Using the context of competitive video gaming (or esports), I leverage ethnographic and netnographic data, in-depth interviews, and archival data to investigate (1) how individuals negotiate the intensification of virtual practices and (2) how virtual and physical elements affect not only the experience of gamers but the experience of peripheral consumers as well. I find that as gaming grows more serious, a notable shift occurs regarding practice visibility and the nature of interactions for gamers and household members, as the gaming experience increasingly shifts from offline to online realities. The findings identify elements that explain how tensions arise between focal consumers (i.e., gamers) and peripheral consumers (i.e., household members), including spatial, technological, identity-driven, and knowledge-driven elements. By highlighting the evolution of social interactions in the household, I identify several virtual-physical misalignments in consumers' experiences and journeys. Suggestions are provided in the discussion and managerial implications sections to help brand and institutions support focal and peripheral consumption journeys in the context of new technological practices.

1.1. Introduction

In recent years, technological advances have profoundly transformed the landscape of leisure activities. Social media and video games, to name a few, have emerged as a prominent form of entertainment, capturing the attention and time of individuals – especially younger ones - like never before. As screens become integral to consumers' daily lives and entertainment experiences, video games are carving out a significant space

within contemporary households. Indeed, from the captivating worlds of fantasy and adventure in role-playing games (RPG) to the competitive thrill of multiplayer games, children, teenagers, and adults are immersing themselves in the virtual dimensions offered by these interactive media.

In the wake of this shift in entertainment practices, households find themselves grappling with a new and uncharted territory, while a major consumption gap arises between generations and genders. Indeed, according to a 2023 Deloitte digital media trends report (Westcott, 2023), nearly half of US Gen Zs and Millennials claim to spend more time socializing online and 40% acknowledge that they socialize more playing video games than they do in the physical world. According to the same report, nearly 20% of Generation Z and Millennials - compared with 6% for older generations - declare they enjoy playing video games more than any other entertainment activities. Yet, from a gender perspective, masculine dominance persists in the gaming subculture, with micro-meso level dynamics making women's effort to cross gendered boundaries harder (Drenten, Harrison, & Pendarvis, 2022).

In addition to a generational gap in terms of entertainment preferences and gender inequity within the subculture, video game consumption brings a unique set of challenges compared with more traditional leisure activities, such as sports or arts. These challenges can be summarized into three key elements. First, video games have long carried a stigma as a solitary, antisocial, and sometimes violent pastime, often viewed as a distraction from more "productive" or "wholesome" activities. Concerns about the potential negative impact of video games on cognitive development, behavior, and social skills have left parents, caregivers, and sometimes partners, wary. As a result, the consumption of video games in the family context is often approached with apprehensions and misconceptions. Second, in contrast to established leisure activities like traditional sports or arts, which often come with clear rules and guidelines for participation and supervision, video game consumption lacks a universally accepted framework. In a family context, the absence of well-defined boundaries for screen time and content appropriateness has left parents unsure of how to effectively regulate and guide their children's gaming habits. Third, the relatively nascent nature of video game consumption within household dynamics means

that non-gamers often lack the knowledge and tools required to navigate this digital landscape. Traditional sports or arts come with resources and experienced mentors, but video games, primarily consumed in the privacy of the home, often remain a mystery to people outside the practice.

This convergence of factors raises a pressing issue: how does the increasing popularity of video game consumption impact relationships and dynamics within households? This question is at the heart of this study, which seeks to delve into the parallel consumption journeys of competitive gamers and the members of their households as the practice gains prominence within the domestic sphere. Despite the increasing presence of video games in the lives of children, teenagers, and young adults, marketing research on the topic remains surprisingly limited. While many studies address the effects of video game consumption on individuals, such as its impact on cognition, behavior, and mental health, research has yet to address the influence of video games on family relationships and the household ecosystem. Moreover, if social components of the consumer journey have been recognized by recent studies (Hamilton, Ferraro, Haws, & Mukhopadhyay, 2021; Siebert, Gopaldas, Lindridge, & Simões, 2020), notably by looking at product recommendation from friends, acquaintances, and strangers, or by examining joint journeys, we know little about the way individuals who are not direct consumers become involved in a consumer's journey. I use the term peripheral consumption journeys to refer to the experiences and activities undertaken by individuals who are indirectly and unintentionally drawn into the consumption process of a product or service primarily used by someone else. The typical involvement of individuals in peripheral journeys ranges from participating in the consumption of the primary user to spectating and can either enrich or compromise focal consumers' journeys.

This study addresses the impact of virtual consumption on relationships and dynamics within households by investigating how families negotiate the increasing presence of video games in their lives. I am interested in understanding the dynamics of these negotiations and the ways in which virtual practices intersect with physical elements within the domestic space specifically when gamers move into competitive gaming. In doing so, this study seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) How do

household members negotiate the intensification of virtual practices? (2) How do virtual and physical elements affect focal consumers' and peripheral consumers' experiences?

By answering these questions, this study aims to shed light on the complex interplay of technology and relationships within the modern household. The findings hold the potential to provide valuable insights for gamers and their families, marketers, educators, and policymakers, ultimately facilitating a more informed and nuanced approach to the growing phenomenon of competitive video game consumption. In the next section, I review existing literature on the consumption journey and family consumption and introduce practice theory as the enabling theory. I then describe the methodology before delving into the findings. I conclude by discussing the results and the implications for marketers, consumers, and policy makers.

1.2. Conceptual background

1.2.1. Consumption journey and family consumption

Consumption journey vs. consumer journey

The concept of the customer journey has been a fundamental marketing paradigm in the past decade, providing an essential framework for understanding how individuals engage with products and services. The customer journey refers to the holistic experience of consumers throughout their interaction with a specific brand, product, or service. It is a comprehensive framework that encompasses all touchpoints and interactions between customers and the brand, from initial awareness and consideration to the eventual purchase and post-purchase experiences. Past literature has emphasized the importance of understanding customers' needs, motivations, and pain points at each stage of their engagement with a brand (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

When looking at the customer journey, marketers seek to map out and optimize these touchpoints, ensuring that customers receive consistent and meaningful experiences, by offering smooth journeys or sticky experience journeys (Siebert et al., 2020). This approach enables businesses to tailor their strategies, messaging, and product offerings to meet the specific needs and preferences of consumers at each stage. Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello (2009) highlight the significance of emotions and psychological factors in

shaping the customer journey, underscoring the need to create emotionally resonant interactions that foster loyalty and advocacy.

For the purpose of this article, the focus will be on “consumer journey” (Hamilton & Price, 2019) rather than “customer journey” whereby the focus on consumer is intentional (Hamilton, 2016) as it highlights that people leverage diverse means both from and outside the market to achieve their goals (Epp & Price, 2011). As a result, the concept of the consumer journey extends beyond the customer-brand relationship and encompasses a broader perspective on individuals' experiences with various products, services, people, and resources across different domains. It transcends the confines of a single brand and acknowledges that consumers engage with a variety of resources simultaneously or sequentially.

From a consumer journey perspective, researchers and practitioners explore how consumers navigate a complex ecosystem of offerings and make choices that align with their values, needs, and aspirations. Understanding the consumer journey involves examining not only the interactions with brands but also how individuals integrate these experiences into their broader lifestyle and identity. It acknowledges that consumers actively shape their journeys and make decisions that reflect their personal narratives and aspirations. This approach recognizes the fluidity and dynamism of consumer choices and the importance of aligning marketing strategies with individuals' evolving needs and values.

In summary, while the customer journey focuses on the interactions between a consumer and a specific brand, product, or service, the consumer journey takes a more holistic view, considering how individuals engage with various offerings across different domains. Both concepts emphasize the need for marketers to understand and adapt to consumers' experiences to create meaningful and enduring connections.

Social consumer journey

Recognizing the influence of social others, Hamilton et al. (2021) use the concept of social customer journey to show how other individuals have the potential to impact a customer's decision-making process at different stages, all while being susceptible to the influence

of others. The authors note that early consumer research placed significant emphasis on joint journeys, particularly within the family as the Decision-Making Unit (DMU), as exemplified by Davis (1970). For instance, Burns and Granbois (1977) delved into the dyadic decision-making process of couples regarding the purchase of a family car, revealing that variation in individual levels of expertise, experience, and preferences impacted involvement and mutual understanding, ultimately influencing how joint decisions were made along the process.

Hamilton et al. (2021) also note that while research on joint journey has been irregular, more recent studies have been observed both within dyads, as demonstrated by Dzhogleva and Lamberton (2014), and within family units, as evidenced by the works of Epp and Price (2008); Thomas, Epp, and Price (2020)

Family consumption

In the present study, I take an interest in the consumption trajectories of both gamers (focal journeys) and household members (peripheral journeys) who get non-intentionally drawn into the consumption process. According to Arnould and Thompson (2005, p. 875), consumer culture theorists are "fundamentally concerned with the cultural meanings, sociohistorical influences, and social dynamics that shape consumer experiences and identities in the myriad messy contexts of everyday life". Indeed, CCT researchers have investigated consumption across multiple social public and private spaces, virtual and physical ones, including the home, the office, neighborhoods, or video games. In the context of the home, past studies have looked at how consumers construct, maintain, and negotiate family relationships (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Barnhart, Huff, & Cotte, 2014; Epp & Price, 2008, 2012; Huff & Cotte, 2016; Hunter-Jones, 2014; Kastarinen, Närvänen, & Valtonen, 2022; Thomas & Epp, 2019; Wallendorf & Arnould, 1991).

In this context, family is understood outside of traditional constructs such as marriage and blood relations to include emotionally close friends (Barnhart et al., 2014) or people sharing a living situation such as roommates. As a result, I subscribe to Huff and Cotte (2016, p. 23) definition that being a family is "a state of being and a process of doing",

challenging the traditional view of family. I use the term "household" and "household members" to refer to this modern understanding of the family.

1.2.2. Practice theories as the enabling lens

The use of enabled theorizing is a common practice in qualitative research and denotes "the use of preexisting theoretical perspectives, theories, or conceptual lenses to inform various moments in the conduct of qualitative research" (Dolbec, Fischer, & Canniford, 2021). Dolbec et al. (2021) find that enabling theories contribute in three ways to marketing research, by extending ongoing conversations, correcting and/or extending the enabling theory, and providing insights for policy, practice, and/or methodology (p. 446). In this study, I use practice theory as my enabling lens.

What practice theory is

Practice theorists investigate consumption by examining the routines, engagements, and performances that constitute the fundamental building blocks of social life (Seidl & Whittington, 2014). Schatzki (2002, p. 87) proposes that practices be defined as "a temporally evolving, open-ended set of doings and sayings linked by practical understandings, rules, teleoaffective structure, and general understandings". Consumption research using practice theory as an enabling lens often relies on Schatzki (2002)'s work whereby emphasis is put on apprehending "embodied, materially interwoven practices centrally organized around shared practical understandings" (Schatzki, 2002, p. 12). Practice theories provide a comprehensive theoretical framework for examining the connection between human activities and the social context. The foundational idea is that social reality exists as a unified level, eliminating the distinction between micro and macro levels. According to this perspective, all human activities and social phenomena are embedded within interconnected practices (Loscher, Splitter, & Seidl, 2019, p. 2). Dolbec et al. (2021, p 448-449) note that from an analytical standpoint, "practice theory offers a conceptual vocabulary to analyze how people perform consumption and production of such routinized patterns of behaviors by bringing together "bundles" of elements (e.g. objects, doings, and meanings for Shove, Pantzar, and Watson (2012)" and has been employed to research constructs such as taste (Arsel & Bean, 2013) and time (Woermann & Rokka, 2015).

Triad of elements in practice theory

According to Schatzki (1996, p. 89), practices are formed by doings and sayings, or manifest as what Warde (2005, p. 133) calls "co-ordinated entit[ies]" whereby doings and sayings are linked through three components: understandings, procedures, and engagements (p. 134). Arsel and Bean (2013) note that the literature has used various terms to refer to these three components. Understandings have been referred to as ideas, meanings, or image; procedures as way of doings, doings, or skills; and engagements as material(s), objects, and stuff (Magaudda, 2011; Schau, Muñiz Jr, & Arnould, 2009; Shove, 2007; Shove & Pantzar, 2005; Warde, 2005; Watson & Shove, 2008). Given their relevance in describing this context, I adopt the objects, doings, meanings triad (Arsel & Bean, 2013; Magaudda, 2011) to describe the evolution of the competitive gaming practices within household dynamics. Such conceptualization as a triad is important as it underlines the how the elements are interconnected and need to be aligned in order to generate the desired outcome (Seregina & Weijo, 2017; Woermann & Rokka, 2015).

Tech-mediated practices

While investigating long-distance family practices and their evolution from colocated to tech mediated, Epp, Schau, and Price (2014, pp. 81-82) note two limitations: first, the under theorization of tech-mediated consumer practices and second, the poor accounting for change in practices. The authors underline that practice theories, rooted in assumptions of physical, bodily performance and tangible material environments (Schatzki 1996) often overlook the nuances of tech-mediated practices. In the context of family consumption practices, studies up until Epp, Schau, and Price (2014) have predominantly concentrated on colocated practices, neglecting the distinct characteristics and implications of interactions in tech-mediated spaces. Epp, Schau, and Price (2014)'s challenging of the boundaries of copresence is particularly relevant for the present study. We, however, look at family relationships when one member's tech mediated practice affects their relationship with co-located members. This study also addresses the second limitation: practice theories' limited ability to explain and capture changes in practices over time and across cultural spaces. Indeed, as I investigate gaming journeys, I shed light on the ways gaming practices evolve over time and across virtual and physical spaces, as well as private and public spaces. I discuss the methodology in the next section.

1.3. Methodology

The objective of this research is to comprehensively understand competitive gaming practices and the impact of interpersonal dynamics on consumers' experiences within households. To answer my research goals and account for the diversity of competitive gaming contexts and stages, I conducted an ethnography of the competitive esports' ecosystem, substantiated by netnographic, interview, and archival data (see table 1).

TABLE 1 – DATA COLLECTION OVERVIEW

PURPOSE OF DATA COLLECTION	COLLECTION METHOD AND SOURCES
Understanding competitive gamers' journeys Understanding gamers' perspective in relation to interactions in the household	2 ethnographies in a college esports club and at an esports tournament 9 in-depth interviews with competitive gamers Archival data analysis including interviews in specialized press and on YouTube Netnography in online gaming communities Industry reports
Understanding the esports pro and semi-pro scene and the challenges associated with supporting competitive gamers	3 Individual interviews with esports professionals Industry reports
Understanding relationships within households Understanding perception of gaming within households Understanding challenges faced by individuals in peripheral journeys	4 Group interviews with families/couples (9 individuals in total) 1 Individual interviews with family member Netnography in social media group dedicated to parents of gamers Attendance to 2 online conferences for parents of gamers Archival data analysis including interviews in specialized press and on YouTube

1.3.1. Collection methods and sources

Ethnography

I conducted two on-site ethnographies by visiting a college esports club during their practice, as well as a three-days world competition in competitive gaming. This immersive field study aimed to understand the interpersonal dynamics among gamers in a physical setting, providing a comparative perspective to the accounts of gamers who practice and spectate at home. The firsthand observation of in-person interactions contributes a nuanced layer to the exploration of competitive gaming practices.

In the first ethnographic site, gamers as well as staff members were observed and informally interviewed on-site to better understand their experience. The setup of the training space allowed the researcher to walk between gaming stations and observe physical interactions as well as virtual ones. A follow-up off-site interview with the coach allowed me to clarify observations gathered during the ethnography and deepen my understanding of participants' social dynamics.

The second site ethnography was realized at the Six Invitational 2023, the three-day world cup of the video game Rainbow Six Siege (R6S), totalizing approximately 24 hours. Even though data from this ethnography was mostly leveraged for study 2 and hence more detailed later in the manuscript, it allowed me to gain an understanding of gamers' journey as esports becomes grounded in a physical, professional structure.

For both ethnographies, data was recorded in field notes, photographs, and videos, and later analyzed in light of the interview data.

Netnography

In addition to the ethnographic immersions, I also engaged in netnography (Kozinets, 2015), immersing myself in various online gaming communities. This approach facilitated an understanding of specific codes not only related to competitive gaming but also across different gaming genres, including MMORPGs (Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games such as World of Warcraft), strategy games, sports games. Such codes included gaining a better understanding of the specific vocabulary used by gamers such

as “playing with randoms” (playing with unknown players), “solo-queue” (waiting to be matched with a team as a solo player), or “duo-queue” (waiting to be matched with a team as a duo). Immersion was realized in both network- and small-group-based virtual communities (Dholakia, Bagozzi, & Pearo, 2004). First, four Discord community servers of 4 esports university and secondary school clubs were joined and observed for four to twelve months. For one of these communities (12 months observation and participation), I was given temporary access by the admins and members to join private team servers and witness their real-time vocal and text interactions during practice and team trials. The author disclosed their role as a researcher in these communities. Second, larger competitive gaming communities on Reddit were joined for approximately twelve months on average. Selection of such communities was based on the top competitive games, across a representation of genres including: Dota 2, League of Legends, Counter strike, Fortnite, Rocket League, Valorant, Overwatch, and Rainbow Six Siege. I also joined and observed a social media group dedicated to parents of teenage gamers and participated to two online conferences organized by the admin of the group. By actively participating in or passively observing these virtual spaces, I gained insights into the diverse and evolving dynamics of competitive gaming within distinct gaming genres. Typical netnography tools were leveraged including screenshots and field notes that were collected in a presentation software.

Interviews

To further delve into the lived experiences of competitive gamers and the influence of others, I conducted long semi-structured interviews with 22 participants. Interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 1 hour and 27 minutes (see table 1). Participants included gamers, their families (parents, siblings, roommates, and partners), esports professionals (coaches, mentors, and program coordinators), and professionals working with teenagers and families in the gaming context. These in-depth interviews provided valuable insights into the multifaceted aspects of competitive gaming and its broader social context. To protect participants anonymity, I employed pseudonyms and confidentiality was guaranteed to all participants. Some of the interviews were translated into English, with the help of AI tools. Participation criteria included defining oneself as a competitive gamer or being the parent of a gamer.

Following Epp & Price (2011) and Epp, Schau, and Price (2014), in-depth interviews in group settings with family members had the goal to uncover how competitive gaming practices were experienced, identify the tensions that can arise, and how these tensions are negotiated. As explained by Epp, Schau and Price (2014, p. 83), group interviews allow for "collective reflection, layering of accounts, and coconstructed data" (Epp and Price 2011). Data collected during group interviews reflected closely the experience shared during individual interviews, showing an important degree of reflexivity from participants. Participants in group interviews were automatically categorized as such (See Table 1).

I started the interviews by asking about participants' backgrounds and lifestyles. For gamers and their families, I subsequently delved into more specific inquiries concerning their gaming experiences, the gaming objects they employ and their significance, as well as their interactions with household members and the effect of gaming on these interactions. Gamers were prompted to articulate details about their gaming setup and its evolution over time. Similarly, I inquired about the gaming environment, exploring alterations in rooms and spatial arrangements with family members.

Interviews with esports professionals (Including gaming program coordinators and managers) focused on the professionalization aspects of gaming journeys, with professionals being able to account for cultural changes in the competitive gaming landscape, evolution of players and practice, professionalization of gaming, and rapport with parents when relevant.

TABLE 2 – TYPE OF INTERVIEWS AND DURATION

Type of interview	Number of interviews (Number of participants)	Range of duration (Average)
Individual interviews with gamers	9 (9)	00:45 – 01:27 (00:59)
Individual interviews with esports professionals	3 (3)	00:49 – 00:52min (00:51)
Individual interviews with family member	1	00:54 (00:54)
Group interviews with families/couples	4(9)	01:06 – 01:23 (01:12)
Total number of participants: 22; Average interview duration: 60 min		

Archival data

Finally, as a supplementary method, I analyzed archival data sourced from various platforms. This included interviews with esports athletes and household members available on platforms such as Twitch and YouTube. Additionally, I scrutinized reports and articles from organizations dedicated to esports, parenting resources like COPE, and materials related to secondary and post-secondary gaming programs. Examples of search queries are provided in Table 3. This approach allowed me to enrich this analysis with existing narratives and perspectives within the gaming community.

TABLE 3 - EXAMPLE OF SEARCH QUERIES FOR ARCHIVAL DATA

Theme	Example of queries	Platforms
Gamers' experience	• Competitive gamer/esports athlete/esports player [+ interview]	Google, YouTube, Twitch, Reddit
Parents/partners of gamers' experience	• [Parents/partner/sibling of] gamer/ competitive gamer/ professional gamer/ esports athlete/esports player (+ interview)	Google, YouTube, Twitch, Reddit

Esports industry	• Esports (+industry, +report) • Professional gaming (+industry, +report) • Competitive gaming (+industry, +report)	Google, Youtube

This comprehensive methodological approach, encompassing ethnographic and netnographic experience, interviews, and archival data has enabled a holistic exploration of competitive gaming practices and the roles played by various individuals, notably family members, during the gaming journey.

Ethics protocol

Several measures were taken to ensure the protection and informed consent of all participants. Prior to conducting group and individual interviews, written consent was obtained from participants using a consent form. At the beginning of the interview, I provided a brief summary of the main points of the consent form and confirmed consent with all participants. Special attention was given to minors aged 14 to 18, with parental consent being sought for their participation. All participants were given the opportunity to seek clarifications and ask questions before signing the forms in the presence of the researcher. To ensure comprehension, minors were presented with a simplified version of the consent form. All minors between 14 and 18 were interviewed in the presence of their parents. Moreover, even though no participants under 14 were interviewed, I had prepared an additional comprehension check specifically designed for children under 14, wherein they would have had to answer written questions using true/false responses, where any discrepancies would have prompted clarifications.

During family interviews, respect was given to the preferences and comfort levels of each participant, particularly regarding recording procedures. An illustrative example of this occurred when one teenager expressed a preference not to appear on camera, opting initially to remain off-screen, while their parent preferred to be on-screen. In response, the camera was initially adjusted to accommodate these preferences. However, after a

brief period, it was collectively decided to deactivate the camera altogether to enhance the quality of the audio recording.

Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants to safeguard their identities, and no identifiable data was used in the writing of the results.

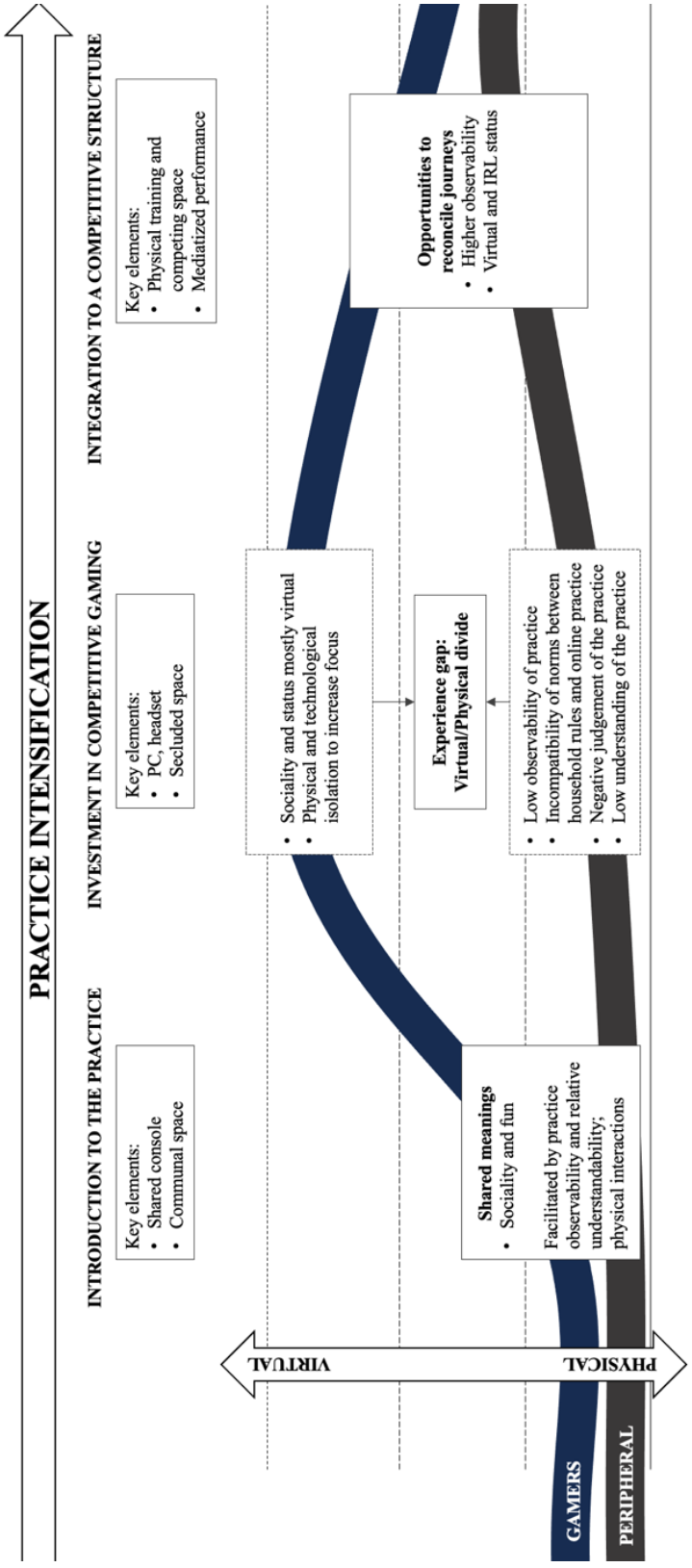
1.3.2. Data analysis

The qualitative analysis of the gathered data involved a systematic approach through coding iterations. The coding process allowed for the identification and categorization of recurring themes, patterns, and unique insights emerging from the interviews, archival data, ethnographic observations, and netnographic interactions. Iterative coding was employed to refine and deepen the understanding of the data, ensuring a thorough exploration of the nuances present in the narratives and experiences shared by participants. This qualitative data analysis method strengthens the credibility of the findings, as it enables a detailed exploration of the rich and diverse perspectives within the competitive gaming community. The iterative coding approach ensures a comprehensive interpretation of the data, contributing to the depth and rigor of the research outcomes.

1.4. Findings: consumption journeys

Gamers embark on a unique journey, shaped by the interplay of social dynamics, the objects they engage with, and their quest for competence within the gaming community. Through the findings, I delve into the multi-faceted journey of gamers, considering meanings, objects, and doings as key dimensions that illuminate their path into the gaming universe, and enrich our understanding of their journey by looking at the peripheral consumption journeys of household members they live with. I start by looking at gamers' introduction to gaming, followed by their investment in competitive gaming, and finally their integration to a competitive structure.

FIGURE 1 - THE CONSUMPTION JOURNEY OF COMPETITIVE GAMERS



1.4.1. Stage 1: Introduction to the practice of gaming

Gamers' consumption journey (stage 1)

Similar to previous studies of gamers' consumption journey (Huston, Gracia B Cruz, & Zoppos, 2022), participants were often introduce to the practice of gaming or esports through friends and family.

Objects. At the introduction stage of the journey, gaming's main appeal appears to be social, and physical interactions are important aspects of the practice. Physicality is unsurprisingly reflected in the objects associated with the gamers' journey, that often begins with a gaming console, typically placed in a shared space, such as the living room. This central hub becomes a focal point for social interaction and communal enjoyment. The shared space encourages gamers to come together physically, promoting couch co-op gameplay, while other household members can witness, watch, or even cheer the practice. This form of gaming, where players share a single screen and compete or cooperate in the same physical space, intensifies the social dimension of gaming. The importance of the console in a shared physical space is pivotal, connecting gamers in virtual reality while maintaining their social connections in the physical world. For example, consider Jonathan's description of some of his earliest gaming-related memories:

> Jonathan: […] When they launched Xbox Live, that's when I started playing online. I started playing with people I didn't know […] I couldn't understand anything they were saying so that pushed me to learn English. That was good.
>
> Interviewer: So, you weren't playing as much with your friends and brothers?
>
> Jonathan: Oh yeah actually, we were still in the living room. I would watch my brothers play and we would have fun, we would help each other.
>
> Interviewer: so, you were physically with your brothers but playing [online]. How was that experience for you?
>
> Jonathan: It was good. Good memories, it's nostalgic (laughs). It was the good old times as we say.
>
> Interviewer: Did you feel like it helped when you encountered toxicity or when things weren't as straightforward? Did you have support?
>
> Jonathan: Yeah, for sure. You know, personal attacks, we would both laugh.

Interestingly, in his depiction of this hybrid online/physical experience, Jonathan underlines the role that others (in this instance, his brothers) have played in making the gaming experience better by either helping him progress or reduce the effect of negative interactions with online strangers.

Doings. Additionally, the competitive gamer's journey is punctuated by the pursuit of competences or what is referred to as “doings” in the enabling lens, whereby doings are embodied activities or competences performed with objects (Magaudda, 2011; Shove and Pantzar, 2005; Arsel and Bean, 2013). As players dive into various games, they embark on a continuous process of learning and adaptation. Each game presents new rules, mechanics, and challenges, necessitating the acquisition of new skills and strategies. Gamers not only learn to navigate and master different gaming genres, but also adapt to various consoles as they play at their friend’s homes and adjust to various gaming environments.

In addition to acquiring technical skills, gamers’ performances of doings require them to learn the norms and codes of the gaming community. These norms extend to etiquette, sportsmanship, and the unspoken rules of online gaming. Gamers develop the ability to communicate and engage with peers through friendly banter and even playful trash talk, both of which are notable social markers within the gaming subculture (Nakamura, 2014). The friendly banter fosters camaraderie, while trash talk, when done in good spirit, adds an element of competition and excitement to the gaming experience. At this stage, teaming up in an online game is an activity mostly reserved with IRL friends and acquaintances.

Meanings. The consumption journey of gamers often starts with a social impulse. In the data, video gaming emerges as a shared experience, initially fostered by interactions with friends, siblings, or even parents, often at a very young age:

> I started playing on the PS3 around 6-7 years old maybe. I was late to the party… My friends already had video games, consoles. So, I asked my parents if I could get one, and I got one. We had the Wii before that we used to play a lot, but that was the family altogether. But I wanted something just for me, so my dad bought a PS3. (Antoine)

Participants report that playing games with others is not only enjoyable but also a bonding experience, which creates relationships and fosters a sense of togetherness. As gamers play together, they construct a shared world of meaning, shaping their perception of gaming as an avenue for communal enjoyment that can carry on years later in parallel to their competitive involvement. Joey for example, explains how he and his friends maintained socially driven gaming-related in-person meetups:

> We're a group of boys, we like basketball, hockey, but esports too. So, we'll often meet up. Like for the last VCT [Valorant Championship Tour], we met at my friend's. So, it's like watching the Superbowl. It was the finale, so we brought wings, popcorn chicken, we bake pizzas, etc. We settle. We end up all sleeping at the dude's, it's like a boy sleepover, it feels good. We reconnect with the friends we know [IRL]. Because online, yeah, it's fun. You can talk to people, get updates, but it's not the same as in real life. In real life, you reconnect.

Such account highlights some of the differences that can arise between online and offline interactions, and the importance of "real life" meetups for many participants' social connection.

While gamers embark on their consumption journeys, it is essential to situate the practice in the environment where it takes place, the house, and recognize the parallel journey undertaken by household members, such as parents, siblings, and roommates. These individuals, who sometimes introduced gamers to the practice, traverse a unique path as they witness gamers' involvement in their practice. I describe the first stage of what I call "peripheral consumption journeys" next.

Peripheral consumption journey (stage 1)

Initiations into the gaming world are typically characterized by a sense of curiosity and shared enjoyment. Family members see gaming as an entertainment medium that fosters social interactions and bonding in the household, as exemplified earlier by Antoine's mention of the Wii as the family console. At this stage, usually gaming holds no strong stigma, and it is regarded as a form of entertainment that encourages sociality and fun. Parents, in particular, often play a central role in gamers' journeys. Important doings for parents often consist in providing and supervising: they are responsible for buying the gaming devices and the games, which allows them to exert a degree of supervision and

control over the gaming content their children are exposed to. The shared space where gaming takes place, whether in the living room or a dedicated playroom, offers parents the opportunity to observe and engage with the gaming activities of their children. One participant recounts having to stop playing GTA San Andreas, a game he borrowed from a neighbor, after his dad witnessed the violence and mature themes contained in the game. This relatively low-effort involvement provides parents with a chance to not only ensure that the games are age-appropriate but also to become more familiar with the gaming world. While it could lead to a deeper understanding of the games, genres, and mechanics, enabling parents to participate in conversations about gaming with their children, most participants' account shows that involvement remains superficial.

The peripheral consumption journey of gamers' household members is characterized by a supportive introduction to gaming, with a shared perception of it as a fun, socially enriching practice. I find that the materials constitutive of the practice are aligned with the meanings associated with them, both in the focal and peripheral journeys. Gaming in a shared space, such as the living room, encourages social interactions, strengthening relationships with siblings and friends. Consumers in both focal and parallel journeys can see gaming as a communal experience as family members begin to see some of the benefits and appeal of gaming, encouraging a favorable outlook on video games within the family dynamic. If, at this stage, the meanings surrounding the practice in both journeys remains relatively similar, the next stage often leads to a wider gap in experiences. I explain this next.

1.4.2. Stage 2: Investment in competitive gaming

This stage marks a significant shift from the physical world to the virtual one, as gaming increasingly takes place online. This transformation encompasses changes in objects, doings, and ultimately meanings, reflecting the gamers' dedication to achieving recognition, the engagement with objects such as specialized gaming equipment, and the development of advanced skills for competitive play. Concurrently, this stage of the journey is where most tension arises between gamers and family members, often increasing the experience gap between focal and peripheral journeys. I take a closer look at how gamers experience this stage first.

Gamers' consumption journey: a social shift (stage 2)

Objects. Engagement with objects changes deeply. While consoles appear to be favored in the introduction to gaming, with compatibility with friends' systems and ability to split screen with co-located gamers being important, investing oneself in competitive gaming often requires transitioning from consoles to high-performance gaming PCs and components. These specialized setups offer the processing power and customization required to optimize gaming performance. The acquisition of gaming-specific hardware becomes essential to gain an edge in competitive play. Comfort technologies, including ergonomic gaming chairs, keyboards, and mouse, accommodate longer gaming sessions, enhancing physical well-being during extended gameplay. Additionally, gamers prioritize immersive technologies, such as noise-canceling headphones and high-resolution screens, to reduce distractions from the real world. These objects not only improve the gaming experience but also serve as tools for concentration and focus.

Aesthetics can also become an important aspect of the gaming setup. One participant for example, shows me a picture of his gaming setup: he has carefully crafted his gaming space (located in his bedroom) with darker objects and matching blue lights from the wall, monitor, mouse, PC tower, and backlights from the TV stand. He informs me later, that the eye-catching pyramid-shaped PC case is rare, and that he traveled over 500 kilometers to get this specific model that only exists in limited quantity. Such setups are called "battlestations", a term that serves to describe not only the computer setup with a tower, monitor, keyboard, and mouse, but at least as much importantly the aesthetics. Simon (2007) demonstrates how case modders (i.e., people who modify their computer cases in unconventional ways) identify with the material of computer systems, turning such objects into 'spectacles' in LAN events. Interestingly, Simon (2007, p. 187) argues that the modified case acts differently for gamers and spectators. While, for spectators, it competes with the game as a distraction from the virtual, it expands the experience for gamers beyond the screen. However, while PC cases could be brought for in-person spectacles at LAN, Battlestations are not meant to be portable. Instead, these private setups have found mass spectatorship in the virtual realm (Jovic, 2023) on forums and video platforms. For example, in 2023, the subreddit r/battlestations totalized more that 4.1M subscribers.

Moving the practice to the virtual realm often means that social interactions, spectatorship, and gaming-related status is moved or at least expanded online as well. Inversely, in-person interactions and spectatorship become more limited as the shift from console to PC, and from casual to competitive involvement drives a transition from open shared spaces to secluded, private environments. Gamers often establish dedicated gaming areas within their bedrooms, basements, or separate home offices. These secluded spaces offer the solitude and concentration needed for competitive gaming while allowing for personalization and optimization of the gaming environment.

The difference between PC and consoles is clear for many participants, as they relate having a serious competitive practice online on their PC, but maintaining casual gaming activities with their partner, friends, or siblings on casual consoles such as the Nintendo Switch.

Doings. Investing in competitive gaming necessitates the development of advanced skills across various domains. Gamers strive for drastic improvements in in-game skills, mastering mechanics, and in some cases, developing physical abilities that enhance their gameplay.

> My goal is to start playing at 8 a.m. So when I get to my desk, I warm up, then I'm going to do a bit of aim training, just to warm up my arm, warm up my... My mechanics. Once my mechanics are done, then I usually go browse the YouTube videos that were released overnight, especially from coaches. (Joey)

Strategies become a focal point, and gamers dedicate time to learning the intricacies of specific games, which may include map knowledge, operator proficiency, and team dynamics, depending on the game. This drives them to not only spend time practicing in-game, but also learning from others using media channels such as YouTube, Twitch, and specialized websites.

Competitive gamers must also possess a mix of soft and hard skills. They learn to navigate the online gaming community, dealing with toxic behaviors and managing their own emotions in high-pressure situations. Communication, teamwork, and adaptability to various gaming scenarios are critical for success in team-based games. Gamers also

develop the ability to analyze and adapt to changing metagames and strategies, remaining at the forefront of their chosen competitive titles.

Meanings. For competitive gamers, this stage represents a shift in practice as it extends beyond their immediate social circle. The pursuit of practice improvement, status, and recognition drives them to invest more time, effort, and money in their gaming practice. As gamers progress in their journey, their experience evolves from casual play to becoming competitive gamers. All participants in my dataset , despite having a varying degree of investment in esports in terms of finance, time, and efforts could be considered serious consumers of esports, as the practice holds a central place in their lives (Huston et al., 2022). Some players strive for status as they acquire a sense of achievement and recognition within their gaming circles.

> I used to be bullied in primary school you know. I was having a hard time fitting in, especially in 6th grade and in high school. So that's when gaming became more important. Like that's how I felt like I had value, by being better than my friends I felt like I was worth something. (Thomas)

Winning, having a high K/D (Kill/Death) ratio, or mastering complex roles serve as markers of status. The recognition from peers elevates the gamer's self-esteem, making them part of a community where competence and accomplishments are celebrated.

However, for players without a strong IRL network, the practice can be met offline with incomprehension and sometimes mockery. As a result, success in online gaming communities becomes a symbol of prestige, and accomplishments in the virtual world gain increasing importance. This shift also results in a more solitary gaming experience. As gamers progress and dedicate more time to honing their skills, friends and family may struggle to keep pace. The journey becomes a personal one, driven by the desire to continuously improve and compete at higher levels. In this process, co-players transition from being primarily real-life friends to individuals met online who share a similar level of commitment to the game. Maxime, a Rainbow Six Siege enthusiast, a game that requires strong team collaboration, explains his strategy to avoid the boredom that can come with playing only with "randoms":

> Usually on Rainbow Six I duo-queue with a friend of mine. I don't really like playing multiplayers by myself actually. I'd rather always play with friends. Like playing by myself is a bit boring. So, I will solo queue once in a while, but it's more rare. But yeah, I will rarely be in a team of five, this is pretty rare. It will often be a team of two, three out of five, with other randoms.

Later, Maxime clarifies that the friends he refers to are almost exclusively online friends whom he built connections with playing the game.

The transition to investment in competitive gaming marks a significant shift in the gamer's journey. This stage is characterized by the pursuit of recognition in virtual reality, the acquisition of high-performance gaming equipment, and the development of advanced gaming skills. Indeed, gamers increasingly focus on their online presence and status as competitive gamers, as the virtual worlds becomes their performance stage. Moving up in divisions and ranks serve as a way to show their performance in competitive matches. However, as they invest more time and effort into their practice, the recognition that they get online is rarely met offline. Indeed, the combination of time invested on screens, spatial isolation, and virtual immersion often leads to conflicts with family members, as such behaviors are perceived as contradictory to household rules and to what a healthy lifestyle represents. I explain this next.

Peripheral consumption journey (stage 2)

> "In my experience, you go through a number of different stages. Initially, you're ignorant and have no real appreciation of what your son/daughter is doing – you simply have that old reaction: 'You're spending too much time on your screens." (Andrew Ward, father of British "MrKcool" Ward, in an interview for British Esports)

As gamers transition into serious competitive gaming, a significant shift occurs within the household dynamic. This phase often leads to a fracture between gamers and other members, as the immersive nature of competitive gaming introduces new challenges related to spatial isolation, screen time, boundaries, and the perception of gaming as a waste of time. Marie, whose ex-partner used to play on the dining table while she studied or watched TV, recounts how she felt after he moved his gaming gear to a dedicated room:

> At the time when he was [playing on] the kitchen table, the kitchen table was close the TV. And I liked the atmosphere because I could go watch TV

> while he played. I felt like we were together. I don't need to be glued to someone on the couch, but just knowing that we were in the same room, I liked that.
>
> At some point, we stopped being side by side. You know, when he was gaming next to me, and I was working, we were side by side, we could talk, we could send messages. And then at some point, we moved, and he had his gaming room, and I was still working at the kitchen table. We kind of 'separated' the rooms between us.

At this point, the table changed from a symbol of togetherness ("I knew what he was doing, who he was gaming with… he knew when I was taking a break"), to a nostalgic reminder of what was once ("When we broke up, uh, he had sent me the photo and he had sent me a photo of the kitchen table, and he was like, 'It feels weird that it's empty.'). After the interview, Marie adds, emotionally: "The table was completely ruined. But it's the only thing we couldn't sell. We stored it."

On top of spatial isolation, the increased time spent online creates additional challenges. Parents, for example, find it increasingly difficult to set limits on their children's screen time, and the omnipresence of screens complicates their ability to discern when gaming is for leisure, academic purposes, or an escape. The result is a growing stigma associated with gaming, which impacts both gamers and non-gamers, leaving families in search of resources to navigate these challenges. One of the primary challenges faced by parents during this phase is the increased screen time their children dedicate to competitive gaming. The desire to improve and succeed in the gaming world often means more extended and more frequent gaming sessions. Parents may struggle to set boundaries, as the line between gaming for leisure and gaming for competitive development becomes blurred. Julia, whose teenager dreams about being a professional gamer, explains:

> Well, you know, when most of his interests happen behind the screen, I find that… even if they're diverse, it's difficult to understand, and to grasp when [my son] is playing, or when he's relaxing. You know playing, working, chilling, or even studying, because now everything happens on the computer. At school they have to have a laptop now. So yeah, when is he studying? When is he playing? That creates frustration because there's a lot of lying.

Indeed, the omnipresence of screens in the lives of teenagers further complicates the situation. With computers serving multiple purposes—homework, gaming, and web

surfing—parents find it challenging to discern the intentions behind their children's screen time. This complexity makes it difficult for parents to measure when gaming is a constructive endeavor, when it is a form of relaxation, or when it becomes procrastination. In an interview for the Network of Academic and Scholastic Esports Federations (2021), Shae Williams, founder of COPE, explains:

> a lot of parents are concerned with how much screen time their kids have had with online school. So many are pushing back on gaming and trying to get them outside. But gaming is also strategy. It's learning skills. I'd much rather have my son playing a strategy game and engaging with his friends on Discord than having him lying on his bed and watching Netflix for hours.
>
> I think that's one of the misperceptions about this space is that when kids disappear into their bedroom to play games, I think most parents still think their child is alone. They don't realize what a vibrant social network this is. That their kid is in a Discord call with their friends chatting about their day while they play.

The increased time spent on screens often leads parents to view gaming as a waste of time. This perception results in part from a lack of understanding of the benefits and potential career opportunities associated with competitive gaming. As gamers move into secluded spaces and engage with more solo-oriented objects such as smaller screens and noise-cancelling headphones, family members' opportunity to take an interest in the gaming practice of their loved one becomes almost non-existent. As a result, parents may fail to recognize the strategic thinking, teamwork, and problem-solving skills that gamers develop, as well as the potential for scholarships and professional careers in esports. Instead, household members often feel isolated when facing these challenges. The absence of readily available resources and support systems compounds their difficulties, leading to maladaptive strategies as Roman illustrates:

> There was a lot of control over the internet connexion overall (…) my parents would turn off the Internet after some time like 6 or 7 pm. So, I had like 2 hours to play after school. But it really made me… I'd find ways to go around this, to get the internet back one way or another.

The rapidly evolving landscape of competitive gaming, coupled with a generational gap in digital literacy, exacerbates not only the difficulty for parents to find adequate solutions, but the isolation they experience as well. As Olivier's mother explains:

> [The mother of my son's friend] didn't realize that she was living the same thing as us. She was like 'ok I'm not alone… I thought it was me… that it was [my son] who was like that so… phew, it's encouraging.'

Moreover, household members often find themselves at a loss when attempting to enforce traditional house rules and expectations. The immersive nature of competitive gaming can make it difficult for players to respond promptly when addressed by their family. Conversations may be interrupted or postponed as gamers are engrossed in their virtual battles, leading to frustration on both sides. Simple requests, such as coming to the dinner table or refraining from excessive noise, can become points of contention. For example, parents who wish to maintain a sense of normalcy and discipline within the household may struggle to compete with the reward/punishment system of gaming. Julia's teenager reflects at the end of the interview:

> Interviewer: How did you feel at the beginning, when there were conflicts as your parents didn't really understand your practice?
>
> Teen: Well, it's just that at the beginning, they didn't understand the stakes, that if I quit my game, I was going to be banned from the game so…
>
> Interviewer: Is it something that you discussed with them? How you felt about it?
>
> Teen: Well, I thought they already knew but evidently, they didn't.

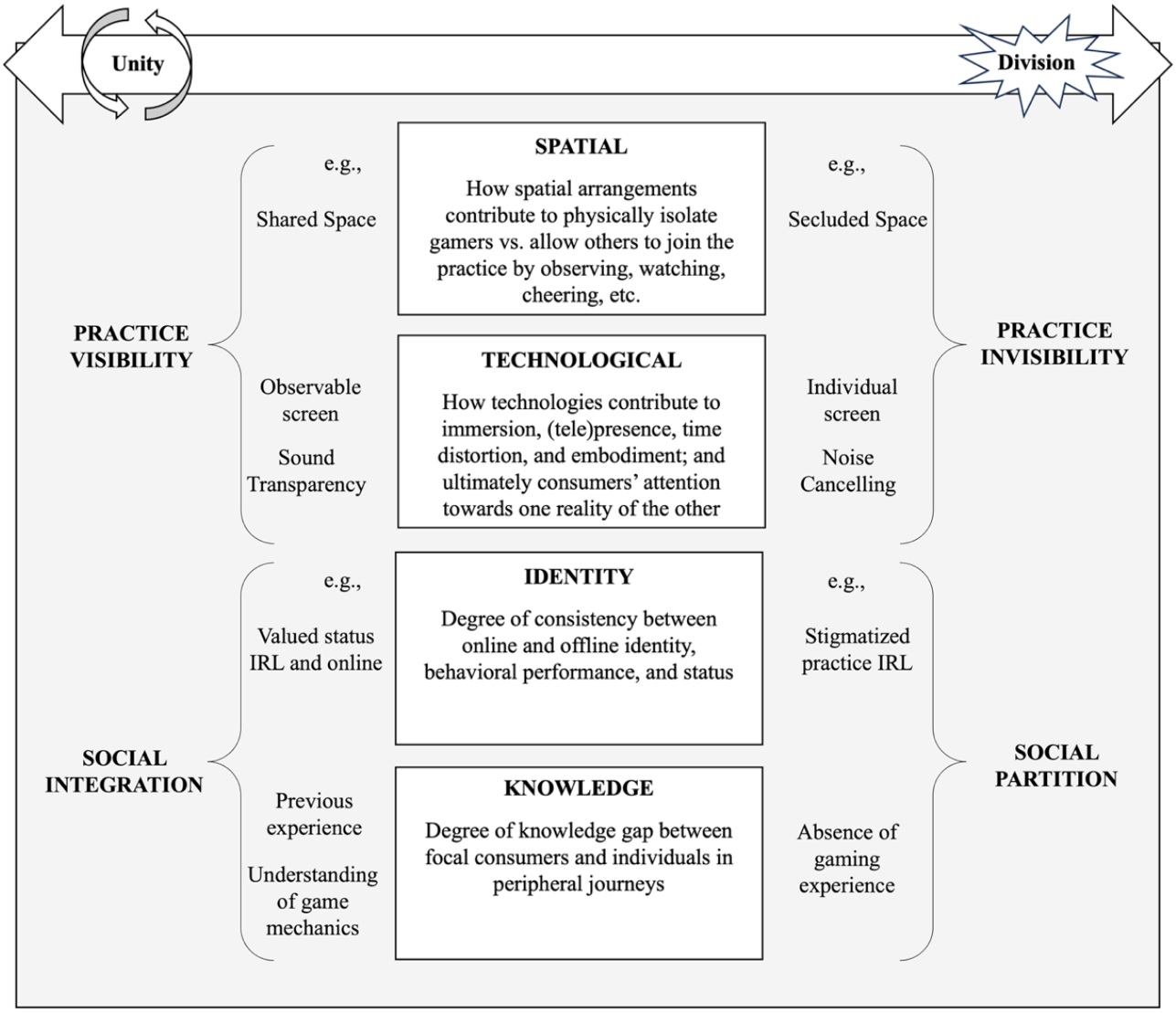
In sum, household members are caught in a complex web of concerns, as they struggle to understand and support the passion for gaming. As a result, several misalignments between objects, meanings, and doings arise across the two journeys. For example, while the investment in a performance PC in a dedicated room is associated with increased seriousness of the practice for players in the focal journey, it translates into fear of isolation and overdependence on screens for individuals in the peripheral journey.

The need for resources and support in navigating these challenges becomes increasingly evident as individuals grapple with the impact of competitive gaming on their relationships and family life. In the next section, I discuss how conflicting goals in this context contribute to a virtual-physical divide.

The virtual-physical divide

The stigma associated with gaming negatively affects household members. Parents and other significant others may feel frustrated and overwhelmed by a gamer's habits, while the gamer may perceive a lack of support and understanding. This divergence in perspectives creates tension within the household causing emotional strain and misunderstandings. At this stage, I identify two main factors creating tensions and affecting negotiations between household members: (1) practice invisibility, brought by spatial and technological isolation, and (2) social partition, created by a knowledge gap and status divide between physical and virtual realities.

FIGURE 2 - ELEMENTS OF PHYSICAL-VIRTUAL DIVIDE



Practice invisibility (vs visibility), as a prominent factor contributing to distancing gamers' experiences from their families', refers to the challenges posed by the spatial and technological isolation associated with competitive gaming. First, spatial isolation is often created as many gamers have their high-performance gaming PCs set up in separate rooms, creating physical distance that hinders the ability of parents to engage with their children's practice, or partners with each other as exemplified earlier by Marie. Shae Williams, co-founder of the COPE explains in a panel discussion for the International Federation of Esports Coaches (2021) that a gamer "participates or performs, just like any sport and you know (…) it's different because they're in their room, the door is shut, and they're alone so you can't be right there with them."

This physical separation is made even more critical by the technological objects that characterize the investment in competitive gaming, as the use of noise-canceling headphones and smaller screens contributes to a lack of transparency and understanding within the household, whose members can still experience some nuisance from gaming. Nathalie describes her son's habits:

> Jordan is very expressive when he's playing with his friends [online]. You know we hear him in the living room when he's in his bedroom, and these two rooms are really far apart.

Additionally, household members often cannot always see or comprehend who their children or spouse are playing with and against in the virtual gaming world, further exacerbating their sense of detachment from the gaming experience.

Social partition (Vs. integration) is another key factor contributing to the physical-digital divide. First, when a significant knowledge gap exists between gamers and household members regarding the technology used or the mechanics of the game, conversation and sharing is made much more difficult. Often, parents, for example, know little about the specific games their children are playing, making it challenging for them to provide meaningful support or engage in informed conversations. Olivier and his parents discuss his investment in competitive gaming:

> Interviewer: When he had those online tournaments. Would you have liked to see him play?
>
> Dad: Would I have liked to see him? Yes.
>
> Olivier: The thing is, you wouldn't have understood what was happening.
>
> Dad: That's it, it's like watching a sport whose rules I don't know...
>
> Mom: That's right.
>
> Dad: A sport that I don't know.
>
> E: Except that it's even... that's it, but like a faster version.
>
> Dad: Exactly, and it's even faster.
>
> Mom: I think I'd like to see him, but physiologically, I wouldn't be able to.
>
> Dad: Close your eyes.
>
> Mom: That's it, I watch with my eyes closed (Laugh), that's about it. Or maybe, watch the replay and slow down the image (…) but as we said, it's not a world we know. We don't know the rules of that game, we can't say 'wow, that's a good move you know, oh yes, I'm proud of him, oh yes' because when we watch him play for a few seconds all we see is um... two hands moving very quickly, and that's it (Laugh).

This knowledge gap, and as described above, physiological gap, contribute to misunderstandings and exacerbates the perceived divide between generations, and between physical and virtual realities. Inversely, when cohabitants are better versed in the technology and the games, interactions become possible and enjoyable for all parties. Joey, for example, explains how his dad sometimes playfully interferes in his online conversations:

> Sometimes he watches me play, and when I die, that's when the jokes start. Always, even if I win or if I die, he says "oh come on, don't let them win". Every time, even if we're destroying them "come on don't let them win". And then he'll get closer to my mic and he'll say, "come on guys, you're gonna have to carry him". Because I say that all the time "I'm carrying you" as a joke. My dad thinks it's funny, so he uses it against me [nb: in gaming culture, carrying one's team means that a player's performance is above the rest of their teammates' performance].

Participants who, like Joey, had family members intervene in their online conversations didn't find it intrusive but instead appeared to enjoy it.

Second, identity (in)congruence can manifest as consumers' identity and status deriving from this identity vary between virtual and physical realities. Researchers have sought to

explore the differences and similarities between offline and online consumer behaviors. For example, one of the appeals of the Internet seemed to be that users could take advantage of the apparent anonymity and limitless promise to become whoever they wanted, playing with codes, and creating an identity that was different online and offline (e.g., Castronova, 2008). Studies suggest however that Internet and computer-mediated communications (CMC) users tend to maintain consistency across their online and offline identities (Baym, 1998; Jensen Schau & Gilly, 2003). Through a process of reembodiment (Belk, 2013), users increase their identification with their avatars, as they give them names and characteristics, and grow comfortable with them. But if characteristics can be kept relatively consistent, what happens when a specific consumer identity is valued in one reality but not in another? Joel, an esports coach, describes how his coaching job – despite being prestigious in the community - was initially met with mockery from his entourage, prompting him to defend the legitimacy of his position:

> You know, in my close friends and family, there's a couple of people who find it funny when I say I'm going to practice. For example, when I go play with my team, to try and be the best, they say "ha you *practice* League of Legends, that's weird". But like I always tell them, it's the same thing as practicing with your soccer team, it's to create better team cohesion, to be better as a team, to go further. It's the same thing, except it's League of Legend.

On top of status, perception of appropriateness of behaviors can be fundamentally different in virtual and physical realities. Marie recounts how having her ex-partner play at night in a room next to her bedroom infuriated her:

> When it was affecting me, my life, I hated it. I was getting so agitated, you know, when you try to sleep and you can't, because your room is connected to his office [i.e., gaming space], you know, like juxtaposed, and then he's yelling "Kill the dragon!".

Moreover, researchers have observed variation in consumers' normative behaviors across the two spaces. For example, online video games are especially prone to online incivilities and harassment. If these behaviors appear intolerable, previous studies have shown that toxic behaviour is commonly viewed as a normal event in video games (Assunção, 2016; Cote, 2017) and that "trash talk" was considered a key component of the gaming experience (Nakamura, 2012).

> Interviewer: You feel like [your friends] tease you more online than in person is that it?
>
> Jordan: Yes, a lot more. Because my friends… actually it's only since this year that I started seeing them in real life. Because they used to go to another school and now, I'm at the same school. And they're so so much calmer, much nicer, and respectful in real life than they are online.

For family members outside of the practice, such differences in behavior can be hard to grasp, and further increases the divide between physical and virtual realities. In summary, practice invisibility and social divide, intensify the tensions within household members, leading to a sense of disconnection and alienation. Bridging this gap and fostering a greater understanding of the world of competitive gaming can be pivotal in mitigating these tensions and promoting healthier relationships between focal and peripheral consumers. In the next stage, I look at focal consumers' integration to a competitive structure, and the impact on peripheral consumers.

1.4.3. Stage 3: Integration to a competitive structure

As gamers transition into the competitive scene and pursue paths to semi-professional and professional gaming (including collegiate esports), their investment in high-end technologies becomes even more pronounced.

Gamers' consumption journeys (stage 3)

Objects. Central to this phase is once again the acquisition and improvement of a high-performance PC, a precision mouse, and a responsive keyboard tailored to meet the demands of competitive play, as well as a reliable high-speed Internet connection. However, the integration into physical tournaments, often in the form of LANs (Local Area Network), necessitates a nuanced adjustment in gaming objects. In these competitive settings, players are required to compete on standardized machines, ensuring a level playing field where all competitors use similar equipment and monitor sizes. One of the participants, Roman, who competes in university leagues, explains the adjustments of going to in-person events:

> I bring my peripherals, but I'm struggling with the way that… Like the screen, I can't adjust it the way that I do at home, it stresses me a little bit (…) You know at home I have my two monitors on a mechanical arm and

> my arm is under my screen… so when we're in a LAN or an in-person event, my hand often hits the monitor stand, because I'm not used to it being there.

Beyond the traditional gaming setup, the significance of noise-canceling headphones takes on a new dimension. While still serving the purpose of enhancing focus, these headphones become crucial tools for maintaining fair play. By minimizing external auditory distractions, they play a pivotal role in preventing inadvertent information sharing among players or the inadvertent influence of the crowd and commentators, thus preserving the integrity of the competitive environment.

Doings. The integration into competitive structures ushers in a new set of competencies for gamers, encompassing a dynamic mix of virtual, physical, and hybrid interactions. Seo (2016) characterizes esports professionals as "striving for the mastery of skills, realizing one's potential, and self-improvement" (p. 267). Beyond mastering the intricacies of in-game performance, gamers find themselves navigating a realm where their behavior in real life becomes as critical as their gaming prowess. This transition becomes particularly evident as gamers venture into in-person competitions within legitimate structures, aligning more closely with the norms and expectations akin to traditional sports. Interestingly, most clubs integrate physical training into their curriculum, as part of a player's development.

Beyond to physical development, gamers undergo a rapid learning curve in adapting to in-person dynamics. Over a relatively short period, they must cultivate the ability to handle the pressure emanating from live audiences, manage their emotions when seated next to teammates during intense competitions, and acclimate to the presence of a real-life public ("The drama of watching an underdog come alive as the crowd is going nuts while a favorite is crumbling under the stress is an absolute top-tier moment in ANY sport and e-sports are no different"). As Jim, a professional working in esports with a background in traditional sports, explains:

> Most traditional sport athletes have been ingrained in years or decades of team play with hands-on coaches who go through a standardized training process to make sure that they're competent enough to coach. And they have to have a lot of interpersonal connections, disagreements, celebrations,

> whatever else you want. But a lot of the best players that you're going to get from esports are incredibly isolated when they come to you. Before they've been put into a team play, you've got coaches that, most of the time, you're just pulling former players that really understand the meta of the game, and they're learning how to navigate a team for the first time.

The shift towards professionalism further heightens the need for competencies beyond virtual skills. As the stakes increase, often with financial and professional gains involved, gamers at this level must work on their personal branding, understanding the significance of cultivating their public image, online and offline. Jim goes on to explain:

> A lot of the questions that I get from players and what players need to do right now, based on my understanding of the professional scene, is they have an individual brand, and they all really care about their individual online brand. And so, we have to be incredibly mindful of how we work with them in terms of marketing and how they're presented and how they're presenting themselves through their own TikToks and whatever else. So, we go through a mini training camp, I'll call it of like, pardon my language, but here's how to not be an asshole online. So, I would say that that's a big thing that we concentrate on and a very large piece that I have seen different from traditional sports and esports.

Indeed, moving towards more traditional competitive settings involves not only excelling in-game but also engaging with the crowd, showcasing sportsmanship, and creating a memorable presence during tournaments. Maxime, a fervent esports spectator and caster, explains the two different behaviors he usually witnesses on the pro scene:

> There are players that play with the crowd (…) I'll send you a GIF of a player I like, he plays for CS Vitality, and you can see he teases the public (…) He's known for this (laughs). It's his brand (laughs). I find it funny. But it depends on the player, how he accepts the public. Either he'll try to forget about it, or play with it, try to increase the fervor.

As competitive gaming becomes more professionalized, the acquisition of these competencies becomes integral to a gamer's overall success and influence within the esports ecosystem.

Meanings. The professionalization of gaming brings forth a transformative shift in the perceived significance and potential benefits of competitive play for gamers. As players tread the path toward semi-professional and professional gaming, they begin to envision not only a realm of personal achievement but also work and financial opportunities. The

competitive scene becomes a gateway for gamers to explore potential careers, ranging from professional gaming contracts to opportunities in esports-related fields such as coaching, content creation, and event management. Joel, whose gaming skills often led him to informally train his friends, took a professional turn as a part-time coach ("when I realized there was money to be made, as a coach, I was like 'oh my god, that's cool!'"). An illustrative example of these potential benefits can be observed in esports sponsorships. As gamers ascend to professional levels, they often attract sponsorship deals from gaming peripheral companies, energy drink brands, and other relevant industries. These partnerships provide financial support for players while also helping with the reputation of esports.

Joining tournaments within the competitive circuit not only serves as a platform for showcasing individual skills but equally offers the opportunity for gamers to have their prowess recognized. As they climb the ranks, their gamertags become associated with real-life faces, contributing to the establishment of personal brands within the esports ecosystem. Similarly, gamers start gaining recognition IRL as well, for example, meeting fans for signing sessions in-between games as I witnessed during in-person tournaments.

This stage of the gaming journey also sparks a notable comparison between traditional sports and esports. While there may be ongoing debates about whether competitive gaming should be officially categorized as a sport, the professionalization of esports undeniably contributes to its legitimacy. The increased media coverage from traditional sports outlets, brand endorsements from companies traditionally associated with sports, and partnerships between sports and esports events are indicative of the growing recognition and acceptance of competitive gaming as a legitimate and respected form of competition. The stage of professionalization not only transforms the meanings associated with gaming but also positions esports as a significant actor in the broader landscape of sports and entertainment.

Peripheral consumption journey (stage 3)

As gamers integrate competitive structures, a notable shift occurs in the meanings attributed to their gaming practice within household dynamics. The transition from a

socially isolated gaming experience with invisible elements to a more visible one introduces new dimensions of understanding and appreciation. Family members, who may have once perceived gaming as a solitary and perhaps enigmatic endeavor, now have the opportunity to witness the depth and commitment their gamers bring to the competitive scene.

Objects. The integration of competitive structures brings about a transformation in the objects associated with gamers' practices, making gaming more visible and inclusive for household members. Retransmission screens become pivotal in this shift, enabling bystanders to actively witness in-person gaming events. These screens serve as windows into the competitive world, breaking down the barriers of social isolation by bringing the gaming experience to a broader audience within the household. Additionally, the adoption of sporting team and players' jerseys further enhances the visibility of the gaming journey. By donning these jerseys, family members physically express their support, creating a tangible connection between the virtual practice and the physical space. In an interview for Rocket League Esports (2022), "COMM"'s parents, sporting a jersey of their son, customized with "COMM_MOM" and "COMMDAD", explain how their vision of the practice shifted as they attended their first in-person tournament:

> Three years ago, Robert woke me up and said are my is my passport valid? because I need to go to Canada. And next thing you know we're booking flights and rushing a passport that had expired and it was an incredible experience that's what opened our eyes to him moving forward in the sport (COMM's mother)

Indeed, witnessing one's performance in an in-person LAN tournament creates new layers of understanding and connection to the phenomenon for neophytes.

Meanings: With the help of retransmission screens and the visibility of in-person gaming events, household members gain a deeper understanding of the meanings associated with esports. The enthusiasm of the crowd and the retransmission of games provide tangible evidence of the significance and popularity of competitive gaming. This newfound visibility allows others to grasp the potential of esports as a legitimate income source and a viable career path. Christine, mother of player "Stratus", illustrates in an interview (Andrejev, 2019):

> "Two years ago, when (Ethan) first started playing, there was more of a negative connotation to (esports). Now, people are so positive because it's such a growing industry and they are really recognizing the big names that are behind a lot of the teams."

Significantly, the acknowledgment of esports as a professional pursuit often takes the form of financial recognition. As household members witness the competitive environment and the potential for financial success, they are more likely to acknowledge the professionalization of gaming, thus fostering a more supportive and understanding atmosphere within the family. Thomas, whose dad was initially unsupportive of his gaming practice, explains how money, combined with joining the university club, helped increase his father's support:

> My dad didn't believe League [of legends] could be monetized (…) When my girlfriend and I moved in together, and he saw that we were independent, that I was staying home while being able to pay for the apartment while paying the rent, he realized that you know, maybe it's not glamourous but it works. So… it removed some stress. He started criticizing less. Also, he saw the esports club, that [members] weren't nutcases, that they were normal people, integrated in society, you know, normal people. I think it helped him see things less negatively. (Thomas, translated)

As Thomas describes, having his father not only realize the financial opportunities but also associate other gamers with their real-life identity positively changed his judgment of the practice.

Doings: The integration of competitive structures not only allows household members to witness the gaming practice, but also invites them to actively participate in the experience. Unlike the previous socially isolated practices, where physical presence was limited, parents, siblings, romantic partners are now welcomed to cheer and engage during games. During the 2019 Mid-Season Invitational semifinals, father of League of Legends player "Caps", became the rallying cheer master for G2, his son's team (Erzberger, 2019). In the news conference following the match, Caps reacts:

> "He goes to watch all of our games. Every time there is an important game, like an international match or a final, he's always there. And he'll follow all our regular games, so it means a lot to me. I also know a lot of my other family is watching at home, and it just helps me out, right, especially this semifinal. We were down in the series, but the crowd cheered for us. I know

> my dad does a lot to try to get the crowd to cheer for G2, so it definitely means a lot and it helped us turn around the series."

Drawing inspiration from traditional sports, household members can import their knowledge and involvement, albeit requiring some work to keep up with the practice. In an interview for the Washington Post (Andrejev, 2019), Christine Yenkel, mother of player “stratus”, explains how she had to watch many plays, and ask her son to explain (“At first it’s hard to see who’s playing well and who died. It took a while, but I think we’re there now.”). This active participation becomes a bridge between the gaming world and the domestic space, contributing to a more cohesive and supportive environment as family members become integral parts of the gamer's activity.

1.5. Discussion and implications

The evolving landscape of the gaming journey, particularly as it grows more serious and competitive, introduces a notable shift in practice visibility and the nature of interactions for gamers and household members. This transformation is mirrored in the progression of gaming objects, transitioning from usually wider screens in shared living spaces to more secluded and personal setups with smaller screens, often in bedrooms or private gaming spaces. However, the significant divergence arises in the realm of social interactions, as the gaming experience increasingly shifts from offline to online realities. This shift in experience creates a growing divide between gamers and non-gamers within households, as the gaming practice becomes less visible in the physical, offline realm. Indeed, the interactions that were once favored within the shared space of the living room or playroom now take place almost exclusively online, contributing to a sense of disconnect and misunderstanding between those immersed in the gaming culture and those on the periphery.

I discuss three implications that arise from the analysis of the competitive gaming journey. First, from a theoretical standpoint, this research underlines the importance of understanding peripheral journeys, beyond focal consumers’, introducing the concept of peripheral consumption journeys. Second, I highlight the evolution of social interactions in the household. Finally, I discuss the virtual-physical misalignments in consumers’ experiences and journeys.

1.5.1. Investigating peripheral consumption journeys

First, this study investigates focal consumption journeys and peripheral ones, and allows me to identify alignment and misalignments between those, ultimately showing how practices can become threaten, stigmatized, or illegitimate within the household when fundamentally different meanings are attributed to objects and doings. This is especially important to identify when gaps between journeys arise, especially for practices that can already suffer from a generational and/or gendered boundaries such as gaming (Drenten et al, 2022) or social media. As a result, I build on Hamilton and Price (2019), Hamilton (2016), and Hamilton et al. (2021) by shedding lights on the critical impact of practices on peripheral journeys, and inversely the role that others can play on consumption journeys beyond decision-making and product recommendation.

Based on this study, I suggest that peripheral journeys can be investigated in contexts where practices can disrupt the spaces and places in which they happen, such as the home, school, or even public spaces. By investigating misalignments across journeys, marketers, educators, and policy makers should be able to better the needs of both focal and peripheral consumers to avoid increasing gaps between them. For example, in the context of this study, I find that vocal interactions online can disrupt co-located household members. In such context, opportunities arise for marketers and policy makers. First, there is an important need for spaces dedicated to competitive gaming outside the home, with many opportunities for experiential providers, schools, and higher education actors to supervise the practice and provide better support to gamers and their entourage. Second, in terms of product development, product design should account for individuals in peripheral journeys, for example by either (1) reducing nuisance or (2) providing feedback to focal users such as lights that warns user when reaching noise limit, audio feedback in headset, or any other gimmick that could raise consumers' awareness of their collocated peers.

Similarly, there are many opportunities to better include individual in peripheral journeys and facilitate cohabitation. Epp, Schau, and Price (2014) underline that a family's technology ecology can facilitate or inhibit practice movement whereby the ecology in the family context is characterized by members' "repertoire of technologies, members'

varying skill levels, and the distribution and synchronicity of technologies within the family" (p. 88). On top of these, I find that physiological differences (e.g., ability to process high frame per second), certainly created by the varying degree of experience that family members have with certain technologies, are part of this ecology. Accounting for the variation of skills, experience, and physiology, I believe that market resources should be developed to help individuals in peripheral journeys acquire a better sense of newer technologies and allow them to become better informed in their role as bystanders, spectators, or supervisors. Similar to solutions that have been discussed in the previous paragraph, I believe in the importance of intermediaries to provide services similar to what exists in traditional sports such as guides and coaches, not only to support gamers but their entourage as well. Additionally, products and services intentionally created to facilitate understanding and support from peripheral consumers could go a long way in supporting the long-term practice of competitive gaming. For example, video games studios can communicate and provide informational elements destined for individuals in peripheral consumption journeys (e.g., basic information about the game, teams, etc.) to facilitate discussions. Similarly, I see opportunities for content creators and experience providers to develop lower paced streaming services adapted for individuals who are incapable of processing high FPS streams, or don't have the knowledge to follow every detail of a game.

1.5.2. Evolution of social interactions and roles along journeys

Gamers' entourage take on many roles throughout their journeys, sometimes facilitating the practice or making it more enjoyable, sometimes hindering it or making it less enjoyable. I find that practice invisibility and social partition directly contribute to dividing household members on the practice, particularly as gamers invest more time and effort on their competitive journey and favor virtual interactions over virtual ones. While, at this stage, most gamers practice in the private space of the home, I draw a parallel with Kozinets et al. (2004) investigation of the ESPN zone Chicago. The authors find that the themed environment "enables a kind of do-it-yourself spectacle to emerge from the actions and interactions of consumers" (p. 668) where voyeurism and participative exhibitionism contribute to a new form of experience. They come up with the term

"observe panopticon" to describe a physical stage designed to answer consumers' need to be observed as they perform in a confined space. I find that in the introductory stage of the practice, the meanings associated with the novelty of gaming, its social orientation, and its position in the most central room of the house (the living room) is akin to an observe panopticon, albeit to a much smaller and restricted audience. In the following stage however, as gamers move to more secluded spaces, observation IRL becomes less wanted, and is certainly not as sought by household members. As noted by Kozinets et al. (2004), observe panopticism where relationships of power exist can quickly become charged with surveillance. The evolution of objects from large, shared TV screens to smaller monitors meant for individual consumption for example, can certainly contribute to feeling "surveilled" while observed. If the observe panopticon has been described as a physical stage, I argue that the concept translates well into the virtual reality. Indeed, as gamers' practice intensifies, they become more observed that ever before in the virtual reality, either willfully as they stream their practice, or unwilfully, simply by design of competitive video games.

1.5.3. Addressing Virtual-Physical misalignments in consumers' experiences and journeys

The notions of play and playful consumption is intrinsically linked to the concept of rules, whereby consumers can choose to follow rules set by others or break them (Deighton and Grayson 1995; Grayson 1999). In their study of the ESPN zone in Chicago, Kozinets et al. (2004) find that to enhance play in such physical-virtual hybrid environment, marketers must cede considerable freedom to consumers. As a result, consumers elect to play by the rules, break them, or create new ones, sometimes with the help of fellow consumers.

This negotiation of rules, however, is still done within a space created and largely controlled by marketers. This study highlights a different context, whereby the experience is largely thought through its virtual components. By investigating consumption journeys of competitive gamers and their entourage, I point out the importance of consumption contexts, or what I could term "consumption containers" to reference Bitner (1992). In other words, if the experience studied by Kozinets et al. (2004) is contained within the ESPN zone Chicago and its own set of rules and physical boundaries, the experience of

competitive gaming is contained within two layers: first the virtual container, which is comprised of the games' rules, norms, and interactions; and second the physical container, which in this study is mostly represented by the home, but in other hybrid experiences such as mobile phone consumption could be a city, a school, or even a car or public transportation. When I started this project, one question that I had was: what happens when rules and norms in virtual reality aren't compatible with rules and norms in physical reality? This question seemed to be one the participants grappled with as well. I find that while it seems evident for household members that house rules should prevail over anything else, gamers on the other hand, seem to have difficulty electing which set of rules to follow for a couple of reasons. First, in most games, increasing one's rank is dependent upon having several wins, encouraging players to keep playing when on a winning streak, or to make up for lost games. Second, several players have mentioned striving to achieve a flow state, which in turns often leads them to losing track of time and their sense of presence in the physical reality. Third, the reward/punishment system in "ranked" mode penalizes players for quitting during a game, to encourage fair play. I find that while some online resources for parents give advice such as automatically shutting down the Wi-Fi, the stakes for competitive gamers may lead to overreaction and increase the divides with household members.

Several implications arise from these observations. First, from a theoretical standpoint, using practice theory as the enabling lense allowed me to identify how practice misalignment occurs when the meanings derived from objects and doings in one reality don't match the meanings in another reality. When normative and value systems strongly differ in one reality compared with another one, misalignments occur, threatening the pursuit of one's practice. I build on Epp, Schau, and Price (2014) who study how practices adapt from disruption to reassembly in the context of tech-mediated practices in long distance relationships. However, rather than looking at how decoupling and reassembling practice components contributes to practice trajectories, I emphasize the importance of social components as households choose to either (1) embrace the practice of one family member by educating oneself, seek mentorship from outside services, become a spectator or even a co-participant; or (2) separate the practice from the rest of the household by spatially, technologically, and socially isolating participants.

The analysis of consumers journeys and peripheral journeys show an increasing virtual-physical divide as competitive gamers' practice become more serious. I find that on top of spending more time online for their practice, gamers also spend more time and resources to increase their knowledge within the community, acquire components that will increase their performance and their sense of belonging. Indeed, studies have shown that consumers leverage the marketplace when their identities are devalued (Maciel & Wallendorf, 2021) or their status threatened (Goor, Keinan, & Ordabayeva, 2021). In this context, however, I find that current marketplace resources can contribute to increasing this virtual physical divide between gamers and household members. Some objects, such as the noise-cancelling headphone, appear to strongly support gamers' virtual presence while creating tension with household members who end up technologically removed from a player's presence. I have discussed already how product design could account for peripheral journey to better align the meanings associated with some objects. I would like to also bring to light that marketplace resources and educational efforts from marketers could help individuals in peripheral journeys transition from co-located to tech-mediated interactions. For example, in the context of parent-child relationships, parents who want to support their children's practice by watching their games may need additional support to adopt technologies that would allow them to communicate, monitor, and cheer directly in the virtual realm.

Conclusion and limitations

I note some limitations to the present research. First, while this study accounts for the many phases of competitive gamers' journeys, I did not report on gamers who chose to end their involvement with competitive gaming for a lack of resources, time, or interest, as this was out of the scope of this study. Second, all the participants are from North America and Europe. Finally, all but one of the participants identified as male. Future research could thus address gender differences in consumer journeys and explore the journey differences with the large market represented by Asia.

In conclusion, I find that experience gaps and friction can arise throughout the consumption journeys of competitive gamers and the parallel journeys of their entourage and identify several contributing factors, including technological, spatial, and social ones.

Competitive gaming or esports is an extreme example of the ways technologies can affect relationships in households. As the phenomenon is not yet completely understood, I hope that future research will help shape the way in which this practice becomes established in and outside of homes.

References

Andrejev, A. (2019, October 21, 2019). Her son is a pro gamer. Here's how she came to understand the world of esports. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/video-games/esports/2019/10/21/her-son-is-pro-gamer-heres-how-she-came-understand-world-esports/

Arnould, E. J., & Thompson, C. J. (2005). Consumer culture theory (CCT): Twenty years of research. *Journal of Consumer Research, 31*(4), 868-882.

Arsel, Z., & Bean, J. (2013). Taste regimes and market-mediated practice. *Journal of Consumer Research, 39*(5), 899-917.

Assunção, C. (2016). " No Girls on the Internet": The Experience of Female Gamers in the Masculine Space of Violent Gaming. *Press Start, 3*(1), 46-65.

Barnhart, M., Huff, A. D., & Cotte, J. (2014). Like a member of the family: Including and excluding paid caregivers in performances of family. *Journal of marketing management, 30*(15-16), 1680-1702.

Baym, N. K. (1998). The emergence of on-line community. *cybersociety, 2*(0), 35-68.

Belk, R. W. (2013). Extended self in a digital world. *Journal of Consumer Research, 40*(3), 477-500.

Brakus, J. J., Schmitt, B. H., & Zarantonello, L. (2009). Brand experience: what is it? How is it measured? Does it affect loyalty? *Journal of Marketing, 73*(3), 52-68.

Burns, A. C., & Granbois, D. H. (1977). Factors moderating the resolution of preference conflict in family automobile purchasing. *Journal of Marketing Research, 14*(1), 77-86.

Castronova, E. (2008). Synthetic worlds: The business and culture of online games. In *Synthetic Worlds*: University of Chicago press.

Coaches, I. F. o. E. (Producer). (2021). Parents in Esports: A Panel Discussion with COPE (Coalition of Parents in Esports). Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hyd6UpQAb6Y&t=1207s&ab_channel=InternationalFederationofEsportsCoaches

Cote, A. C. (2017). "I Can Defend Myself" Women's Strategies for Coping With Harassment While Gaming Online. *Games and Culture, 12*(2), 136-155.

Davis, H. L. (1970). Dimensions of marital roles in consumer decision making. *Journal of Marketing Research, 7*(2), 168-177.

Dholakia, U., Bagozzi, R., & Pearo, L. (2004). A Social Influence Model of Consumer Participation in Network- and Small-Group-Based Virtual Communities.

International journal of research in marketing, 21, 241-263. doi:10.1016/j.ijresmar.2003.12.004

Dolbec, P.-Y., Fischer, E., & Canniford, R. (2021). Something old, something new: Enabled theory building in qualitative marketing research. *Marketing Theory, 21*(4), 443-461.

Drenten, J., Harrison, R. L., & Pendarvis, N. J. (2022). More Gamer, Less Girl: Gendered Boundaries Tokenism and the Cultural Persistence of Masculine Dominance. *Journal of Consumer Research*.

Dzhogleva, H., & Lamberton, C. P. (2014). Should birds of a feather flock together? Understanding self-control decisions in dyads. *Journal of Consumer Research, 41*(2), 361-380.

Epp, A. M., & Price, L. L. (2008). Family identity: A framework of identity interplay in consumption practices. *Journal of Consumer Research, 35*(1), 50-70.

Epp, A. M., & Price, L. L. (2011). Designing solutions around customer network identity goals. *Journal of Marketing, 75*(2), 36-54.

Epp, A. M., & Price, L. L. (2012). Family time in consumer culture: implications for transformative consumer research. In *Transformative consumer research for personal and collective well-being* (pp. 599-622): Routledge.

Epp, A. M., Schau, H. J., & Price, L. L. (2014). The role of brands and mediating technologies in assembling long-distance family practices. *Journal of Marketing, 78*(3), 81-101.

Erzberger, T. (2019). Caps' dad leading cheers for son, G2 Esports at MSI. *ESPN Esports*. Retrieved from https://www.espn.com/esports/story/_/id/26775351/caps-dad-leading-cheers-son-g2-esports-msi

Esports, R. L. (Producer). (2022). Beyond the Pitch: Parents at Worlds. Retrieved from https://youtu.be/Yve3SwQuebs?si=m_zm32pynIWcTHvG

Federations, N. o. A. a. S. E. (2021). Interview: Being a parent of a gamer with Shae Williams, Co-founder of COPE. Retrieved from https://www.nasef.org/blog/shae-williams-cope

Goor, D., Keinan, A., & Ordabayeva, N. (2021). Status pivoting. *Journal of Consumer Research, 47*(6), 978-1002.

Hamilton, R. (2016). Consumer-based strategy: Using multiple methods to generate consumer insights that inform strategy. In (Vol. 44, pp. 281-285): Springer.

Hamilton, R., Ferraro, R., Haws, K. L., & Mukhopadhyay, A. (2021). Traveling with companions: The social customer journey. *Journal of Marketing, 85*(1), 68-92.

Hamilton, R., & Price, L. L. (2019). Consumer journeys: developing consumer-based strategy. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, 47*(2), 187-191. doi:10.1007/s11747-019-00636-y

Huff, A. D., & Cotte, J. (2016). The evolving family assemblage: How senior families "do" family. *European Journal of Marketing, 50*(5/6), 892-915.

Hunter-Jones, P. (2014). Changing family structures and childhood socialisation: a study of leisure consumption. *Journal of marketing management, 30*(15-16), 1533-1553.

Jensen Schau, H., & Gilly, M. C. (2003). We are what we post? Self-presentation in personal web space. *Journal of Consumer Research, 30*(3), 385-404.

Jovic, D. (2023). Building the Ultimate Battlestation: Producing and Consuming Gaming Setup Videos on YouTube.

Kastarinen, A., Närvänen, E., & Valtonen, A. (2022). Doing Family over Time: The Multilayered and Multitemporal Nature of Intergenerational Caring through Consumption. *Journal of Consumer Research, 50*(2), 282-302. doi:10.1093/jcr/ucac050

Kozinets, R. V. (2015). *Netnography: redefined*: Sage.

Kozinets, R. V., Sherry Jr, J. F., Storm, D., Duhachek, A., Nuttavuthisit, K., & DeBerry-Spence, B. (2004). Ludic agency and retail spectacle. *Journal of Consumer Research, 31*(3), 658-672.

Lemon, K. N., & Verhoef, P. C. (2016). Understanding customer experience throughout the customer journey. *Journal of Marketing, 80*(6), 69-96.

Loscher, G., Splitter, V., & Seidl, D. (2019). Theodore Schatzki's theory and its implications for organization studies. *Management, Organizations and contemporary social theory. London: Routledge*.

Maciel, A. F., & Wallendorf, M. (2021). Space as a Resource in the Politics of Consumer Identity. *Journal of Consumer Research, 48*(2), 309-332.

Magaudda, P. (2011). When materiality 'bites back': Digital music consumption practices in the age of dematerialization. *Journal of consumer culture, 11*(1), 15-36.

Nakamura, L. (2014). Gender and race online. *Society and the Internet. How networks of information and communication are changing our lives. Oxford*, 81-95.

Schatzki, T. R. (1996). *Social practices: A Wittgensteinian approach to human activity and the social*: Cambridge University Press.

Schatzki, T. R. (2002). *The site of the social: A philosophical account of the constitution of social life and change*: Penn State University Press.

Schau, H. J., Muñiz Jr, A. M., & Arnould, E. J. (2009). How brand community practices create value. *Journal of Marketing, 73*(5), 30-51.

Seidl, D., & Whittington, R. (2014). Enlarging the strategy-as-practice research agenda: Towards taller and flatter ontologies. *Organization studies, 35*(10), 1407-1421.

Shove, E. (2007). *The design of everyday life*: Berg.

Shove, E., & Pantzar, M. (2005). Consumers, producers and practices: Understanding the invention and reinvention of Nordic walking. *Journal of consumer culture, 5*(1), 43-64.

Shove, E., Pantzar, M., & Watson, M. (2012). *The Dynamics of Social Practice: Everyday Life and How it Changes*. doi:10.4135/9781446250655

Siebert, A., Gopaldas, A., Lindridge, A., & Simões, C. (2020). Customer experience journeys: Loyalty loops versus involvement spirals. *Journal of Marketing, 84*(4), 45-66.

Simon, B. (2007). Geek chic: Machine aesthetics, digital gaming, and the cultural politics of the case mod. *Games and Culture, 2*(3), 175-193.

Thomas, T. C., & Epp, A. M. (2019). The best laid plans: Why new parents fail to habituate practices. *Journal of Consumer Research, 46*(3), 564-589.

Thomas, T. C., Epp, A. M., & Price, L. L. (2020). Journeying together: Aligning retailer and service provider roles with collective consumer practices. *Journal of Retailing, 96*(1), 9-24.

Wallendorf, M., & Arnould, E. J. (1991). "We gather together": Consumption rituals of thanksgiving day. *Journal of Consumer Research, 18*(1), 13-31.

Warde, A. (2005). Consumption and theories of practice. *Journal of consumer culture, 5*(2), 131-153.

Watson, M., & Shove, E. (2008). Product, competence, project and practice: DIY and the dynamics of craft consumption. *Journal of consumer culture, 8*(1), 69-89.

Westcott, K. A., Jane; Arkenberg, Chris; Auxier, Brooke; Loucks, Jeff; Downs, Kevin. (2023). *Digital media trends*. Retrieved from https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/industry/technology/digital-media-trends-consumption-habits-survey.html#read-the-digital-media-trends

Woermann, N., & Rokka, J. (2015). Timeflow: How consumption practices shape consumers' temporal experiences. *Journal of Consumer Research, 41*(6), 1486-1508.

Chapter 2
Triadic Phygital Experiences: How producers mediate performers and audiences' experiences

Abstract

This article explores consumer experiences shaped by digital technologies, focusing on the evolving concept of 'phygital' or hybrid experiences arising from the integration of virtual and physical elements. While existing studies predominantly concentrate on individual shopping journeys, this research investigates the challenges of reconciling virtual immersion and physical experiences within an esports tournament, where performers immerse themselves in virtual games while in-person audiences seek physical engagement. Addressing potential value destruction in such multi-actor experiences, the study examines how firms can manage divergent consumer expectations in phygital settings. Through a triadic lens involving producers, performers, and audiences, the article uncovers the complexities of value creation and destruction in extraordinary phygital experiences. The findings contribute valuable insights to the literature, offering a framework for managing conflicting expectations and highlighting the importance of transgressive spaces in the phygital realm.

2.1. Introduction

> You know you're in this crazy intense environment when you're doing well and then the game is over the ball drops and you step outside your computer and you're just in your room. When you're at a LAN it's completely different you really feel the arena shaking and like the vibrations of everybody yelling. You're used to in the game hearing the [artificial] crowd but then it's a real crowd (…), it takes you to a whole other place. It's an entirely different way to experience the game.

The significance of experiences has become increasingly evident in contemporary society, with experiential marketing approaches being a top priority for marketing practitioners (Qualtrics' XM Institute, 2021) and scholars (e.g., Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Pine & Gilmore, 2011). Indeed, the customer experience concept has

attracted attention from both practitioners and academics: creating memorable experiences for customers contributes to the success of companies (Verhoef et al., 2009) and is linked to positive outcomes such as increased economic value and market share, consumer loyalty, consumer satisfaction, and positive word of mouth (e.g., Frow & Payne, 2007; Klaus & Maklan, 2012; Maklan & Klaus, 2011; Pine & Gilmore, 2011). Consumers are no longer perceived merely as rational decision-makers driven by practical considerations but also as complex individuals seeking fulfillment through symbolic and hedonistic pursuits (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982).

Moreover, one of the challenge and opportunity of consumers experiences is that they are being continuously transformed by digital technologies. Big data and tracking technology enable unprecedented personalization as the analysis of vast datasets allows businesses to deliver tailored recommendations, customized content, and optimized interfaces, enhancing user satisfaction (Akter & Wamba, 2016). Predictive analytics and real-time feedback mechanisms improve customer service, while supply chain optimization ensures efficient inventory management and faster deliveries. Other technologies such as Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) enhance engagement through immersive experiences, interactive storytelling, virtual try-on for products, and location-based information. VR immerses users in entirely digital environments, offering realistic simulations, while AR overlays digital content onto the real world. Both types of technology-enhanced reality contribute to a more engaging consumer journey, revolutionizing industries such as gaming, retail, and education. As a result, Marketing scholars have sought to understand how digital technologies influence consumers' experiences (Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2010), often focusing on the differences between virtual and physical experiences.

In the recent years however, several scholars and practitioners have called for a better integration of virtuality and physicality into a seamless experience, referring to such experiences as 'hybrid' (e.g., Flavián, Ibáñez-Sánchez, & Orús, 2019) or 'phygital' (e.g., Batat, 2022). In the retail and service literatures, the integration of physical and virtual elements throughout the consumer journey has often been examined using the logic of marketing channels such as omnichannel or multichannel strategies (e.g., Akter, Hossain,

& Strong, 2021; Ansari, Mela, & Neslin, 2008; Hossain, Akter, Kattiyapornpong, & Dwivedi, 2020; Lee & Kim, 2010; Wallace, Giese, & Johnson, 2004), with a strong focus on optimizing the shopping experience over time in virtual spaces and physical places (e.g., Armstrong & Rutter, 2017; Banik, 2021; Batat, 2019; Lawry, 2022). Moreover, most studies on hybridity/phygitality focus on individual experiences as consumers navigate between physical and digital settings.

Yet, phygital experiences aren't contained to individual, shopping-oriented consumption journeys. In many contexts, such as spectacles, extraordinary experiences, arts exhibitions, or even classrooms, more and more brands and institutions are integrating virtual and physical environments, offering a variety of experiences along the reality-virtuality-continuum (Milgram & Kishino, 1994) such as Virtual Reality (VR), Augmented Reality (AR) Mixed-Reality (MR), or Extended Reality (ER). For example, investigating the ESPN Zone Chicago, Kozinets et al. (2004) demonstrate that the integration of technologies such as screens and VR games contributed to consumers experiencing the boundaries between reality and fantasy, and virtual and physical. In their investigation, consumers had the opportunity to take on several roles, alternating between watching and being watched as they engaged in VR games and simulations, encouraging interactions with fellow consumers and bystanders.

But what happens in phygital settings, when one group of consumers primarily seeks virtual immersion, while the other primarily seeks a physical experience? This article investigates the challenges of unifying experiences in the context of an esports tournament, an extraordinary experience in which esports athletes ('performers') must immerse themselves in the virtual game and ignore physical distractions, while crowds ('in-person audiences') seek to physically ground what is usually a virtual experience. To understand such extraordinary consumers experiences in phygital settings, this study asks: How do consumers experience the virtual and physical consumption of phygital experiences? How do producers enable and constrain this consumption?

Moreover, when experiences are cocreated by multiple actors such as companies and various groups of consumers, conflicting expectations, norms, and behaviors can arise

(Bradford & Sherry Jr, 2015; Hill, Canniford, & Eckhardt, 2022; Kozinets et al., 2004). To understand how firms can manage conflicting experiences, this study further asks: How can firms manage divergent expectations from consumers in phygital experiences?

This study extends the literature on phygital (or virtual-physical hybrid) experiences by applying its framework to an extraordinary context, highlighting the specific challenges of co-located and simultaneous presence in virtual and physical realities. It also discusses agency in triadic relationships and underlines the importance of transgressive spaces.

In the next sections, I explain the theoretical lens, the research context, and the methodology employed. I then move on to the findings, uncovering how value is created and destroyed in triadic relationships between producers, performers, and audiences in live phygital experiences. I conclude by providing managerial implications for firms building experiences combining virtual and physical elements and addressing consumers with divergent needs.

2.1.1 Phygitality and Virtual-Physical Hybridity

The integration of physical and virtual elements into a seamless experience has been an important focus for marketing practitioners and scholars. To refer to such integration, the concept of hybridity (virtual-physical) has frequently been used, often to refer to space, while the concept of phygitality has been more recently adopted in the marketing literature. I review the concept of hybridity first.

2.1.2 Physical-Virtual Hybridity

According to De Souza e Silva (2006), hybrid spaces as "mobile spaces, created by the constant movement of users who carry portable devices continuously connected to the Internet and to other users" (p. 262). Central to her conceptualization is the idea that mobile devices allow consumers to embed the internet in their everyday activities, constantly connecting physical and digital spaces as consumers move through urban spaces. Importantly, the author defines sociality as a key dimension of hybrid experiences. In her mobile-driven conceptualization of hybrid spaces, De Souza e Silva (2006, p. 261) argues that hybridity arises "when virtual communities (chats, multiuser domains, and

massively multiplayer online role-playing games), previously enacted in what was conceptualized as cyberspace, migrate to physical spaces because of the use of mobile technologies as interfaces". Indeed, in mobile hybrid experiences, consumers' movement and the affordances of mobile technologies allow them to socialize with surrounding peers, as well as physically distant ones. As a result, mobility becomes central in this conceptualization of hybridity, excluding to some degree stationary experiences.

However, hybrid sociality is also observed in more stationary experiences. For example, Lindtner et al (2008) examinate physical-digital hybridity in the context of Wang-Ba - Internet cafés - in China. Their study highlights the mutual efficacy of digital and physical environments, showing that players' experience was positively impacted by sociality online and offline. Contrary to De Souza e Silva (2006)'s definition, they find that hybridity is not restricted to the use of mobile technologies. Rather, the use of stationary PCs becomes central to consumers' experiences, allowing both virtual and physical interactions with distant and co-located peers. Also studying public contexts of play such as internet cafés and LAN parties, Taylor, Jenson, De Castell, and Dilouya (2014) investigate how sociality and computer-mediated interactions is affected when players gather not only online but in physical settings as well. Like Lindtner et al. (2008), they find that play is temporally and spatially bound, with some participants choosing to engage in gaming practices exclusively in public contexts as opposed to private ones. In such public contexts, spatial arrangements are found to hinder or encourage hybrid sociality. In LAN events for example, Taylor et al. (2014) note that participants were not only seeking mediated and unmediated forms of sociality, but that spatial and temporal arrangements contributed to "more fluid and prolonged forms of play" (p. 774). In sum, sociality in hybrid experience arises from interactions flowing from physical and virtual realities.

Next, I review the concept of "phygitality" or "phygital experiences" as its use in the marketing literature and more specifically in the customer experience literature makes it relevant to this study.

2.1.3 Phygitality

The term "phygital" (a combination of physical and digital) has been suggested to characterize how companies create connections with customers across virtual and physical realities (Batat, 2019; Mele, Spena, Marzullo, & Di Bernardo, 2023). Having been used mainly by practitioners, several scholars have noted a lack of clear conceptualization and theoretical development (e.g., Mele et al, 2023; Batat 2019, 2022), due in part to its confusion with concepts such as multichannel, omnichannel, and cross-channels strategies (Batat, 2022).

Batat (2022) notes that in the retail and service literatures, the integration of physical and virtual elements throughout the consumer journey has often been examined using the logic of marketing channels, with a focus on optimizing virtual and physical touchpoints. The author however argues in favor of expanding phygitality beyond the channel logic, proposing a holistic framework examining the dynamics of consumers movement from physical and virtual reality and inversely. Understanding such dynamics is especially relevant as companies attempt to offer seamless experiences that go beyond optimizing touchpoints, marrying virtual and physical elements, such as the Apple's Vision Pro augmented reality headset. As a result, Batat (2022) proposes the following definition of phygital (p. 10):

> A holistic and integrative ecosystem that adopts a consumer standpoint as a starting point and then integrates a combination of physical, human, digital and media content elements, platforms, technologies, and extended realities, among others; the goal of phygital is to offer unique and compelling customer experiences that should guarantee a coherent continuum in the delivery process of consumer value (intrinsic/ extrinsic) provided from digital to physical and vice versa.

This definition moves away from the functional and economic logic of optimizing touchpoints across virtual and physical channels to propose a holistic framework that brings forward the symbolic, emotional, and social value of phygital experiences (PH-CX) as well. The PH-CX framework underlines the dynamics created in phygital settings, where consumers navigate from physical to virtual and from digital to virtual. To this end, Batat (2022) identifies point of contacts ('connectors') that arise from the interactions between brands, firms, and consumers. The author classifies these connectors under four

categories: media (content created by a company for informational, promotional, and relational purposes), digital (online technologies that connect firms and consumers), physical (physical display of a firm's offering including merchandising techniques), and human (direct contact between firm's employees and staff and consumers). Such definition and framework bring forward the significance of the continuum between virtual and physical experiences (Lawry, 2022; Bartoli et al., 2023).

Other scholars have also attempted to better conceptualize the term. In a systematic literature review, Mele et al. (2023) use the Antecedents, Decisions, Outcome model (ADO) to categorize four items associated with the concept of phygitality. In their model, antecedents are comprised of resources (objects and applications) and contexts (place and space), which affect decisions during the customer journey, and results in a phygital customer experience eliciting emotional, behavioural, and social responses.

Despite recent efforts to conceptualize and better understand phygital experience, it is not clear how group of individuals experience phygitality when one group's experience is more virtual while the other one is more physical. Taking this into account, I turn our attention to triads before delineating how the research context allows us to better understand these intersecting experiences.

2.1.4 Agency, Power, and Value Creation in Triads

Despite the proven effect of multiple group of actors on brands (Parmentier & Fischer, 2015), brand-consumers relationships have often been researched as dyadic processes (Tax, McCutcheon, & Wilkinson, 2013). Building on Callon (1998), Vargo and Lusch (2011), and Wasserman and Faust (1994), Siltaloppi and Vargo (2017, p. 396) point out limitations of dyads, as they "cannot capture the multidirectional and complex relationships that constitute contexts for collaboration, competition, and value creation in human systems". Indeed, in contrast with groups of two, triads introduce a new layer of interaction as each actor not only engages directly with another actor, but they also act as an intermediary between the other two (Simmel, 1950). Siltaloppi and Vargo (2017) identify three forms of triadic relationships from their literature review: brokerage, mediation, and coalition.

Brokerages involve the actions of a third party (the broker) between two others and is particularly important in channel studies where actors mediate between upstream suppliers and downstream customers. Its examination allows for a better understanding of the third party's actions between two others.

Mediations highlight how dyads are embedded within triads. It identifies mechanisms by which a dyadic relationship is influenced by or influences a relationship with a third party. The analysis focuses on non-rational or informal mechanisms like normative commitments and cognitive dispositions.

Coalitions underline the dynamics of three-actor systems as a whole, emphasizing the formation and change in relationships among the three actors. It draws attention to aspects such as power, psychological balance, and strategic benefits in triadic relationships. In sociology, the literature outlines several factors influencing the development of coalitions over time. Caplow (1956) for example, explained that the emergence of such triads is rooted in how power is initially distributed between the three actors. He proposed that if one actor holds a dominant position, a coalition is likely to emerge between the two others in order to challenge this dominance.

Despite being analytically distinct, the three forms of triadic relationships (brokerage, mediation, and coalition) identified by Siltaloppi and Vargo (2017) are tightly interrelated and often inseparable in real-life contexts. In the context of phygital experiences, triads allow us to question what happens when several actors share an experience in a co-located space yet live this experience mostly in virtual reality for the first one, mostly in physical reality for the second one, while the third one must bridge the two to provide an optimized holistic experience. More specifically, investigating phygital experiences from a triadic lens allows us to identify: (1) how performers and audiences exercise their agency, and (2) how value is created or destroyed. I describe the context and the methodology next. To investigate the challenges and opportunities arising from bridging virtual and physical experiences, I analyze the interactions between competitive gaming players (‘performers’), audiences, and producers in esports arenas.

2.2 Context: esports

Esports is defined as a form of sporting activities where individuals cultivate and refine mental and/or physical skills using information and communication technologies (Wagner, 2006). The main difference with other form of gaming is its organized approach to competition (Buchanan-Oliver & Seo, 2012). Esports is a strong marketing phenomenon: its structure is uniquely influenced by its development around commercial products, creating a fragmented environment shaped around different IP and genres, stakeholders, and publishers (Scholz, Scholz, & Barlow, 2019). Indeed, the esports environment is highly profit-oriented especially given it centers around a commercial product. I chose to investigate esports arenas to answer my research questions for two reasons: they (1) illustrate the challenges of phygitality when moving a virtual experience to a physical one, and they (2) represent a phygital experience whereby three actors are co-located yet living their experiences through different realities.

First, these extraordinary experiences represent well one of the challenges of phygitality: moving a virtual practice to a physical setting. Indeed, most of the video practice happens virtually, with competitive players often being isolated offline but connected online. Seo (2013, p. 1551) notes that organizations of professional tournaments act as an important milestone in the cultural development of esports "by authenticating [competitive gaming] consumption in a real world, traversing the boundaries between the online and offline". Indeed, locally networked events – often referred to as a LAN (Local Area Network) party – have allowed players to engage in competitive gaming (Witkowski, 2012), with competitions organized as early as 1980 with the Space Invaders competition organized in 1980 by Atari. In-person tournaments thus contribute to the legitimization efforts of actors in the industry in the same way as creating leagues, schools, and esports associations. However, as the practice moves from virtual reality to physical reality, challenges arise from building a holistic experience that caters to the needs of players and audiences.

Second, I identify a triad of actors who co-create these hybrid experiences despite being immersed in different realities. This is important in the context of phygital extraordinary experiences. One key definition of customer experience has been offered by Lemon and

Verhoef (2016) as "a multidimensional construct focusing on a customer's cognitive, emotional, behavioral, sensorial, and social responses to a firm's offerings during the customer's entire purchase journey" (p. 71). This definition acknowledges not only the multidimensional aspect of CX but the required interaction from which experience emerges as well (De Keyser, Lemon, Klaus, & Keiningham, 2015; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2003; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Verhoef et al (2009) also point out that customer experience is not only affected by elements controlled by marketers such as the price, but also by other elements over which marketers have little control including the behavior of other customers. In the context of esports arenas, behavior of audience members can be critical: they possess access to comprehensive information that surpasses what is available to the competing teams. With the ability to observe the entire map and closely monitor the actions of the players in competition, the in-person audience's insights can influence the dynamics of the virtual environment, potentially impacting the overall experience and outcomes of the esports event.

2.3 Methodology

This investigation of the challenges and opportunities arising from bridging virtual and physical experiences, warranted me to employ multiple methods to account for the three actors' experiences within the triad. As a result, I use a subset of the data collected in study 1, including ethnographic and netnographic data (observation, interviews, online data collection, and immersion within virtual communities). Consequently, description of data collection is lightened when repetitive of the first study. Additional archival data was also collected to specifically account for the experience of crowds, online audiences, producers, and performers at esports events. The data allowed me to gain insight into the experiences as lived by audiences, performers, and producers to better understand holistic phygital experiences.

2.3.1 Participant and non-participant observation

In order to understand the phygital experience from an audience standpoint, participant observation was realized during the Six Invitational 2023, a three-day gaming spectacle

showcasing the video game Rainbow Six Siege (R6S), encompassing approximately 24 hours (three days of eight hours).

Prior to the tournament, many hours were spent in online R6S communities as well as watching R6S related content in order to get a good understanding of the game, the pro players and teams, and what to expect at a tournament of this magnitude, with thousands of in-person spectators. I spent half of the time on site by myself, observing spectators' interactions, and informally interviewing them. The second half was spent with members of a university esports club that were already interviewed. Observing this group, their interactions, as well as informally interviewing them on-site allowed for a better, enriched understanding of their holistic competitive gaming experience. At the time of the ethnography, many of the esports club members were meeting in-person for the first time, as their practices were happening remotely. Witnessing the transformation from virtual socialization to the in-person one was informative, with some gamers still addressing each other by their gamer tag (nickname) while having no idea of their interlocutor's first name. For both ethnographies, data was recorded in field notes, photographs, and videos, and later analyzed in light of the interview data.

In the other ethnographic site already described in study 1, gamers as well as staff members of a collegiate esports club were observed and informally interviewed on-site. For this study, the focus of the observation and analysis was put on understanding participants' virtual experience when co-located with other players, coaches, and observers.

For both observations, data was recorded in field notes, photographs, and videos, and later analyzed in light of the interview data.

2.3.2 In-depth interviews

Out of the 22 interviews from the first study, thirteen interviews were leveraged and analyzed for this second study, as parts of the interviews pertained to the experience of gamers as players in tournaments, esports audiences (online or in-person), and/or producers of esports experiences. Quotes used in essay 1 were not used in essay 2, as they

pertained to different aspects of the experience investigated. Interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 1 hour and 27 minutes. To protect participants anonymity, I employed pseudonyms and confidentiality was guaranteed to all participants. Some of the interviews were translated into English.

2.3.3 Netnography

In addition to the ethnographic immersions, I also engaged in netnography (Kozinets, 2015), immersing myself in various online gaming communities. This approach helped with atmospheric preparation (Hill et al., 2022) as I got familiar with the cultural expectations of esports events and 'learned to participate'. Netnography tools were leveraged including screenshots and field notes that were collected in a presentation software.

2.3.4 Archival data collection

Data collection included specialized online magazine articles, blog and forum posts, and videos related to esports consumption, with a focus on in-person esports event, comparison with the streaming experience, and the history of teams, esports venues, and tournaments.

This step was especially important as it allowed for a deeper understanding of the phygital experience for pro players' standpoint, as they were not readily accessible to be interviewed. Post-match conferences and interviews in specialized press were thus very informative.

2.3.5 Data Analysis

Similar to study 1, the qualitative analysis of the data involved a systematic approach through coding iterations. The coding process enabled the recognition and organization of recurrent themes, patterns, and distinctive perspectives arising from interviews, archival materials, ethnographic observations, and netnographic interactions. Iterative coding was employed to refine and deepen the understanding of the data, ensuring a thorough exploration of the nuances present in the narratives and experiences shared by participants.

2.4 Findings: mediating experiences across physical and virtual realities

> Where do you place the cursor between the comfort of the players so they can perform, so they can be comfortable while playing on stage, and the comfort of the audience? If you push the cursor too much to one side, the overall experience will be less enjoyable. (Maxime)

As Maxime, one of the participants, describes, one of the challenges of in-person esports competitions lies in orchestrating an experience that caters to the divergent needs of players and spectators. In a statement for Dot Esports, ESL, one of the major esports' tournament actors, summarizes the issue as one of gaming integrity ('sound damping') versus atmosphere and play/audience connection.

> "Soundproof booths do offer a solution for sound damping, but this in turn also dampens the energy of a LAN tournament and disconnects the players from the crowd, which is a critical dynamic for an engaging and exciting high-level sporting event (…) The feedback from players at events like IEM Katowice is testament to our current solution going in the right direction."
>
> - ESL statement for Dot Esports

I first analyze the fundamental elements that shape esports events for audiences: the configuration and ecosystem of esports arenas, the viewing experience vs. the social experience of audiences, and the divergence in audiences' and players' experiences.

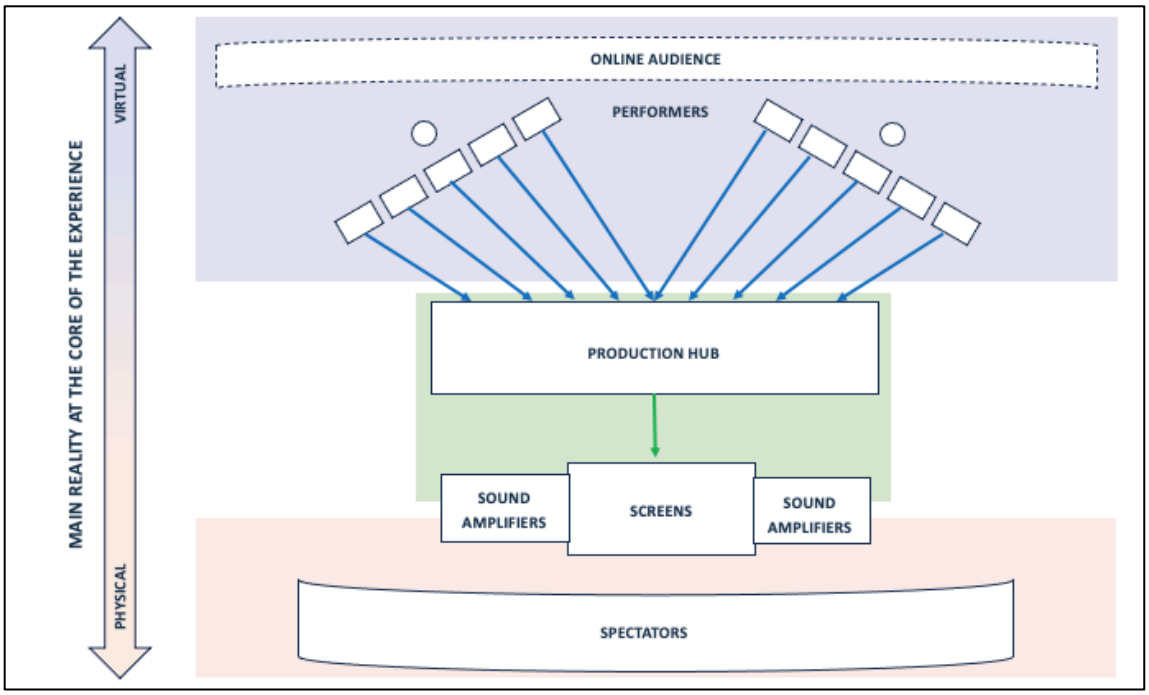
2.4.1 The configuration and ecosystem of esports arenas

In the fast-changing world of competitive gaming, in-person esports tournaments have emerged as captivating phygital spectacles, catching the attention of gaming enthusiasts, scholars, and marketers alike. The findings of this study highlight the tensions and challenges arising from the need to optimize players' experience, allowing them to be immersed in the virtual and achieve a flow state, while concurrently cultivating an engaging atmosphere to cater to a live audience. Before delving into the dynamics shaping these seemingly divergent experiences, let's take a look at the configuration of esports arenas and the triad constituting the ecosystem of esports arenas.

The arena

At the heart of the esports arena is a central stage, hosting two teams of five players each, positioned on opposite sides. Each player is provided with the same performance PC, earbuds, noise-cancelling headset, and gaming chair. On top of these equipment, players bring their own keyboard and mouse. Accompanying them, a coach stands behind, offering strategic guidance between plays.

FIGURE 3 - A SCHEMA OF THE ESPORTS ARENA

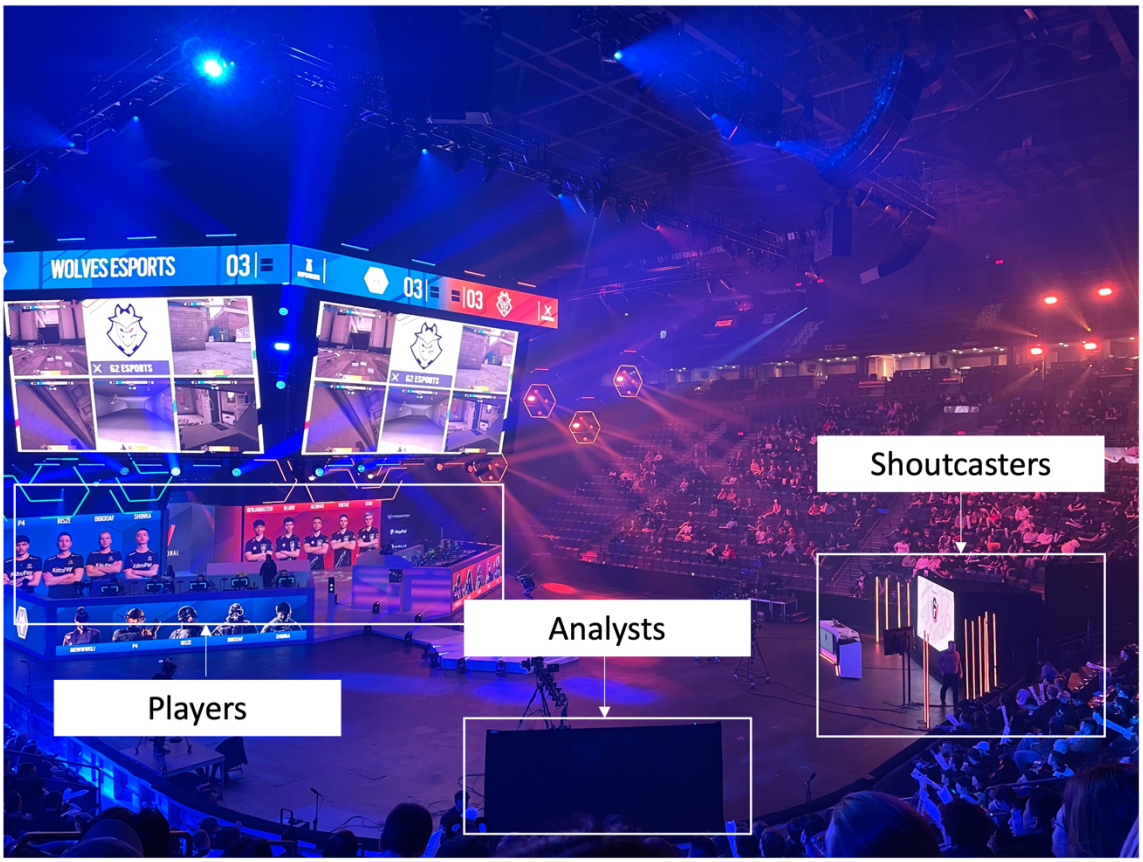


Surrounding the stage in a half-circle arrangement, the audience observes the intense gameplay through the giant screens, cheering (mostly) and booing (rarely) players and teams. At the Six Invitational, the center section of the seating area is reserved for individuals holding VIP tickets.

Strategically placed between the stage and the audience, the production hub houses hosts, shoutcasters, and analysts. Hosts address the crowd before and after plays. They're usually responsible for the storytelling before and after matches, for introducing teams, and for interviewing players and coaches. Shoutcasters provide play-by-play comments during the matches as well as any other information relevant to the teams in play ("a difference between the last time these two teams met was Julio was not on the roster. And what

Julio's added to this team is just a sense of a little bit more calm, we saw it Jönköping [a previous tournament] we have seen a bit of the growth on the side of W7M"). Their comprehensive game knowledge help audience members follow the action. Analysts decipher data into strategic insights, offering valuable information, usually after the games or during breaks. Positioned with their backs to the public, these experts immerse themselves in the game.

FIGURE 4 - STAGE SETUP AT THE SIX INVITATIONAL 2023



The production hub is one of the most central elements of the phygital experience in esports arena, wielding control over the flow of information from the players' experience to that of the audience. It serves as the nexus for broadcasting visuals and sounds, allowing the audience to virtually engage with the unfolding events for players. Given that the audience lacks visibility into individual screens and reactions, as well as the ability to hear the players' booth discussions, the production hub becomes instrumental in shaping the

immersive and coherent narrative of the esports experience. I describe two core elements of the esports experience next: the viewing experience, and the social experience.

The Viewing Experience and the Social Experience of audiences

Despite the presence of LANs since the 1980's, esports has traditionally been a predominantly viewing-centric experience, characterized by its highly mediated nature. The core of the practice lies in the retransmission of what players see on their screens, transforming it into a spectacle for audiences to enjoy. The viewing experience in esports is fundamentally shaped by its tradition of being spectator-oriented, particularly underscored by the advent of platforms like Twitch that played a pivotal role by introducing unique features that allowed fans to participate in real-time discussions, sharing comments and memes, which ultimately became a big part of internet culture. Indeed, unlike traditional sports, esports offer a unique viewing experience by allowing fans to immerse themselves in the perspective of the players. Through innovative tools like 'multiview', viewers can access different angles and viewpoints during the game. This feature enables fans to witness the action as if they were in the players' shoes, experiencing the game from their point of view, making it difficult for some esports enthusiasts to see the value of in-person events when measured through the lens of the viewing experience:

> I've never actually been to [an esports tournament], but I would imagine the viewing experience would be much worse. Before multiview, no real downside to going to LAN. But now with multiview you either go to LAN and watch tsm loot whilst sen fight gambit whilst esa oob on them. Or you use multiview at home and can watch who you want when you want. I can't imagine [a Battle Royale LAN] being amazing to watch

Many other accounts from in-person esports spectators also point out that the viewing experience is not the central element of in-person events, and isn't nearly as important as other elements contributing to the atmosphere, in particular, the social experience:

> I've been to a Starcraft LAN before, and its main draw is the crowd. People cheer and react to plays, and that energy makes games a lot more hype. It's really something when a player does something cool and the crowd goes wild all around you. The downside is that it's obviously a lot less comfortable than watching something at home. You'll have a worse view of the screen, you may be seated near distracting people, you can't choose

> which casters to listen to, you have to deal with parking and entrance fees, and so on. (Reddit)

As the comment highlights, a consensus is that the viewing experience is just one facet of attending an esports event. The social experience and the atmosphere created by a live audience significantly contributes to the overall appeal. Attendees enjoy the energy of the crowd, the cheers, and reactions to plays, acknowledging that while the viewing conditions might be less comfortable than at home, the communal aspect enhances the overall enjoyment.

Interestingly, unlike traditional sports stadium, there was little partisanship in the crowd, with most audience members dressed in plain clothes. Some fans wore jerseys of the teams playing, some were waving banners, and some cosplayed operators (i.e., characters) from the game. During one of the matches, an informant sitting next to me points out a small group screaming on one side of a team: “they must be their friends”, he explains, hinting at the fact that strong partisanship that early in this tournament isn’t necessarily normative. Indeed, contrary to traditional sports events, where fans come to cheer their favorite team and players, some surveys specific to esports have shown that the presence of pro players was not among the top reasons for attending an in-person event (CSL & EEA, 2021; YouGov, 2022). As one event attendee recounts on a forum dedicated to the game Rocket League:

> The most powerful thing of this weekend for me was witnessing the transition of booing Vitality to cheering them on rigorously. On Friday I watched a random match on Twitch that featured Gen G, and so I decided they would be my team to root for. I had no clue that they had a NA [North America] player until the announcers mentioned it, so I cheered for them and booed Vitality. I liked Zen’s playing a lot, so when Gen G got booted, I started to root for Vit. When Ferra asked us to adopt Vitality as their North American team, I was pretty surprised as it was unexpected and a very interesting offer, but when Ferra began to ask the crowd for American flags to carry out with them, the adrenaline of the crowd went through the roof! I can’t even imagine anything similar ever happening again, and it was so unique that I can’t comprehend any sport being able to replicate anything close to that experience. Zen waving the American flag was very unifying and empowering of him to do, and if I had a French flag I would have waved it back just for Vit.

This, however, might be specific to the game and the local culture, as some countries have been specifically pointed out for cheering only their local teams. This is the case for Brazil, as exemplified in a forum thread dedicated to the game Valorant:

> **Original Poster:** BR [Brazil] crowds cheering for BR teams. During TL vs FUT match, crowds only cheer for TL. But isn't it just the same to all traditional sports too? If you watch NFL, home crowds BOO like crazy and throw middle fingers to away crowds and even threaten sometimes. Same thing happens to European football matches. I don't really get the hate for crowds being biased when it's 100x worse in traditional sports
>
> **Commenter:** Because in traditional sports there is home and away, and everyone gets equal games at home and at the opponent's arena. But entire valorant events are usually hosted in one single location that is completely up to riot.

In sum, data analysis show that people attend live events not solely for the game but for the chance to connect with others who share their passion ('the crowd has grown every day and it's so cool to see the different fan bases and hear the chants'). This perspective underscores how the sense of community and shared enthusiasm play a pivotal role in shaping esports events' worth beyond the viewing experience alone. Next, I explain the experience of players (mostly virtual) and audiences (mostly physical) in such phygital settings, to allow for a better understanding of the challenges and management strategies required to build such phygital experiences.

Players' experience Vs. Audiences' experience

On one side of this phygital experience, players must immerse themselves in the virtual game, getting over the pressure and distractions coming from their physical environment. Even though players are physically sitting next to each other, most of their actions and interactions happen in the virtual space. Their communications with each other, their coach, and the opposing team all happens online, through voice channels and chat. In-between plays, team members will sometimes interact physically to congratulate or support one a another after a win or a loss, fist bumping for example, but will maintain their oral communications virtually. To optimize their performance, they require an environment that seamlessly blends comfort and focus, allowing players to achieve a flow state. As Joey, one of the participants, describes in his interview:

> That's my flow state anyway. It varies for everyone, but it's just entering your zone, and then you know exactly what to do. You don't wonder, you're not like ‘okay, is he going to come from behind?’ You know! You just do a 180, pow, shoot, clack, turn around, peak the corner, stop, pow, he's dead.

Achieving a state of flow demands an immersive, distraction-free setting, where players can fully concentrate on their in-game experience (virtual) and forget about physical distractions. In this sense, players’ experience in esports setting can be described as having a “virtual core”, whereby immersion increases their ultimate goal: performance.

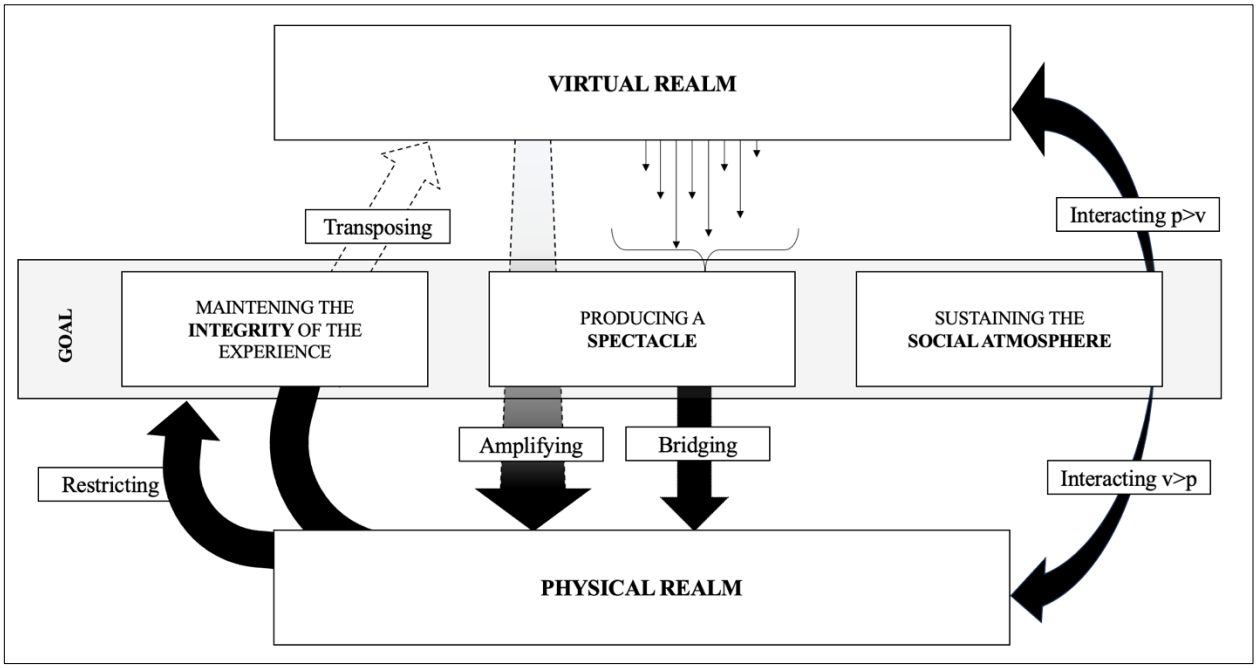
On the other side, audience members choose to visit esports arenas for the atmosphere, the socialization with other audience members, and the overall spectacle created by visuals and sounds.

> It was inspiring to see so many various groups of people coming together to engage in a common interest, especially in the realm of video games, which can oftentimes be seen as a socially isolating factor. (Reddit)

The challenge arises in delivering an experience that transcends physical and digital boundaries.

Producers must then create an environment that maximizes the performance of players, sustains the engagement of audiences, and maintains the integrity of the game (i.e., fair-play standards) for participants. Ensuring a seamless transmission of information to the audience, such as commentary and crowd reactions, becomes a complex task: the risk of players gaining unintentional advantages through audible cues from the crowd or commentator remarks is ever-present. I describe the challenges that producers face next, as they take of a mediating role between spectators and performers, and virtual and physical elements.

FIGURE 5 - MEDIATING PHYSICAL AND VIRTUAL EXPERIENCES



2.4.2 Mediating from virtual to physical

I identify four ways in which navigation from virtual reality to physical reality is enabled in phygital experiences: amplifying, bridging, embodying, and interacting. While amplifying and bridging are strategies created and controlled by producers, embodying and interacting are actions carried by performers and consumers, and supported by producers. I describe them next.

Amplifying

In the context of LANs, I call the first strategy employed by producers "amplifying", as the viewing experience is amplified and anchored in the physical experience through sounds, lights, and vibrations. Such spectacular stimuli (Borghini, Sherry, & Joy, 2021; Hill et al., 2022; Sherry Jr et al., 2001) including sounds and lights are typically associated with experiential places where managers aim to create a "wow factor" (sherry et al. 2001). Yet, recent studies (e.g., Bradford and Sherry 2018, Hill et al 2021) note that spectacular stimuli can hinder consumer participation, relegating consumers to a passive stance. For example, an informant in Hill et al (2021) study of the Anfield stadium describes how such stimuli can remove the "opportunity for having a sing, cracking a joke, actually

creating part of the atmosphere" (p.132), ultimately cultivating an impression of artificiality.

Prior work has also demonstrated the importance that preparation holds in order for individuals to participate in entrained behaviors, by learning scripts, rules (Higgins & Hamilton, 2019; Schau, Muñiz Jr, & Arnould, 2009), and having opportunities to learn group behaviors, such as engaging in singing together. In the context of this study however, many esports' enthusiasts noted the absence of strong rallying elements in past tournaments such as chants ('It sounds like they forget that they're meant to be excited. Their chants are also trash as well, no creativity.'), with community members in specialized forums expressing wanting to collectively contribute to this lacking aspect:

> Commenter A: In terms of chants: What happened to the theatre thread the other day? I thought this sub wanted to organise some new chants?
>
> Comment B: I really don't know, it's just hard because you need good short ones which people can follow in seconds so it's very hard
>
> Commenter C: Yeah, I'd love to hear one from this sub so that we are not only r6 analysts but also create more individual chants for each team. Maybe the teams themselves have wishes(?) - similar to the chants for football matches. Does anyone have connections or a way to ask them?

Indeed, Hill et al. (2022)'s analysis suggests the importance that groups of individuals who repeatedly participate in interaction ritual chains have in creating social atmosphere. However, given that esports tournaments are fairly recent, and that locations tend to change every year, many of the participants I met were first time participants.

Moreover, often hosted in venues transformed for the duration of the competition, tournaments lack the 'religiosity' that can be attributed to sports and music venues (Hill et al 2022; Bradford and Sherry 2015; Sherry et al. 2001). As a result, I find that, in this context, amplifying support from producers is necessary as esports is not yet as established as traditional sports. One forum member recounts a previous Rocket League tournament experience:

> In terms of how well run the event was, I was blown away by the sound system, lighting, announcers, smoke fog and fire machines, and of course the skill of the players themselves. I have been to a few concerts in my life, and RLCS was quite comparable to the level of detail that goes into creating

> an entertaining event full of detail and excitement. Some of my favorite details were that during overtime, all of the lights in the stadium turned red, and I also enjoyed how before the series began, there was an animation with the two teams' cars driving into the arena. (Reddit)

During my three-days immersion at an esports tournament, I also noted that the viewing experience is enhanced by the use sounds, lights, and vibrations, transforming viewing into a spectacle. Notably, impactful moments (i.e., "kills") were accentuated by a sound effect reminiscent of the fallen tribute canon from Hunger Games, signaling the death of a player. Such ways to amplify the retransmission of virtual events turned out to be crucial for the virtual-to-physical flow as spectators' attention isn't always focused on the action ("the people in crowds at events aren't actually having their eyes glued to the big screen watching all the time"). In such context, visual and audible cues bring the audience right back into the virtual action. I discuss a complementary strategy, "bridging", next.

Bridging

Even when important moments were not visually displayed on the screen, the crowd responded spontaneously with audible expressions of surprise, joy, or disappointment, guided by the commentary that swiftly provided context for the unfolding events. I call this "bridging". In the context of broadcasting or mediated experience, "bridging" refers to the act of connecting or linking different pieces of information or topics to ensure a smooth and coherent flow. This strategy is important as it helps to maintain continuity and clarity for the audience. In the context of esports broadcasting, "bridging" not only involves providing additional context, or transitioning between different aspects of the game, but also seamlessly connecting gameplay events or strategies that couldn't be shown to audiences. Bridging allows for a more comprehensive and engaging viewing experience and is essential given the strong information asymmetry and the control over what's retransmitted by the production.

In contrast to sports like football or basketball, in esports, spectators heavily rely on the production team to share the ongoing events within the game. The production team must manage multiple points of view simultaneously, as numerous actions can unfold at the same time in the virtual arena. This complex task is where the strategic use of sounds and lights becomes crucial, serving as complementary tools to enhance the audience's

understanding and engagement with the dynamic gameplay. The coordination of these elements becomes instrumental in providing a comprehensive and immersive viewing experience in esports.

As phygitality also refers to the seamless navigation from virtual to physical and vice-versa, I describe two ways in which consumers create such movement, and how producers support it.

Embodying

"Embodying" refers to the act of giving physical form to part of the virtual experience. In the context of the study, it takes shape as enthusiasts actively integrate their virtual gaming identity into the physical world. An illustration of this phenomenon is evident when members of the esports club I accompanied to the event donned their esports club jerseys with their gamer tag, or when spectators cosplayed as operators from Rainbow Six during the events. By doing so, their gamers' identity transcended the virtual space where it's usually contained, embodying the gaming culture in real life. This act not only blurs the boundaries between the virtual and physical but also serves as a tangible expression of their dedication and connection to the esports community. The donning of club jerseys or cosplay becomes a powerful symbol of identity, creating a bridge between the virtual narratives of gaming and the lived experiences of enthusiasts in the offline world.

Producers also support embodying, by integrating "real life" facts about players to their commentaries, providing background information about the making of game operators, and the making of the game in general as game designers are invited to the stage.

Interestingly for audience members, the transition from virtual to "real life" identities proved to be nuanced. Onstage, players had their gamertags showcased prominently, with their chosen operators displayed below, but were never referred to with their real name unless it was the same as their gamertag (e.g., 'Fabian').

FIGURE 6 - STAGE AT THE INVITATIONAL 2023

Audience members always referred to gamers or commentators by their gamertags, highlighting the significance of their virtual personas. Strikingly, individuals sitting side by side in the audience, despite engaging in regular conversations and shared gameplay experiences, sometimes remained unaware of each other's actual names.

> I have been sitting for a couple of hours with members of [the esports club I interviewed]. They all know each other but it's the first time most of them are meeting "in real life". Maxime and Léo are among them. They have recognized each other immediately as Maxime has been casting several of Léo's game. They have been discussing enthusiastically for at least 30 minutes when Maxime announces he'll be going in the VIP section to meet people he has played with in the past. As he leaves, I engage the conversation with Léo, mentioning how helpful Maxime has been in giving me a crash course about the game that same morning. At some point, Léo interrupts me and asks, "which one is Maxime?", making me realize that everyone kept referring to each other using their gamertag, having no idea about their 'real' name. (Notes from the field, Day 1, afternoon, Six Invitational)

This phenomenon underscores the unique dynamic where individuals within the gaming community may forge strong connections through virtual interactions while maintaining a certain level of what one could consider 'anonymity' in face-to-face interactions, even among those attending the same school or participating in weekly gaming activities.

Interacting

Esports events provide a unique opportunity for individuals to transition from online interactions to offline connections ("Before attending [the tournament] this weekend, I had no clue who any of the teams or players were, but now I can match names to faces of players"). Producers facilitate structured meet-and-greet sessions with professional players, creating a controlled environment for fans to engage with their gaming idols. Simultaneously, the organic nature of these connections unfolds in spontaneous encounters within the event venue. It's not uncommon for audience members to approach pro players in the corridors, requesting pictures or exchanging a few words.

> It was my first LAN too, the atmosphere was unbelievable. Seeing all the players and casters just casually walking around and taking pictures and chatting with the fans was so heartwarming. (reddit)

James, an avid gamer who has competed at the semi-pro level and is now an esports professional also provides some additional context to social interactions between esports enthusiasts and professional gamers:

> Although, again, it's mimicking 'real' sports, the audience isn't there yet. So that you still see your favorite players kind of interacting with people on Twitter in a way that maybe a footballer or a hockey star wouldn't. (interview)

Beyond interactions between fans and pros, the community spirit extends to audience members who, having initially connected online, take the initiative to organize meetups during the event as exemplified previously by Maxime joining the VIP section to finally meet people he used to play with. These offline connections, whether orchestrated by producers or arising organically, contribute to grounding socialization for a community that has historically interacted online.

Next, I describe the role of producer in mediating experiences from the physical realm to the virtual realm.

2.4.3 Mediating from physical to virtual

In phygital experiences like esports LAN events, producers play a crucial role in mediating the transition of information and atmosphere from the physical reality (in-

person audiences, shout casters) to the virtual one (players and online audiences). On the one hand, they must work toward preserving fair play and safeguarding the integrity of players' experiences, while allowing players and online audiences to feel the energy from in-person LANs, and audiences to connect with players. Let's first look at an important aspect of the mediation between co-located players and audiences ('restricting') before focusing on how the physical atmosphere can be conveyed from physical audiences to players and online audience ('transposing').

Restricting

One aspect of the physical to virtual mediation involves a form of restriction, where sounds, visual displays, and other information are carefully filtered from the physical atmosphere, to the virtual one. Restriction is implemented to uphold the integrity of the players' experience, ensuring fair play, and maintaining a comfortable environment for team communication. By selectively managing the information flow, producers aim to strike a balance that safeguards the competitive fairness of the game while preserving the essential communication dynamics among team members.

First, players' screens aren't visible to opposing team while retransmission screens are positioned and angled to restrict visibility to players (see figure 6), minimizing the chance of accidental glimpses. By controlling the players' line of sight, producers contain strategic information and prevent any external parties from gaining an unfair advantage.

Second, producers must find ways to manage how sounds and audible cues may be perceived by players. As a result of the delicate interplay between audience engagement and fair competition, an ongoing debate in the esports scene has been around using soundproof booths for players versus noise cancelling headphones. The debate ultimately revolves around the trade-off between creating a controlled, focused environment and promoting a more open, interactive experience. Proponents of soundproof booths argue that they provide players with a controlled space, shielding them from external distractions and potential communication with the audience. This controlled environment is believed to enhance concentration and enable players to communicate and strategize effectively without concerns about hearing cues from the crowd. It is particularly crucial

in games where audio cues and communication play a significant role. When asked about their preferences (Stubbs, 2017), players in favor of soundproof booths usually state performance and focus ("I preferred to play in a booth because the headphones would catch a lot of crowd noise and be distracting"), comfort ("being in a booth allows me to use headphones of my choice which creates comfort"), team cohesion ("the environment inside is much better for the team spirit"), and fair play ("the crowd can indicate a lot of things while they're cheering for someone and this can change an entire match").

On the other hand, opponents to soundproof booths argue for an open setup, suggesting that it fosters a more immersive and engaging experience for both players and the audience. They believe that removing soundproof booths allows for a more direct connection between players and fans. In an interview for Redbull (Stubbs, 2017) Max 'qojqva' Bröcker explains:

> I prefer to play out in the open with noise cancelling headphones. I experienced that the air in the booth becomes stale very fast, thus making it sometimes hard to fully concentrate. When playing out in the open you also feel the reaction of the crowd much better. When you're winning and they cheer on you it boosts the team morale, but when you're on the losing team you have to try to ignore the chants.

An open setup aligns with the idea of esports as a spectator sport, with the audience sharing in the excitement of the competition. The debate often hinges on finding the right balance that ensures fair competition, player focus, and an enjoyable experience for the audience. Some events may adopt a compromise, incorporating elements like noise-canceling headphones for players or controlled sound environments to address concerns without fully isolating players in soundproof booths. Ultimately, the ongoing discussion reflects the evolving nature of esports as it seeks to optimize the competitive environment while maintaining its entertainment value, thus making 'restricting' a particularly tricky strategy. Let's look at 'transposing' next.

Transposing the atmosphere

> "Nothing's ever gotten that much of an emotional reaction out of me and it's just like that type of energy from the crowd brings in any viewer whether you're you know watching at home or you're there" (YouTube - The Evolution of Crowds In the RLCS)

The concept of "transposing" indicates the movement or conversion of the ambiance from the physical (real-world) setting to the virtual environment. It can be approach differently if looking at transposition to co-located individuals or remote ones. I look at transposition to remote individuals first.

From offline crowds to online audiences. The atmosphere created by crowds' presence and reactions is an important topic in online forum dedicated to esports, which can ultimately positively transform the viewing experience for online audiences, as described below.

> I don't know if the crew changed anything or if the crowd is just louder today but I'm loving the emotions being telegraphed through the stream. The cheers after each kill and after each round along with the reaction of the crowd after each map or after a good clutch really makes the viewing experience something more than just watching two amazing teams face off. (Reddit)

Or inversely, negatively influence it ('I know it's only the quarter finals but still. I saw a lot of empty seats and the atmosphere seems less intense than it used too.'). Such accounts underscore the importance of strategically communicating the atmosphere to online audiences, especially in esports contexts where opportunities for in-person LANs aren't as common as in traditional sports.

It is also noteworthy that given the highly connected nature of the gaming community, it is common that in-person and remote audiences engage in conversation as the event unfolds, to complement or rectify what is transposed through the streams ('I'm here and the crowd is much louder and hyped up than yesterday's.').

From crowds to performers. Prior research investigating ways to enhance performer-audiences interaction during live performances have looked into light-based interactions (Feldmeier & Paradiso, 2007; Freeman, 2005; Yang, Bai, & Cho, 2017; Young, 2015) and smartphone-enabled ones (Dahl, Herrera, & Wilkerson, 2011; Freeman et al., 2015; Schnell, Robaszkiewicz, Bevilacqua, & Schwarz, 2015), even though the latter has raised some concerns regarding its potential for distractions from the live performance (Hödl, Bartmann, Kayali, Löw, & Purgathofer, 2020). However, when focusing on transposing the atmosphere to co-located individuals immersed in the virtual

experience, one question arises: how can the atmosphere be felt by performers, if measures are taken to restrict their interaction with the crowd, and enhance their immersion in the virtual realm?

Observations in this study introduce a fascinating dimension to the esports experience, suggesting that while traditional auditory and visual cues may be restricted, alternative channels, particularly touch, can transcend physical-virtual boundaries. In the context of esports events, players often articulate experiencing an immersive connection by "feeling the hype" through sensing vibrations.

> You have double noise canceling earbuds and the headphones over it, but you can still feel the rumbling in your chest while you're playing. You feel the ground shaking. It's awesome." (Retals for the website NerdStreet)

This tactile feedback brings elements of the physical reality into players' virtual gaming experience. It underscores the idea that, even in a predominantly digital environment, the incorporation of tangible sensations can contribute to a more holistic and engaging interaction, enriching the players' connection with the game and the overall atmosphere of the esports event.

In certain instances, the influence of crowd feedback on a game can be remarkably impactful. A striking example unfolded during the Six Invitational tournament when player Benjamaster strategically harnessed the crowd's insights to his advantage. Contemplating a strategic move against an opponent he suspected was positioned above him, Benjamaster hesitated at the last moment. The producers' decision to broadcast his screen granted the audience unique insights, revealing the concealed opponent behind a wall, injecting an element of suspense. When the crowd, realizing Benjamaster's indecision, erupted into shouts, he found himself in a curious position. Unsure if the cheers were directed at his screen or another player's among the ten, Benjamaster repeatedly gestured at the wall for confirmation. With another roar from the crowd, he seized the moment, blindly launching a bomb toward his suspected opponent, resulting in significant damage. As the crowd erupted in cheers, the astonishment echoed not only among the audience but also resonated with the incredulous commentators. Their disbelief was palpable as they commented, "Is that a crowd buff? It's a crowd buff indeed!", showcasing

the remarkable interplay between player intuition and the electric atmosphere generated by audience engagement. While players explicitly explaining crowd use as a strategy can lead to negative and mixed feelings from audiences (“Literally cheating”; “That’s on one side unfair, on the other side very fun”; “Are we really celebrating this stuff?”), most of the discussions analyzed during my netnography show that such use of the crowd seems relatively accepted across several games’ genre, as exemplified by this forum discussion pertaining to the game Counter Strike:

> **Original poster:** Can’t teams use the crowd noise as an advantage? There was a specific moment when [a player] was holding the smoke, and the crowd started making noise that would cue to [the player] knowing that someone was in that smoke. They just kept chanting "yes", which is a little bit unfair, especially added to the factor that the crowd can be sometimes biased. on a premise that the players can clearly hear the crowd, does this make for any concern?
>
> **Commenter A:** Don’t watch Astralis play any event in Copenhagen if you think it’s a concern lol. [Counter Strike] players use it all the time.
>
> **Commenter B:** Some of the tricks that CS players like n0thing and shroud have said before: (1) Point crosshair at random walls or smokes and listen for crowd reaction. (2) Throw grenades and listen for loud boom from stadium noise from tournament observer POV. (3) Throw flashes and look at the opposing players' faces for white screen reflections. Basically, these pro players will use any tricks available to win. Whether or not you think it's unfair doesn't really matter to them.
>
> **Commenter C:** In terms of your last point - I bet many of them do think it is unfair but they can't change anything about it and if the opposing team are going to have these tricks available then you are at a disadvantage for not using them yourself. It is up to the organisers to prevent these tricks from being usable.

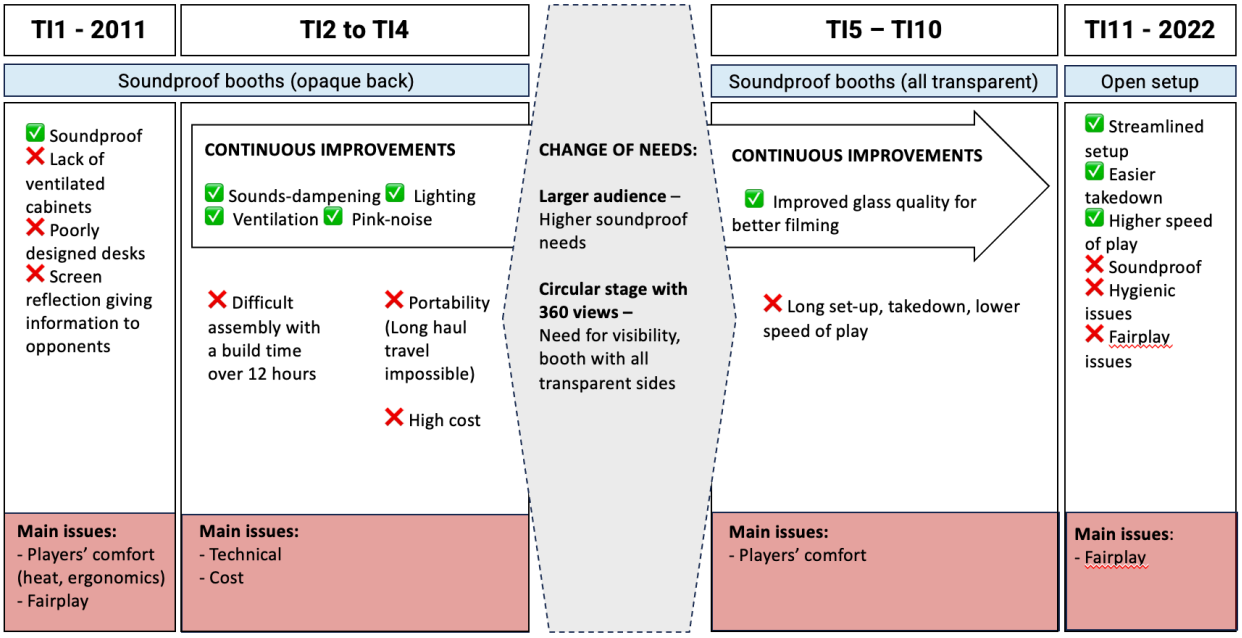
But if crowd use can create memorable moments for LAN attendees and be normatively accepted or at least tolerated by the community given that both sides could leverage it, mediating users that are not living their experience through the same reality can sometimes fail. I explain this next using a case study of Dota 2’s The International.

2.4.4 How does mediating fail? Lessons from the industry

To better understand the challenges revolving around stage setups, connecting strategies, and disconnecting ones, let’s turn to more than a decade-long learning from Valve, the

studio responsible for the current biggest esports title, Dota2. Since 2011, twelve editions of The International Dota 2 Championships ("TI") have been organized by Valve. Until TI11, every championship had soundproof booths. In 2022 however, Valve chose to experiment with an open setup, which was later largely considered as "disastrous" (Çakır, 2023). Before I delve into the specific issues related to the open setup of TI11, let's look at the evolution of soundproof booths from TI1 to TI10 (figure 7).

FIGURE 7 - THE EVOLUTION OF SOUNDPROOF BOOTHS AT DOTA 2'S TI



Soundproof booths have been used by Valve since the very first International (TI) tournament in 2011. Beginning as a necessity for soundproofing during matches, the booths faced challenges such as ventilation issues, reflection problems, and time-consuming assembly. While ventilation issues affected players' comfort, making it harder for to be immersed in virtuality and achieving state of flow, reflection problems allowed teams to see their opponents' screen reflected on the glass, affecting fair-play, and forcing producers to find a quick solution by taping t-shirts to the glass. Over the years, many improvements were made, including better design, air conditioning, and faster assembly processes. As the tournament grew larger (see T5 in figure 1), Valve elected a circular stage with a 360 view, so the audience would be sitting around four sides instead of three.

As a result, the booths became transparent on all sides for audience visibility. Cost and shipping challenges remained problematic with soundproof booth. On top of these challenges, booths made players' set-up more difficult, increasing time between plays while offering a less smooth experience for players between warm-up and matches. Soundproof booths have also been criticized for creating barriers between players and fans. To improve the overall experience, Valve created rotating booth for TI11, trading off sound proofness for easier setup and lower technical challenges, a setup that would theoretically facilitate producers' job:

> As a former admin for several Dota 2 majors, I'm incredibly jealous of this lol. Being able to have the next teams setup during the previous series saves so much time and prevents technical issues. (Reddit)

As well as players and audiences' experiences:

> Oh man this is a heaven for us viewers as well, No downtime between series is such a blessing especially when the games are happening in the middle of the night for many countries. (Reddit)

While offering advantages like streamlined setups, this setup underestimated sound-dampening difficulties, as players reported being able to hear shoutcasters. Players reported being able to adjust their strategies based on audio indications glanced from commentators, ultimately influencing outcomes of matches. On top of offering crucial pieces of information, having the official shoutcasting in English offered a subsequence advantage to English-speaking teams. As Gökhan Çakır (2023) added at the time for the specialized Dot Esports online magazine:

> "The problem doesn't get any better when both teams are fluent in English, either, since the constant information flow can also turn matches into starting contests."

In conclusion, the absence of soundproof booths at Dota 2's The International 11 introduced significant challenges, raising concerns about the integrity of the game and fairness between teams. Players, reported being able to hear casters' commentary during matches, allowing for strategic adjustments based on external information. This situation created potential game-breaking scenarios, impacting the balance of play and strategic decision-making. Moreover, the disadvantage seemed to have been more pronounced for non-English-speaking teams, as the constant flow of information from casters gave an

unintended advantage to English-speaking players. Attempts to address the issue with soundproof headphones have proven less effective, emphasizing the need to reassess the tournament's audio setup to preserve the fairness and integrity of competitive play. As a result, producers chose to return to soundproof booths for TI 2023.

This case study underscores the profound impact of the co-location of virtual and physical experiences, revealing that a misalignment of goal can lead to value destruction. These issues highlight the challenges faced by esports tournament producers and serve as a compelling reminder of the critical importance of strategic planning for producers, emphasizing the need for meticulous consideration in designing experiences that seamlessly integrate both the virtual and physical dimensions to enhance rather than detract from the overall value for all participants.

2.5 Discussion and implications

2.5.4 How co-location creates Phygital Experiences and Hybrid Spaces

In this study, I opted in favor of the concept of phygitality, which definition previously relied on a channel logic. However, phygitality isn't only about continuity across one's consumer journey or touchpoints as noted by Batat (2019), and the concept recently evolved as framework encompassing the dynamics of consumers movement from physical and virtual reality and inversely (Batat, 2022).

By moving away from an individual or dual perspective and adopting a triadic lens, I find that phygitality emerges when designing experiences that engage consumers in shared space and time while immersing them in distinct realities. A significant finding from the study of a live virtual-physical event underscores that phygitality manifests when consumers share a common physical space but concurrently experience a phenomenon from different realities. This co-location of experiences highlights the synergy between the physical and virtual dimensions, affirming the interconnectedness of consumers' encounters in the phygital realm.

For producers of phygital experiences, it entails a thoughtful consideration of foundational elements in both virtual and physical realms, recognizing the potential impact of actions

in one reality on outcomes in the other. In the context of this study, esports tournaments, pivotal to the virtual player experience are core elements like performance, encompassing effective communication and fair play, with complete immersion holding a secondary role. In contrast, within other phygital contexts, such as horror games in VR, immersion takes precedence, and the presence of external individuals such as friends or family can adversely affect the experience. To address this, producers can skillfully manage co-presence through a blend of synchronous and asynchronous interactions.

2.5.5 Flow of interaction in live phygital consumer experiences: connecting and disconnecting consumers

Studies of live collective events have pointed out to the importance of the social experience of atmosphere (Coffin & Chatzidakis, 2021; Hill et al., 2022; Hill, Canniford, & Mol, 2014) and the role of "emotional energy," in motivating individuals to repeat rituals (Collins, 2004). I find that in the context of live phygital experiences where two actors' experiences are lived through different realities, producers can experience challenges in containing the social atmosphere as well as information flows so that one lived experience doesn't negatively affect the other. This highlights the tension between what I call connecting and disconnecting strategies.

In her conceptualization of phygitality, Batat (2022) identifies point of contacts ('connectors') that arise from the interactions between brands, firms, and consumers. However, observing a phygital experience from a triadic lens, whereby groups of consumers share an experience from different realities also point out to the importance of findings ways to "disconnect" group from one another, at least temporarily. This is especially important considering to which degree one's virtual experience relies on virtual immersion. As a result, I discuss how flows of interaction arise in live phygital experience.

Conceptualizing socialization in phygital experiences involves addressing the complexities of connecting distinct groups engaged in different realities, aiming for a more inclusive and integrated encounter. I explore various dimensions of interaction: synchronous versus asynchronous, unilateral versus bilateral.

In unilateral and synchronous interactions, one group permeates the experience of another. In the context of this study for example, while the crowd's influence is tangible for players through sounds, touch, or visuals, this connection remains mostly one-sided, with the players not reciprocating feedback. I call this form of interaction "permeating," as it encapsulates the unilateral flow of influence from the audience to the players.

Bilateral and synchronous interactions involve active responses between the two groups, fostering a sense of connection. Whether in virtual performances, immersive exhibits, or other phygital experiences, participants respond in real-time—via signs, sounds, or other interactive means. This reciprocal engagement, that could be termed "connecting," emphasizes the bidirectional exchange between the two groups.

Moving to unilateral and asynchronous interactions is where I find post-experience feedback. This can be found in various phygital encounters where participants, after the fact, acknowledge the impact of the other group on their experience. I label this type of interaction "Acknowledging," signifying the retrospective acknowledgment of the crowd's influence. In the context of the study for example, this arises as players give post-match interviews or post on social media.

In asynchronous and bilateral interactions, the opportunity for post-experience discussion between the two groups becomes evident. This facilitates a re-connection, allowing both groups to revisit and share insights after the initial encounter. I term this dynamic "re-connecting", highlighting the asynchronous yet reciprocal nature of the exchange, enabling a more prolonged and reflective form of socialization in the phygital space. For instance, in scenarios where synchronous interactions may be undesirable, strategies can be employed to facilitate later reconnection with individuals outside the core experience. In the case of a horror VR game, this might involve players and audiences collectively revisiting the most intense moments, juxtaposing players' facial and emotional reactions with the audience's response.

In the esports domain, I recommend producers encourage players to articulate their sense of the crowd's presence, utilizing gestures during matches, or interviews post-match to convey the impact and connection with the audience.

2.5.6 Atmospherics in phygital settings

This study underlines how atmospherics can be co-created across virtual and physical realms, and then transposed from one reality to another. If atmospheric stimuli are commonly associated with retail and servicescape locations (Hightower Jr, Brady, & Baker, 2002; Sherry Jr et al., 2001; Spence, Puccinelli, Grewal, & Roggeveen, 2014) and can transform places into "self-contained world" (Kozinets et al. 2004, p. 662), Hill et al. (2022)'s study of atmospheres in the context of soccer point out to the mobile nature of atmosphere as symbolic resources can be transferred from places to places. Findings of the study show that this mobility is not confined to physical spaces but can also occur between virtual and physical realities, as atmospheric elements are transferred among individuals rooted primarily in either realm.

One notable contribution of the study is the elucidation of how atmospheric stimuli can move between realities, ensuring the overall experience's integrity. In the esports context, where physical and virtual experiences may need to be temporarily disconnected, the findings reveal various strategies employed by producers to create synergies and maintain a cohesive overall experience.

Moreover, while the focus of this second study was co-located individuals, I recognize the importance of online audiences when transposing the atmosphere. Given the challenges in translating the in-person atmosphere to the online realm, I propose targeted recommendations to bridge this gap. Firstly, I suggest that shoutcasters and commentators play a pivotal role in enhancing the connection. By providing vivid descriptions of the live atmosphere, including factors like loudness and temperature, they can paint a more immersive picture for online viewers. Additionally, leveraging technological advancements, online audiences can step into the players' shoes using VR headsets, allowing them to experience the event from the players' perspective. Incorporating haptic feedback, such as feeling the vibrations from the roaring crowd, can further enrich the online viewing experience.

Furthermore, I advocate for the integration of online audiences into the in-person event, fostering a more inclusive and participatory atmosphere. Noting the importance of online

concerts since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, Wang and Okada (2023) argue that while viewers have the option to activate their cameras and reveal their faces in the livestream, the excessive number of faces displayed on the screens makes it challenging for artists to gauge the overall atmosphere. As a result, they introduce Heart Fire, a system designed to enhance interaction between performers and online audiences whereby listeners' heart rates are measured using a smartwatch, and then animated in real-time as a burning flame which intensity corresponds to the audiences' heart rate. I follow this logic and propose an approach that involves incentivizing online engagement and enabling online viewers to influence the ambient stimuli of the tournament. For instance, organizers could encourage virtual cheering in the live chat or facilitate online voting for teams, directly impacting the visual elements of the esports arena. This not only deepens the connection between online viewers and the event but also helps balance support for teams, particularly in situations where tournaments are hosted in locations that may exhibit regional biases. By implementing these recommendations, esports tournament producers can amplify the overall viewing experience, ensuring a seamless and engaging integration for both in-person attendees and the vast online audience.

2.5.7 Agency in triadic relationships

While CX is mostly controlled by marketers, this study shows that memorable moments can arise when consumers and performers are given the opportunity to contest the rules and engage in a form of play by traversing the boundaries established by producers. This aligns with previous definitions of customer experience that point out to the importance of elements outside the control of marketers such as the behavior of other customers (Verhoef et al, 2009). This also contributes to a better understanding of playful ('ludic') consumption, an important element of many collective consumption settings (e.g., Arnould & Price, 1993; Belk & Costa, 1998; Kozinets, 2001, 2002; Martin & Schouten, 2014; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Seregina & Weijo, 2017; Thompson & Üstüner, 2015). Investigating play and consumer agency in a spectacular retail environment, Kozinets et al (2004) find that play is increased as consumers are given the opportunity to actively participate to experiences as opposed to taking a passive stance, ultimately providing them with a form of agency as they take on a temporary role of producers. This

is echoed by Hill et al (2022)'s study demonstrating the importance of providing enough opportunities for consumers to become active producers of social atmospheres. In this study, leveraging a triadic lens allows us to find that agency is expressed by breaking implicit producers' rules: audiences' performance permeate performers' experience, while performers break from their immersive state and allow audience members to join in on the play. Indeed, in playful consumption, consumers are presented with paradoxical opportunities to play along the rules or break them (Grayson, 2002). In triads, this study finds that such negotiations of rules stress even more the responsibility of producers to find the correct balance between allowing transgressions and maintaining experience integrity.

Indeed, esports tournament producers must carefully navigate and define boundaries for transgressive spaces or moments, where rules can be pushed or broken. Drawing on insights from this study, particularly in the context of esports, it becomes evident that audiences permeating players' experiences can be tolerated under specific conditions. Firstly, this tolerance is contingent upon the potential for all performers to leverage such interaction. Secondly, there should be an element of unpredictability or a 'luck factor' associated with crowd influence, introducing an element of uncertainty. To maintain the integrity of the overall experience, managers should establish clear boundary conditions for rule-breaking while implementing measures that safeguard non-negotiable elements, such as game integrity.

Critical to this endeavor is the producer's ability to prioritize and hierarchize the needs and goals of all parties involved in phygital experiences. In the case study of The International (Dota 2) developed earlier in the paper, it becomes evident that producers may have inadvertently de-prioritized game integrity in favor of creating a more connecting experience. However, the overwhelming negative audience reaction highlighted the potential pitfalls of such a decision. While an enhanced social atmosphere was deemed important for both audiences and players, it ultimately destroyed value for all parties involved as the shared foundational aspect of the experience - game integrity - was not adequately protected by producers. Therefore, managers should strike a delicate balance, recognizing the importance of fostering a connected and social atmosphere while

ensuring that the core elements that define the esports experience, such as game integrity, remain intact. This necessitates a nuanced approach where the needs of all stakeholders are considered, and boundaries are set to guarantee a harmonious and enjoyable phygital experience for both in-person and online participants.

2.5.8 Enhancing interactions and reconnection

Batat (2022) recommends that phygital customer experiences should enhance socialization, bearing in mind that social needs aren't expressed in the same way in virtual vs. physical spaces. I provide tangible recommendations on this point. As I have observed, online identities and status didn't always translate properly offline, with some spectators I accompanied referring to each other using gamertags while not knowing their 'real' name. Producers could significantly enhance the overall experience for attendees by strategically leveraging their virtual identities. One recommendation is the development and implementation of a dedicated app tailored for tournament spectators. This app could capitalize on attendees' virtual gaming experiences, facilitating connections based on factors such as whether they have played together or share similar skill levels. This personalized approach could create a more engaging and interconnected community at the event, reinforcing a smooth transition from virtual to physical reality.

Moreover, given its importance, producers should facilitate preparation in entrained behaviors (Higgins & Hamilton, 2019; Schau et al., 2009), and provide opportunities to learn group behaviors (Hill et al., 2022). Analysis of interactions in the online communities I joined to prepare for the tournament showed some efforts on the part of audiences to create chants for teams and boost the overall atmosphere. Given the relatively new popularity of esports and esports teams compared with established traditional sports, producers and teams could encourage some more partisanship by creating stronger symbols for teams such as chants.

Conclusion

This study explains how producers of phygital experiences enable and constrain the navigation between physical and virtual reality of audiences and performers in the context of live esports experiences. The context of esports is interesting as the challenges surrounding it lie in bringing a practice that mainly develops online, to an offline setting. Even though the use of soundproof booths has shown promising results, the case study on Dota 2's the International proves that the cost and technical challenges associated with make them a solution that cannot be leverage by smaller tournament producers I believe that, while this trajectory is inversed to that of many other experiences moving from physical to virtual realms as observed with shopping, concerts, and classrooms to name a few, the findings are relevant for such contexts as well.

Importantly, this study invites experience producers to map out how flows of information and social interactions can influence individuals in different realities, and the role that producers should play in mediating these. This entails identifying when connecting individuals in different realities can create value, and when it poses a risk of destroying value. In the context of hybrid classrooms for example, if teachers were to be apparent to performers-producers, and students to online and offline audiences, proactively planning for amplifying, bridging, restricting, and transposing strategies could enhance the overall learning experience and foster effective communication between individuals in hybrid educational settings, while maintaining boundaries to enhance focus and learning. Specifically related to transposing, future studies could further our understanding of the use of haptics, which appear to be promising and underutilized in live events.

The study also points out to the importance of identifying reconnecting strategies when preserving the integrity of an experience entails disconnecting individual from virtual and physical realities. In the context of esports, the case study of Dota 2's The International shows the promising value that soundproof booths can bring in allowing for visual connection while dampening audio connection. However, the cost and technical challenges associated with the booths shows not only that such solutions aren't portable yet, but that they cannot be implemented in lower-budget tournaments as well. As a result, mid-size tournaments, where crowds are big enough to have an audible impact, but small

enough to make the use of soundproof booth out of budget may require an increased physical separation and more reconnecting strategies as a result. Future studies could investigate the effect of connecting and disconnecting strategies on consumer experience both from performers and consumers' point of view.

Given the highly controlled environment in which virtual-physical experiences arise, I find that marketers have an important mediating role to play between consumers, and with performers. I hope this study contributes to building better phygital experiences in the future.

References

Akter, S., Hossain, T. M. T., & Strong, C. (2021). What omnichannel really means? In (Vol. 29, pp. 567-573): Taylor & Francis.

Akter, S., & Wamba, S. F. (2016). Big data analytics in E-commerce: a systematic review and agenda for future research. *Electronic Markets, 26*, 173-194.

Ansari, A., Mela, C. F., & Neslin, S. A. (2008). Customer channel migration. *Journal of marketing research, 45*(1), 60-76.

Armstrong, K., & Rutter, C. (2017). Exploring the enigma of the happiness construct in phygital fashion experiences. In *Advanced fashion technology and operations management* (pp. 220-233): IGI Global.

Arnould, E. J., & Price, L. L. (1993). River magic: Extraordinary experience and the extended service encounter. *Journal of consumer research, 20*(1), 24-45.

Arnould, E. J., & Thompson, C. J. (2005). Consumer culture theory (CCT): Twenty years of research. *Journal of consumer research, 31*(4), 868-882.

Banik, S. (2021). Exploring the involvement-patronage link in the phygital retail experiences. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services, 63*, 102739.

Bartoli, C., Nosi, C., Mattiacci, A. et al. Consumer–brand relationship in the phygital age: a study of luxury fashion. *Ital. J. Mark*. 2023, 429–450 (2023). https://doi.org/10.1007/s43039-023-00081-4

Batat, W. (2019). *Experiential marketing: Consumer behavior, customer experience and the 7Es*: Routledge.

Batat, W. (2022). What does phygital really mean? A conceptual introduction to the phygital customer experience (PH-CX) framework. *Journal of Strategic Marketing*, 1-24.

Belk, R. W., & Costa, J. A. (1998). The mountain man myth: A contemporary consuming fantasy. *Journal of consumer research, 25*(3), 218-240.

Borghini, S., Sherry, J. F., & Joy, A. (2021). Attachment to and detachment from favorite stores: An affordance theory perspective. *Journal of consumer research, 47*(6), 890-913.

Bradford, T. W., & Sherry Jr, J. F. (2015). Domesticating public space through ritual: Tailgating as vestaval. *Journal of consumer research, 42*(1), 130-151.

Buchanan-Oliver, M., & Seo, Y. (2012). Play as co-created narrative in computer game consumption: The hero's journey in Warcraft III. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour, 11*(6), 423-431.

Çakır, G. (2023). Valve is bringing back soundproof booths for Dota 2's TI12 after disastrous TI11 experiment. Retrieved from https://dotesports.com/dota-2/news/valve-is-bringing-back-soundproof-booths-for-dota-2s-ti12-after-disastrous-ti11-experiment

Callon, M. (1998). Introduction: the embeddedness of economic markets in economics. *The sociological review, 46*(1_suppl), 1-57.

Caplow, T. (1956). A theory of coalitions in the triad. *American sociological review, 21*(4), 489-493.

Coffin, J., & Chatzidakis, A. (2021). The Möbius strip of market spatiality: mobilizing transdisciplinary dialogues between CCT and the marketing mainstream. *AMS Review, 11*, 40-59.

Collins, R. (2004). *Interaction ritual chains*: Princeton university press.

CSL, & EEA. (2021). *2021 Esports Fan Survey Analysis*. Retrieved from https://www.sportstravelmagazine.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Esports-Fan-Survey-Analysis-2021.pdf

Dahl, L., Herrera, J., & Wilkerson, C. (2011). *TweetDreams: Making Music with the Audience and the World using Real-time Twitter Data.* Paper presented at the NIME.

De Keyser, A., Lemon, K. N., Klaus, P., & Keiningham, T. L. (2015). A framework for understanding and managing the customer experience. *Marketing Science Institute working paper series, 85*(1), 15-121.

De Souza e Silva, A. (2006). From cyber to hybrid: Mobile technologies as interfaces of hybrid spaces. *Space and culture, 9*(3), 261-278.

Denegri-Knott, J., & Molesworth, M. (2010). Concepts and practices of digital virtual consumption. *Consumption, Markets and Culture, 13*(2), 109-132.

Feldmeier, M., & Paradiso, J. A. (2007). An interactive music environment for large groups with giveaway wireless motion sensors. *Computer Music Journal*, 50-67.

Flavián, C., Ibáñez-Sánchez, S., & Orús, C. (2019). The impact of virtual, augmented and mixed reality technologies on the customer experience. *Journal of business research, 100*, 547-560.

Freeman, J. (2005). *Large audience participation, technology, and orchestral performance.* Paper presented at the ICMC.

Freeman, J., Xie, S., Tsuchiya, T., Shen, W., Chen, Y.-L., & Weitzner, N. (2015). Using massMobile, a flexible, scalable, rapid prototyping audience participation framework, in large-scale live musical performances. *Digital Creativity, 26*(3-4), 228-244.

Frow, P., & Payne, A. (2007). Towards the 'perfect'customer experience. *Journal of Brand Management, 15*(2), 89-101.

Grayson, K. (2002). The dangers and opportunities of playful consumption. In *Consumer value* (pp. 121-141): Routledge.

Higgins, L., & Hamilton, K. (2019). Therapeutic servicescapes and market-mediated performances of emotional suffering. *Journal of consumer research, 45*(6), 1230-1253.

Hightower Jr, R., Brady, M. K., & Baker, T. L. (2002). Investigating the role of the physical environment in hedonic service consumption: an exploratory study of sporting events. *Journal of business research, 55*(9), 697-707.

Hill, T., Canniford, R., & Eckhardt, G. M. (2022). The roar of the crowd: How interaction ritual chains create social atmospheres. *Journal of Marketing, 86*(3), 121-139.

Hill, T., Canniford, R., & Mol, J. (2014). Non-representational marketing theory. *Marketing Theory, 14*(4), 377-394.

Hödl, O., Bartmann, C., Kayali, F., Löw, C., & Purgathofer, P. (2020). Large-scale audience participation in live music using smartphones. *Journal of New Music Research, 49*(2), 192-207.

Holbrook, M. B., & Hirschman, E. C. (1982). The experiential aspects of consumption: Consumer fantasies, feelings, and fun. *Journal of consumer research, 9*(2), 132-140.

Hossain, T. M. T., Akter, S., Kattiyapornpong, U., & Dwivedi, Y. (2020). Reconceptualizing integration quality dynamics for omnichannel marketing. *Industrial Marketing Management, 87*, 225-241.

Huston, C., Gracia B Cruz, A., & Zoppos, E. (2022). Dimensionalizing esports consumption: Alternative journeys to professional play. *Journal of consumer culture, 22*(2), 456-475.

Klaus, P., & Maklan, S. (2012). EXQ: a multiple-item scale for assessing service experience. *Journal of Service Management, 23*(1), 5-33.

Kozinets, R. V. (2001). Utopian enterprise: Articulating the meanings of Star Trek's culture of consumption. *Journal of consumer research, 28*(1), 67-88.

Kozinets, R. V. (2002). Can consumers escape the market? Emancipatory illuminations from burning man. *Journal of consumer research, 29*(1), 20-38.

Kozinets, R. V. (2015). *Netnography: redefined*: Sage.

Kozinets, R. V., Sherry Jr, J. F., Storm, D., Duhachek, A., Nuttavuthisit, K., & DeBerry-Spence, B. (2004). Ludic agency and retail spectacle. *Journal of consumer research, 31*(3), 658-672.

Lawry, C. A. (2022). Blurring luxury: the mediating role of self-gifting in consumer acceptance of phygital shopping experiences. *International Journal of Advertising, 41*(4), 796-822.

Lee, H.-H., & Kim, J. (2010). Investigating dimensionality of multichannel retailer's cross-channel integration practices and effectiveness: shopping orientation and loyalty intention. *Journal of Marketing Channels, 17*(4), 281-312.

Lemon, K. N., & Verhoef, P. C. (2016). Understanding customer experience throughout the customer journey. *Journal of Marketing, 80*(6), 69-96.

Lindtner, S., Nardi, B., Wang, Y., Mainwaring, S., Jing, H., & Liang, W. (2008). *A hybrid cultural ecology: World of Warcraft in China.* Paper presented at the Proceedings of the 2008 ACM conference on Computer supported cooperative work.

Maklan, S., & Klaus, P. (2011). Customer experience: are we measuring the right things? *International Journal of Market Research, 53*(6), 771-772.

Martin, D. M., & Schouten, J. W. (2014). Consumption-driven market emergence. *Journal of consumer research, 40*(5), 855-870.

Mele, C., Spena, T. R., Marzullo, M., & Di Bernardo, I. (2023). The phygital transformation: a systematic review and a research agenda. *Italian Journal of Marketing, 2023*(3), 323-349.

Milgram, P., & Kishino, F. (1994). A taxonomy of mixed reality visual displays. *IEICE TRANSACTIONS on Information and Systems, 77*(12), 1321-1329.

Parmentier, M.-A., & Fischer, E. (2015). Things fall apart: The dynamics of brand audience dissipation. *Journal of consumer research, 41*(5), 1228-1251.

Pine, B. J., & Gilmore, J. H. (2011). *The experience economy*: Harvard Business Press.

Prahalad, C. K., & Ramaswamy, V. (2003). The new frontier of experience innovation. *MIT Sloan management review*.

Prahalad, C. K., & Ramaswamy, V. (2004). Co-creation experiences: The next practice in value creation. *Journal of interactive marketing, 18*(3), 5-14.

Schau, H. J., Muñiz Jr, A. M., & Arnould, E. J. (2009). How brand community practices create value. *Journal of Marketing, 73*(5), 30-51.

Schnell, N., Robaszkiewicz, S., Bevilacqua, F., & Schwarz, D. (2015). *Collective sound checks: Exploring intertwined sonic and social affordances of mobile web applications.* Paper presented at the Proceedings of the Ninth International Conference on Tangible, Embedded, and Embodied Interaction.

Scholz, T. M., Scholz, T. M., & Barlow. (2019). *eSports is Business* (Vol. 15): Springer.

Schouten, J. W., & McAlexander, J. H. (1995). Subcultures of consumption: An ethnography of the new bikers. *Journal of consumer research, 22*(1), 43-61.

Seo, Y. (2013). Electronic sports: A new marketing landscape of the experience economy. *Journal of marketing management, 29*(13-14), 1542-1560.

Seo, Y. (2016). Professionalized consumption and identity transformations in the field of eSports. *Journal of Business Research, 69*(1), 264-272.

Seregina, A., & Weijo, H. A. (2017). Play at any cost: How cosplayers produce and sustain their ludic communal consumption experiences. *Journal of Consumer Research, 44*(1), 139-159.

Sherry Jr, J. F., Kozinets, R. V., Storm, D., Duhachek, A., Nuttavuthisit, K., & DeBerry-Spence, B. (2001). Being in the zone: Staging retail theater at ESPN Zone Chicago. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, 30*(4), 465-510.

Siltaloppi, J., & Vargo, S. L. (2017). Triads: A review and analytical framework. *Marketing Theory, 17*(4), 395-414.

Simmel, G. (1950). *The sociology of georg simmel* (Vol. 92892): Simon and Schuster.

Spence, C., Puccinelli, N. M., Grewal, D., & Roggeveen, A. L. (2014). Store atmospherics: A multisensory perspective. *Psychology & Marketing, 31*(7), 472-488.

Stubbs, M. (2017). Pro gamers chime in on the soundproof booth debate. Retrieved from https://www.redbull.com/us-en/pros-on-soundproof-booths

Tax, S. S., McCutcheon, D., & Wilkinson, I. F. (2013). The service delivery network (SDN) a customer-centric perspective of the customer journey. *Journal of service research, 16*(4), 454-470.

Taylor, N., Jenson, J., De Castell, S., & Dilouya, B. (2014). Public displays of play: Studying online games in physical settings. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 19*(4), 763-779.

Thompson, C. J., & Üstüner, T. (2015). Women skating on the edge: Marketplace performances as ideological edgework. *Journal of consumer research, 42*(2), 235-265.

Vargo, S. L., & Lusch, R. F. (2011). It's all B2B… and beyond: Toward a systems perspective of the market. *Industrial Marketing Management, 40*(2), 181-187.

Verhoef, P. C., Lemon, K. N., Parasuraman, A., Roggeveen, A., Tsiros, M., & Schlesinger, L. A. (2009). Customer experience creation: Determinants, dynamics and management strategies. *Journal of retailing, 85*(1), 31-41.

Wagner, M. G. (2006). *On the Scientific Relevance of eSports.* Paper presented at the International conference on internet computing.

Wallace, D. W., Giese, J. L., & Johnson, J. L. (2004). Customer retailer loyalty in the context of multiple channel strategies. *Journal of retailing, 80*(4), 249-263.

Wang, T., & Okada, S. (2023). Heart Fire for Online Live-streamed Concerts: A pilot study of a smartwatch-based musician-listener interaction system. *Frontiers in Computer Science, 5*, 1150348.

Wasserman, S., & Faust, K. (1994). Social network analysis: Methods and applications.

Witkowski, E. (2012). On the digital playing field: How we "do sport" with networked computer games. *Games and Culture, 7*(5), 349-374.

Woermann, N., & Rokka, J. (2015). Timeflow: How consumption practices shape consumers' temporal experiences. *Journal of Consumer Research, 41*(6), 1486-1508.

Yang, J., Bai, Y., & Cho, J. (2017). *Smart light stick: an interactive system for pop concert.* Paper presented at the 2017 5th International Conference on Mechatronics, Materials, Chemistry and Computer Engineering (ICMMCCE 2017).

YouGov. (2022). *Esports Growth & Venue Develeopment in KSA*. Retrieved from https://populous.com/new-survey-shows-passion-for-esports-in-saudi-arabia-driving-demand-for-purpose-built-venues

Young, M. (2015). Concert LED Wristbands. *Trendhunter. Available online at: https://www. trendhunter. com/trends/led-wristband (accessed November 18, 2021)*.

Concluding Remarks

The fast development on digital technologies is transforming consumers' experiences. In this dissertation, I identify co-location as an important aspect of phygital experiences, whether co-location happens between consumers and individual initially outside the consumption experience (chapter 1), or between individuals immersed in different realities (Chapter 2).

The first chapter follows the evolution of the consumption journey of competitive gamers and conceptualizes what I call "peripheral consumption journeys", or the consumption experience of individuals who find themselves – often reluctantly in this context – affected by someone else's journey. As I highlight the social interactions arising between focal and peripheral consumers, I find several misalignments that contribute to either delegitimize a practice, reduce the enjoyment of focal consumers, or negatively affect relationships between individuals. As a result, the essay provides suggestions to managers to support both journeys and create value out of them.

The second chapter looks at a novel form of extraordinary phygital experiences, esports tournaments, in which performers and spectators tend to live their experience through different realities. The study in this second chapter underlines the importance of the mediating role undertaken by experience providers as they amplify, bridge, restrict, and transpose components of one reality to another.

Both essays underscore the importance of identifying differences in norms, how actions in one reality affects the experience in another, and how actions or information becomes accessible or visible from one reality to another.

Bibliography

Akter, S., Hossain, T. M. T., & Strong, C. (2021). What omnichannel really means? In (Vol. 29, pp. 567-573): Taylor & Francis.

Akter, S., & Wamba, S. F. (2016). Big data analytics in E-commerce: a systematic review and agenda for future research. *Electronic Markets, 26*, 173-194.

Andrejev, A. (2019, October 21, 2019). Her son is a pro gamer. Here's how she came to understand the world of esports. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/video-games/esports/2019/10/21/her-son-is-pro-gamer-heres-how-she-came-understand-world-esports/

Ansari, A., Mela, C. F., & Neslin, S. A. (2008). Customer channel migration. *Journal of Marketing Research, 45*(1), 60-76.

Armstrong, K., & Rutter, C. (2017). Exploring the enigma of the happiness construct in phygital fashion experiences. In *Advanced fashion technology and operations management* (pp. 220-233): IGI Global.

Arnould, E. J., & Price, L. L. (1993). River magic: Extraordinary experience and the extended service encounter. *Journal of Consumer Research, 20*(1), 24-45.

Arnould, E. J., & Thompson, C. J. (2005). Consumer culture theory (CCT): Twenty years of research. *Journal of Consumer Research, 31*(4), 868-882.

Arsel, Z., & Bean, J. (2013). Taste regimes and market-mediated practice. *Journal of Consumer Research, 39*(5), 899-917.

Assunção, C. (2016). " No Girls on the Internet": The Experience of Female Gamers in the Masculine Space of Violent Gaming. *Press Start, 3*(1), 46-65.

Banik, S. (2021). Exploring the involvement-patronage link in the phygital retail experiences. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services, 63*, 102739.

Barnhart, M., Huff, A. D., & Cotte, J. (2014). Like a member of the family: Including and excluding paid caregivers in performances of family. *Journal of Marketing Management, 30*(15-16), 1680-1702.

Batat, W. (2019). *Experiential marketing: Consumer behavior, customer experience and the 7Es*: Routledge.

Batat, W. (2022). What does phygital really mean? A conceptual introduction to the phygital customer experience (PH-CX) framework. *Journal of Strategic Marketing*, 1-24.

Baym, N. K. (1998). The emergence of on-line community. *cybersociety, 2*(0), 35-68.

Belk, R. W. (2013). Extended self in a digital world. *Journal of Consumer Research, 40*(3), 477-500.

Belk, R. W., & Costa, J. A. (1998). The mountain man myth: A contemporary consuming fantasy. *Journal of Consumer Research, 25*(3), 218-240.

Borghini, S., Sherry, J. F., & Joy, A. (2021). Attachment to and detachment from favorite stores: An affordance theory perspective. *Journal of Consumer Research, 47*(6), 890-913.

Bradford, T. W., & Sherry Jr, J. F. (2015). Domesticating public space through ritual: Tailgating as vestaval. *Journal of Consumer Research, 42*(1), 130-151.

Brakus, J. J., Schmitt, B. H., & Zarantonello, L. (2009). Brand experience: what is it? How is it measured? Does it affect loyalty? *Journal of Marketing, 73*(3), 52-68.

Buchanan-Oliver, M., & Seo, Y. (2012). Play as co-created narrative in computer game consumption: The hero's journey in Warcraft III. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour, 11*(6), 423-431.

Burns, A. C., & Granbois, D. H. (1977). Factors moderating the resolution of preference conflict in family automobile purchasing. *Journal of Marketing Research, 14*(1), 77-86.

Çakır, G. (2023). Valve is bringing back soundproof booths for Dota 2's TI12 after disastrous TI11 experiment. Retrieved from https://dotesports.com/dota-2/news/valve-is-bringing-back-soundproof-booths-for-dota-2s-ti12-after-disastrous-ti11-experiment

Callon, M. (1998). Introduction: the embeddedness of economic markets in economics. *The sociological review, 46*(1_suppl), 1-57.

Caplow, T. (1956). A theory of coalitions in the triad. *American sociological review, 21*(4), 489-493.

Castronova, E. (2008). Synthetic worlds: The business and culture of online games. In *Synthetic Worlds*: University of Chicago press.

Coaches, I. F. o. E. (Producer). (2021). Parents in Esports: A Panel Discussion with COPE (Coalition of Parents in Esports). Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hyd6UpQAb6Y&t=1207s&ab_channel=InternationalFederationofEsportsCoaches

Coffin, J., & Chatzidakis, A. (2021). The Möbius strip of market spatiality: mobilizing transdisciplinary dialogues between CCT and the marketing mainstream. *AMS Review, 11*, 40-59.

Collins, R. (2004). *Interaction ritual chains*: Princeton university press.

Cote, A. C. (2017). "I Can Defend Myself" Women's Strategies for Coping With Harassment While Gaming Online. *Games and Culture, 12*(2), 136-155.

CSL, & EEA. (2021). *2021 Esports Fan Survey Analysis*. Retrieved from https://www.sportstravelmagazine.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Esports-Fan-Survey-Analysis-2021.pdf

Dahl, L., Herrera, J., & Wilkerson, C. (2011). *TweetDreams: Making Music with the Audience and the World using Real-time Twitter Data.* Paper presented at the NIME.

Davis, H. L. (1970). Dimensions of marital roles in consumer decision making. *Journal of Marketing Research, 7*(2), 168-177.

De Keyser, A., Lemon, K. N., Klaus, P., & Keiningham, T. L. (2015). A framework for understanding and managing the customer experience. *Marketing Science Institute working paper series, 85*(1), 15-121.

De Souza e Silva, A. (2006). From cyber to hybrid: Mobile technologies as interfaces of hybrid spaces. *Space and culture, 9*(3), 261-278.

Denegri-Knott, J., & Molesworth, M. (2010). Concepts and practices of digital virtual consumption. *Consumption, Markets and Culture, 13*(2), 109-132.

Dholakia, U., Bagozzi, R., & Pearo, L. (2004). A Social Influence Model of Consumer Participation in Network- and Small-Group-Based Virtual Communities. *International Journal of Research in Marketing, 21*, 241-263. doi:10.1016/j.ijresmar.2003.12.004

Dolbec, P.-Y., Fischer, E., & Canniford, R. (2021). Something old, something new: Enabled theory building in qualitative marketing research. *Marketing Theory, 21*(4), 443-461.

Drenten, J., Harrison, R. L., & Pendarvis, N. J. (2022). More Gamer, Less Girl: Gendered Boundaries Tokenism and the Cultural Persistence of Masculine Dominance. *Journal of Consumer Research*.

Dzhogleva, H., & Lamberton, C. P. (2014). Should birds of a feather flock together? Understanding self-control decisions in dyads. *Journal of Consumer Research, 41*(2), 361-380.

Epp, A. M., & Price, L. L. (2008). Family identity: A framework of identity interplay in consumption practices. *Journal of Consumer Research, 35*(1), 50-70.

Epp, A. M., & Price, L. L. (2011). Designing solutions around customer network identity goals. *Journal of Marketing, 75*(2), 36-54.

Epp, A. M., & Price, L. L. (2012). Family time in consumer culture: implications for transformative consumer research. In *Transformative consumer research for personal and collective well-being* (pp. 599-622): Routledge.

Epp, A. M., Schau, H. J., & Price, L. L. (2014). The role of brands and mediating technologies in assembling long-distance family practices. *Journal of Marketing, 78*(3), 81-101.

Erzberger, T. (2019). Caps' dad leading cheers for son, G2 Esports at MSI. *ESPN Esports*. Retrieved from https://www.espn.com/esports/story/_/id/26775351/caps-dad-leading-cheers-son-g2-esports-msi

Esports, R. L. (Producer). (2022). Beyond the Pitch: Parents at Worlds. Retrieved from https://youtu.be/Yve3SwQuebs?si=m_zm32pynIWcTHvG

Federations, N. o. A. a. S. E. (2021). Interview: Being a parent of a gamer with Shae Williams, Co-founder of COPE. Retrieved from https://www.nasef.org/blog/shae-williams-cope

Feldmeier, M., & Paradiso, J. A. (2007). An interactive music environment for large groups with giveaway wireless motion sensors. *Computer Music Journal*, 50-67.

Flavián, C., Ibáñez-Sánchez, S., & Orús, C. (2019). The impact of virtual, augmented and mixed reality technologies on the customer experience. *Journal of business research, 100*, 547-560.

Freeman, J. (2005). *Large audience participation, technology, and orchestral performance.* Paper presented at the ICMC.

Freeman, J., Xie, S., Tsuchiya, T., Shen, W., Chen, Y.-L., & Weitzner, N. (2015). Using massMobile, a flexible, scalable, rapid prototyping audience participation framework, in large-scale live musical performances. *Digital Creativity, 26*(3-4), 228-244.

Frow, P., & Payne, A. (2007). Towards the 'perfect'customer experience. *Journal of Brand Management, 15*(2), 89-101.

Goor, D., Keinan, A., & Ordabayeva, N. (2021). Status pivoting. *Journal of Consumer Research, 47*(6), 978-1002.

Grayson, K. (2002). The dangers and opportunities of playful consumption. In *Consumer value* (pp. 121-141): Routledge.

Hamilton, R. (2016). Consumer-based strategy: Using multiple methods to generate consumer insights that inform strategy. In (Vol. 44, pp. 281-285): Springer.

Hamilton, R., Ferraro, R., Haws, K. L., & Mukhopadhyay, A. (2021). Traveling with companions: The social customer journey. *Journal of Marketing, 85*(1), 68-92.

Hamilton, R., & Price, L. L. (2019). Consumer journeys: developing consumer-based strategy. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, 47*(2), 187-191. doi:10.1007/s11747-019-00636-y

Higgins, L., & Hamilton, K. (2019). Therapeutic servicescapes and market-mediated performances of emotional suffering. *Journal of Consumer Research, 45*(6), 1230-1253.

Hightower Jr, R., Brady, M. K., & Baker, T. L. (2002). Investigating the role of the physical environment in hedonic service consumption: an exploratory study of sporting events. *Journal of Business Research, 55*(9), 697-707.

Hill, T., Canniford, R., & Eckhardt, G. M. (2022). The roar of the crowd: How interaction ritual chains create social atmospheres. *Journal of Marketing, 86*(3), 121-139.

Hill, T., Canniford, R., & Mol, J. (2014). Non-representational marketing theory. *Marketing Theory, 14*(4), 377-394.

Hödl, O., Bartmann, C., Kayali, F., Löw, C., & Purgathofer, P. (2020). Large-scale audience participation in live music using smartphones. *Journal of New Music Research, 49*(2), 192-207.

Holbrook, M. B., & Hirschman, E. C. (1982). The experiential aspects of consumption: Consumer fantasies, feelings, and fun. *Journal of Consumer Research, 9*(2), 132-140.

Hossain, T. M. T., Akter, S., Kattiyapornpong, U., & Dwivedi, Y. (2020). Reconceptualizing integration quality dynamics for omnichannel marketing. *Industrial Marketing Management, 87*, 225-241.

Huff, A. D., & Cotte, J. (2016). The evolving family assemblage: How senior families "do" family. *European Journal of Marketing, 50*(5/6), 892-915.

Hunter-Jones, P. (2014). Changing family structures and childhood socialisation: a study of leisure consumption. *Journal of Marketing Management, 30*(15-16), 1533-1553.

Huston, C., Gracia B Cruz, A., & Zoppos, E. (2022). Dimensionalizing esports consumption: Alternative journeys to professional play. *Journal of Consumer Culture, 22*(2), 456-475.

Jensen Schau, H., & Gilly, M. C. (2003). We are what we post? Self-presentation in personal web space. *Journal of Consumer Research, 30*(3), 385-404.

Jovic, D. (2023). Building the Ultimate Battlestation: Producing and Consuming Gaming Setup Videos on YouTube.

Kastarinen, A., Närvänen, E., & Valtonen, A. (2022). Doing Family over Time: The Multilayered and Multitemporal Nature of Intergenerational Caring through

Consumption. *Journal of Consumer Research, 50*(2), 282-302. doi:10.1093/jcr/ucac050

Klaus, P., & Maklan, S. (2012). EXQ: a multiple-item scale for assessing service experience. *Journal of Service Management, 23*(1), 5-33.

Kozinets, R. V. (2001). Utopian enterprise: Articulating the meanings of Star Trek's culture of consumption. *Journal of consumer research, 28*(1), 67-88.

Kozinets, R. V. (2002). Can consumers escape the market? Emancipatory illuminations from burning man. *Journal of Consumer Research, 29*(1), 20-38.

Kozinets, R. V. (2015). *Netnography: redefined*: Sage.

Kozinets, R. V., Sherry Jr, J. F., Storm, D., Duhachek, A., Nuttavuthisit, K., & DeBerry-Spence, B. (2004). Ludic agency and retail spectacle. *Journal of consumer research, 31*(3), 658-672.

Lawry, C. A. (2022). Blurring luxury: the mediating role of self-gifting in consumer acceptance of phygital shopping experiences. *International Journal of Advertising, 41*(4), 796-822.

Lee, H.-H., & Kim, J. (2010). Investigating dimensionality of multichannel retailer's cross-channel integration practices and effectiveness: shopping orientation and loyalty intention. *Journal of Marketing Channels, 17*(4), 281-312.

Lemon, K. N., & Verhoef, P. C. (2016). Understanding customer experience throughout the customer journey. *Journal of Marketing, 80*(6), 69-96.

Lindtner, S., Nardi, B., Wang, Y., Mainwaring, S., Jing, H., & Liang, W. (2008). *A hybrid cultural ecology: World of Warcraft in China.* Paper presented at the Proceedings of the 2008 ACM conference on Computer supported cooperative work.

Loscher, G., Splitter, V., & Seidl, D. (2019). Theodore Schatzki's theory and its implications for organization studies. *Management, Organizations and contemporary social theory. London: Routledge*.

Maciel, A. F., & Wallendorf, M. (2021). Space as a Resource in the Politics of Consumer Identity. *Journal of Consumer Research, 48*(2), 309-332.

Magaudda, P. (2011). When materiality 'bites back': Digital music consumption practices in the age of dematerialization. *Journal of Consumer Culture, 11*(1), 15-36.

Maklan, S., & Klaus, P. (2011). Customer experience: are we measuring the right things? *International Journal of Market Research, 53*(6), 771-772.

Martin, D. M., & Schouten, J. W. (2014). Consumption-driven market emergence. *Journal of consumer research, 40*(5), 855-870.

Mele, C., Spena, T. R., Marzullo, M., & Di Bernardo, I. (2023). The phygital transformation: a systematic review and a research agenda. *Italian Journal of Marketing, 2023*(3), 323-349.

Milgram, P., & Kishino, F. (1994). A taxonomy of mixed reality visual displays. *IEICE TRANSACTIONS on Information and Systems, 77*(12), 1321-1329.

Nakamura, L. (2014). Gender and race online. *Society and the Internet. How networks of information and communication are changing our lives. Oxford*, 81-95.

Parmentier, M.-A., & Fischer, E. (2015). Things fall apart: The dynamics of brand audience dissipation. *Journal of Consumer Research, 41*(5), 1228-1251.

Pine, B. J., & Gilmore, J. H. (2011). *The experience economy*: Harvard Business Press.

Prahalad, C. K., & Ramaswamy, V. (2003). The new frontier of experience innovation. *MIT Sloan management review*.

Prahalad, C. K., & Ramaswamy, V. (2004). Co-creation experiences: The next practice in value creation. *Journal of interactive marketing, 18*(3), 5-14.

Schatzki, T. R. (1996). *Social practices: A Wittgensteinian approach to human activity and the social*: Cambridge University Press.

Schatzki, T. R. (2002). *The site of the social: A philosophical account of the constitution of social life and change*: Penn State University Press.

Schau, H. J., Muñiz Jr, A. M., & Arnould, E. J. (2009). How brand community practices create value. *Journal of Marketing, 73*(5), 30-51.

Schnell, N., Robaszkiewicz, S., Bevilacqua, F., & Schwarz, D. (2015). *Collective sound checks: Exploring intertwined sonic and social affordances of mobile web applications.* Paper presented at the Proceedings of the Ninth International Conference on Tangible, Embedded, and Embodied Interaction.

Scholz, T. M., Scholz, T. M., & Barlow. (2019). *eSports is Business* (Vol. 15): Springer.

Schouten, J. W., & McAlexander, J. H. (1995). Subcultures of consumption: An ethnography of the new bikers. *Journal of Consumer Research, 22*(1), 43-61.

Seidl, D., & Whittington, R. (2014). Enlarging the strategy-as-practice research agenda: Towards taller and flatter ontologies. *Organization studies, 35*(10), 1407-1421.

Seo, Y. (2013). Electronic sports: A new marketing landscape of the experience economy. *Journal of Marketing Management, 29*(13-14), 1542-1560.

Seo, Y. (2016). Professionalized consumption and identity transformations in the field of eSports. *Journal of Business Research, 69*(1), 264-272.

Seregina, A., & Weijo, H. A. (2017). Play at any cost: How cosplayers produce and sustain their ludic communal consumption experiences. *Journal of Consumer Research, 44*(1), 139-159.

Sherry Jr, J. F., Kozinets, R. V., Storm, D., Duhachek, A., Nuttavuthisit, K., & DeBerry-Spence, B. (2001). Being in the zone: Staging retail theater at ESPN Zone Chicago. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, 30*(4), 465-510.

Sheth, J. N., & Park, C. W. (1974). A theory of multidimensional brand loyalty. *ACR North American Advances*.

Shove, E. (2007). *The design of everyday life*: Berg.

Shove, E., & Pantzar, M. (2005). Consumers, producers and practices: Understanding the invention and reinvention of Nordic walking. *Journal of Consumer Culture, 5*(1), 43-64.

Shove, E., Pantzar, M., & Watson, M. (2012). *The Dynamics of Social Practice: Everyday Life and How it Changes*. doi:10.4135/9781446250655

Siebert, A., Gopaldas, A., Lindridge, A., & Simões, C. (2020). Customer experience journeys: Loyalty loops versus involvement spirals. *Journal of Marketing, 84*(4), 45-66.

Siltaloppi, J., & Vargo, S. L. (2017). Triads: A review and analytical framework. *Marketing Theory, 17*(4), 395-414.

Simmel, G. (1950). *The sociology of georg simmel* (Vol. 92892): Simon and Schuster.

Simon, B. (2007). Geek chic: Machine aesthetics, digital gaming, and the cultural politics of the case mod. *Games and Culture, 2*(3), 175-193.

Spence, C., Puccinelli, N. M., Grewal, D., & Roggeveen, A. L. (2014). Store atmospherics: A multisensory perspective. *Psychology & Marketing, 31*(7), 472-488.

Stubbs, M. (2017). Pro gamers chime in on the soundproof booth debate. Retrieved from https://www.redbull.com/us-en/pros-on-soundproof-booths

Tax, S. S., McCutcheon, D., & Wilkinson, I. F. (2013). The service delivery network (SDN) a customer-centric perspective of the customer journey. *Journal of service research, 16*(4), 454-470.

Taylor, N., Jenson, J., De Castell, S., & Dilouya, B. (2014). Public displays of play: Studying online games in physical settings. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 19*(4), 763-779.

Thomas, T. C., & Epp, A. M. (2019). The best laid plans: Why new parents fail to habituate practices. *Journal of Consumer Research, 46*(3), 564-589.

Thomas, T. C., Epp, A. M., & Price, L. L. (2020). Journeying together: Aligning retailer and service provider roles with collective consumer practices. *Journal of Retailing, 96*(1), 9-24.

Thompson, C. J., & Üstüner, T. (2015). Women skating on the edge: Marketplace performances as ideological edgework. *Journal of consumer research, 42*(2), 235-265.

Vargo, S. L., & Lusch, R. F. (2011). It's all B2B… and beyond: Toward a systems perspective of the market. *Industrial Marketing Management, 40*(2), 181-187.

Verhoef, P. C., Lemon, K. N., Parasuraman, A., Roggeveen, A., Tsiros, M., & Schlesinger, L. A. (2009). Customer experience creation: Determinants, dynamics and management strategies. *Journal of retailing, 85*(1), 31-41.

Wagner, M. G. (2006). *On the Scientific Relevance of eSports.* Paper presented at the International conference on internet computing.

Wallace, D. W., Giese, J. L., & Johnson, J. L. (2004). Customer retailer loyalty in the context of multiple channel strategies. *Journal of Retailing, 80*(4), 249-263.

Wallendorf, M., & Arnould, E. J. (1991). “We gather together”: Consumption rituals of thanksgiving day. *Journal of Consumer Research, 18*(1), 13-31.

Wang, T., & Okada, S. (2023). Heart Fire for Online Live-streamed Concerts: A pilot study of a smartwatch-based musician-listener interaction system. *Frontiers in Computer Science, 5*, 1150348.

Warde, A. (2005). Consumption and theories of practice. *Journal of Consumer Culture, 5*(2), 131-153.

Wasserman, S., & Faust, K. (1994). Social network analysis: Methods and applications.

Watson, M., & Shove, E. (2008). Product, competence, project and practice: DIY and the dynamics of craft consumption. *Journal of Consumer Culture, 8*(1), 69-89.

Westcott, K. A., Jane; Arkenberg, Chris; Auxier, Brooke; Loucks, Jeff; Downs, Kevin. (2023). *Digital media trends*. Retrieved from https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/industry/technology/digital-media-trends-consumption-habits-survey.html#read-the-digital-media-trends

Witkowski, E. (2012). On the digital playing field: How we "do sport" with networked computer games. *Games and Culture, 7*(5), 349-374.

Woermann, N., & Rokka, J. (2015). Timeflow: How consumption practices shape consumers' temporal experiences. *Journal of Consumer Research, 41*(6), 1486-1508.

Yang, J., Bai, Y., & Cho, J. (2017). *Smart light stick: an interactive system for pop concert.* Paper presented at the 2017 5th International Conference on Mechatronics, Materials, Chemistry and Computer Engineering (ICMMCCE 2017).

YouGov. (2022). *Esports Growth & Venue Develeopment in KSA*. Retrieved from https://populous.com/new-survey-shows-passion-for-esports-in-saudi-arabia-driving-demand-for-purpose-built-venues

Young, M. (2015). Concert LED Wristbands. *Trendhunter. Available online at: https://www. trendhunter. com/trends/led-wristband (accessed November 18, 2021)*.

Appendix

1.1. Interview details

TABLE 4 - INTERVIEW DETAILS

Pseudonym	**Description and Role**	**Type of Interview**	**Duration**
Marc	20s', competitive gamer, member of gaming university club, living with parents	Individual interview	50min
Maxime	20s', competitive gamer, member of gaming university club, living with roommates	Individual interview	76min
Thomas	20s', competitive gamer, member of gaming university club, living with partner	Individual interview	65min
Antoine	20s', competitive gamer, member of gaming university club, living with parents	Individual interview	46min
Léo	20s', competitive gamer, member of gaming university club, living with roommates	Individual interview	52min
Jonathan	20s', competitive gamer, living with partner	Individual interview	45min
Joey	20s', competitive gamer, member of gaming university club, living with parents	Individual interview	87min
Genevieve	20s', competitive gamer, member of gaming university club, living with parents	Couple interview	83min

Roman	20s', competitive gamer, member of gaming university club, living with parents		
James	20s', competitive gamer, member of gaming university club, living with parents	Individual interview	59min
Joel	30s', coach	Individual interview	49min
Jim	30s', esports program professional	Individual interview	52min
Peter	30s', esports program professional, gamer	Individual interview	52min
Jenna	20s', esports program professional, gamer	Individual interview	51min
Marie	20s', partner of gamer	Individual interview	54min
Matt	30s', gaming program professional, gamer	Couple interview	68min
Katie	30s', gaming program professional, gamer		
Nicolas	40s', parent of competitive gamer, ex-gamer	Family interview	71min
Julia	40s', parent of competitive gamer, non-gamer		
Olivier	20s', competitive gamer		
Amélie	30s', parent of competitive gamer, non-gamer	Family interview	66min
Michael	20s', gamer		