

**This item is the archived peer-reviewed author-version of:**

Virtual athlete or ultimate nerd? A framing analysis of eSports in Flemish printed media

**Reference:**

De Donder Shauny, Robeers Timothy, Daneels Rowan.- Virtual athlete or ultimate nerd? A framing analysis of eSports in Flemish printed media  
Sport in society - ISSN 1743-0445 - 26:5(2023), p. 757-773  
Full text (Publisher's DOI): <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2022.2063119>  
To cite this reference: <https://hdl.handle.net/10067/1875190151162165141>

De Donder, S., Robeers, T., & Daneels, R. (2022). Virtual athlete or ultimate nerd? A framing analysis of eSports in Flemish printed media. *Sport in Society*. Advanced online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2022.2063119>

## **Virtual Athlete or Ultimate Nerd? A Framing Analysis of eSports in Flemish Printed Media**

Shauny De Donder<sup>a\*</sup>, Timothy Robeers<sup>a</sup>, Rowan Daneels<sup>a</sup>

*Department of Communication Studies, University of Antwerp. Sint-Jacobstraat 2-4, 2000 Antwerp, Belgium.*

**\*Corresponding author:** Shauny De Donder – [shauny.dedonder@gmail.com](mailto:shauny.dedonder@gmail.com)

### **Abstract:**

Despite the rapid and global increase in popularity and media focus of eSports, many issues remain, not least in terms of how the media portray eSports (players). Considering Flanders (Belgium) has been relatively slow to follow this global uptake, this article adopts an inductive framing approach to analyze exhaustively how eSports are portrayed in 103 Flemish newspaper and magazine articles. Results indicate eSports were represented via eight frames spread across the categories ‘game/industry’ and ‘players’. On the one hand, the Flemish printed media legitimize eSports via comparisons with traditional sports and its applicability to capitalist frameworks such as the sport-industrial complex. On the other hand, player representations remain largely permeated with ‘softer’ stereotypes of laziness as well as with neglecting reference to female players. Subsequently, greater investments by the Flemish government could raise the national prominence of eSports, benefit competitive development, and help tackle issues of stereotyping in the media.

**Keywords:** eSports; professional gaming; sporting legitimacy; stereotyping; framing analysis; Flemish printed media

## INTRODUCTION

eSports as both an activity and an industry has grown intensely in the last decade. Watching eSports, for instance, is increasingly becoming a legitimate pastime, with viewer ratings exceeding ratings for traditional sports in certain younger population groups (Limelight Networks, 2017), fast-tracked even more by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to data from Newzoo (2020), eSports audience numbers reached around 495 million viewers in 2020. Subsequently, revenue numbers also keep on growing annually to almost \$1 billion globally in 2020 (Newzoo, 2020). The eSports industry has risen in popularity due to technological advancements and younger audiences' desire to engage actively with this relatively new form of digital entertainment (Hamari and Sjöblom, 2017). Subsequently, growth of gaming and the eSports industry has not gone unnoticed with news media, with news reports increasingly drawing attention towards the growth of the gaming industry (Nieborg and Foxman, 2016). Remarkably though, academic research on eSports is often focused on questioning whether eSports can be considered a real sport (Jenny et al., 2017) or on gender inequality (Kim, 2017), limiting the research on topics such as news coverage of eSports. This seems strange considering traditional news media play an important role in shaping public opinion and certain stereotypes, especially when covering new phenomena like eSports (Chadwick, 2013).

The current study therefore aims to address this gap by applying an inductive framing analysis to uncover which frames news media (i.e., newspapers and magazines) use to represent the eSports industry and eSports players. More specifically, this study focuses on Flanders (the Dutch-speaking region of Belgium) as academic research has so far completely bypassed the rise of the Flemish eSports industry with an increasing number of Flemish individuals such as *Overwatch* (a multiplayer first-person shooter

De Donder, S., Robeers, T., & Daneels, R. (2022). Virtual athlete or ultimate nerd? A framing analysis of eSports in Flemish printed media. *Sport in Society*. Advanced online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2022.2063119>

game) player Andreas “Logix” Berghmans, *League of Legends* (a multiplayer online battle arena video game) player Mitch “Krepo” Voorspoels, and eSports host (the presenter of a particular event or tournament) Eefje “Sjokz” Depoortere belonging to the international top of their respective professional eSports leagues (eSports België, 2021).

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***eSports: A brief history***

One of the first digital gaming competitions or eSports contests was held in the United States in 1981: the ‘Space Invaders Championship’ included 10.000 participants in this first edition, which attracted global media attention at the time (Hope, 2014). With the entry of the internet in the 1990s, connecting gamers became a possibility which, in turn, also led to the organization of online eSports competitions. Concurrent with this evolution in the United States, playing digital games (competitively) skyrocketed in South Korea (Goetomo, 2016). During the 1990s, the Korean government rolled out a state-of-the-art broadband network system which necessitated content such as online games, and subsequently eSports. Specifically, massively multi-user online role-playing games (hereafter: MMORPGs) like *Lineage* and *StarCraft* gained rapid popularity.

With the ‘World Cyber Games’ first organized in 2000 as a small contest for countries to participate in, eSports and the competitive aspect of digital games continued its global rise in popularity (Hope, 2014). When Western and Asian eSports cultures converged, it snowballed international attention of and participation in eSports. For instance, the International eSports Federation (hereafter: IESF) – founded in 2008 – grew from 9 members to 42 members and helped facilitate the internationalization of eSports

De Donder, S., Robeers, T., & Daneels, R. (2022). Virtual athlete or ultimate nerd? A framing analysis of eSports in Flemish printed media. *Sport in Society*. Advanced online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2022.2063119>

through the standardization of a set of rules in support of the integrity of the games (Yenişehirlioğlu et al. 2018).

Similarly, viewing game matches and tournaments has become an important facet of the growing eSports industry and subsequently facilitated a significant rise in prize money. For instance, the biggest eSports event to date, the ‘League of Legends World Championship 2020,’ ensured a peak viewership record of 3.882 million live viewers (Kelly, 2020). This indicates how online gaming not only grew in popularity, but also how it can surpass traditional sports viewing numbers (Limelight Networks, 2017). A similar trend exists regarding prize money, where the *Dota 2* international championship in 2019, for example, offered a prize pool of over \$34 million (Gough, 2021), surpassing prize money offered in some traditional sports (Bhardwaj, 2018).

### ***‘A sport or not a sport’: Situating eSports in the realm of traditional sports***

Many scholars have attempted to define eSports during the past decade (Jenny et al., 2017; Jin, 2010; Robeers and Sharp, 2020). However, due to the complexity of the industry as well as the convergence of factors including culture, technology, sport, and business, this has proven difficult. Although Wagner (2006, 3) acknowledged this problem, his own subsequent formulation of eSports as “an area of sport activities in which people develop and train mental or physical abilities in the use of information and communication technologies” fell short in its own right, as it disregarded much of eSports’s online characteristics, organizational context, and design as an interconnection of multiple platforms such as computing, gaming, and sport (Jenny, 2017; Jin, 2010). Subsequently, Jenny et al. (2017, 4) defined eSports more inclusively as “organized video game competitions,” a definition which this study will adopt. Still, Wagner’s efforts

De Donder, S., Robeers, T., & Daneels, R. (2022). Virtual athlete or ultimate nerd? A framing analysis of eSports in Flemish printed media. *Sport in Society*. Advanced online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2022.2063119>

reveal an important facet of eSports to bear in mind, namely sport activities. Despite much academic attention in areas such as history (e.g., Yenişehirlioğlu et al. 2018) and business (Parshakov and Zavertiaeva, 2018; Yenişehirlioğlu et al. 2018), a key aspect in eSports research is concerned with the question whether eSports can be defined as an actual sport (Hamari and Sjöblom, 2017; Wagner, 2006).

Since eSports share some aspects with traditional sports (e.g., competitive nature, strategy, teams), they are often relationally defined to traditional sports (Orme, 2020; Steinkuehler, 2020). Using Guttman's (1978) typology that distinguishes between play, games, contests, and sports, Bowman and Cranmer (2019) determined that previous literature is reluctant to classify digital gaming and eSports as actual sports because of a lack of physicality and institutionalization.

Regarding the lack of physicality, previous studies (e.g., Hallmann and Giel, 2018; Jenny et al., 2017) questioned eSports' classification as a sport, as they argued the physical aspect of eSports (i.e. physical exertions like controller or mouse and keyboard input) as well as cognitive abilities such as eye-hand coordination (Bowman and Cranmer, 2019; Orme, 2020) to be inferior to the intellectual component of eSports. However, Bowman and Cranmer (2019) disputed these concerns. They argued that, although Guttman's (1978) model suggests an activity requires sufficient physicality to be labelled a sport, it fails to clarify the threshold of how physically exertive this activity needs to be. Similar to traditional sports such as golf or chess which all require some, yet not exertive physical skill, eSports could therefore be considered as a sport since it requires a certain level of physicality.

Regarding the lack of institutionalization, Jenny et al. (2017) critiqued eSports for not having the institutional stability compared to traditional sports. However, Bowman

De Donder, S., Robeers, T., & Daneels, R. (2022). Virtual athlete or ultimate nerd? A framing analysis of eSports in Flemish printed media. *Sport in Society*. Advanced online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2022.2063119>

and Cranmer (2019) as well as Summerley (2020) argued that eSports' institutionalization in terms of organization, media coverage and propagation, and fandom aspects is evolving to the level of institutionalization of traditional sports for a number of reasons. First, these authors stated that eSports share organizational characteristics of traditional sports, including overseeing organizations, leagues, tournaments, and teams. Specific eSports organizations also have their own team owners, players, coaches, analysts, and training infrastructure (Orme, 2020), while most eSports competitions and leagues already have a universal ruleset adopted by all competitors (Summerley, 2020). Second, institutionalization through media structures is also an aspect that is evolving for eSports (Bowman and Cranmer, 2019). For instance, US sports broadcaster ESPN already invested significantly in eSports coverage, while in Flanders, pay-per-view channels such as Eleven Sports started to offer several international eSports events. Third, institutionalization through propagation (i.e., spreading the game across geographical areas), commercialization, fandom, and spectatorship is growing exponentially for eSports (Bowman and Cranmer, 2019; Summerley, 2020). For example, not only eSports league matches and tournaments, but also individual eSports celebrities enjoy international exposure via online streaming platforms such as Twitch.tv and YouTube (Orme, 2020; Reitman et al., 2020). eSports merchandizing (e.g., jerseys of popular eSports players) is also becoming increasingly more common (Parshakov and Zavertiaeva, 2018). Finally, advertising and sponsorship deals between eSports organizers and multinational companies such as Intel, Red Bull, and Coca-Cola also contribute to the argument to define eSports as an actual sport (Orme, 2020).

De Donder, S., Robeers, T., & Daneels, R. (2022). Virtual athlete or ultimate nerd? A framing analysis of eSports in Flemish printed media. *Sport in Society*. Advanced online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2022.2063119>

In summary, these arguments help substantiate the claim that eSports includes different aspects and exists as a separate sports discipline. However, the question whether media outlets represent it as such remains complicated.

### ***A matter of (stereotypical) representation: eSports and the media***

Like for many other sports, the media are instrumental in representing eSports to audiences as they constantly (re)produce, reformulate, and shape our understanding of the meaning of eSports (Robeers and Sharp, 2020). More so, such continuous reformulations are made possible via the flexibility, elasticity, and interactivity of sport-media texts that enable the integration, exclusion, and influencing of boundaries of what constitutes, in this case, eSports (Jarvie, 2018). Partly because of their shared technological character, some studies that have looked at eSports opted for a social media perspective (e.g., Sjöblom, et al., 2018; Wood et al., 2019). Yet, in spite of present-day's visual media culture, printed media remain an important source of information for millions of newspaper readers and sports fans as well as for newspaper editors looking to attract new audiences (Frandsen, 2019). Subsequently, some studies (e.g., Robeers and Sharp, 2020; Tikkanen, 2019) have looked at the representations of eSports in a selection of newspapers and suggest traditional representations of eSports were both challenged and reinforced. Three important observations were made regarding representation and stereotypes on eSports.

First, the stereotype of the young male player contributed to reinforcing traditional representations of male hegemony in eSports. This reinforces findings of studies by Williams (2003) and Maclean (2016), which determined media representations continue to maintain and reinforce (c)over stereotypes of both male and female gamers. Indeed,

De Donder, S., Robeers, T., & Daneels, R. (2022). Virtual athlete or ultimate nerd? A framing analysis of eSports in Flemish printed media. *Sport in Society*. Advanced online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2022.2063119>

earlier studies by Kendall (1999, 2000) found that mainly white, male, young internet users including gamers are often stereotyped as ‘nerds’ or ‘geeks’ in the media, which is related to the peripheral and unimportant position game culture occupies compared to mainstream media culture (Kowert, Griffiths, and Oldmeadow, 2012). The conceptualization of these terms implies a strong relationship between the person’s identity and technology which, in this case, relates to their online presence. ‘Nerds’ or ‘geeks’ then are people who through a continuous working habit portray antisocial behavior and a lack of social skills that causes them to engage mainly in computer-based communication with others. Furthermore, the ‘nerd’ or ‘geek’ stereotype in media coverage frequently includes aspects of hyper masculinity (e.g., technological skills and a lack of ‘female’ social skills), commonly found in descriptions of athletes in traditional sports (Davis and Weaving, 2009), and femininity (e.g., a lack of practicing sports and a shortage of sexual relationships with women; see Kendall, 2000). Taylor (2012) found that although the stereotype of geek/nerd masculinity has been gradually shifting in favor of a mainstreaming of gendered technological advancements and know-how, such a ‘hybrid’ notion of masculinity among eSports players actively contributes to hostile work environments towards professional female eSports players. This is further connected to a second stereotype of sexism towards female gamers/eSports players as also substantiated via the recent #Gamergate scandal in the media (Mortensen, 2018). Moreover, Vermeulen and Van Looy (2016) revealed female gamers experience a ‘double stereotyping,’ indicating they not only encounter gender-based discrimination but also suffer from the lower culture or ‘nerdy’ status of playing digital games mentioned before. Such gender stereotyping maintains gender inequality and divisions in eSports (Kim, 2017), which occurs more informally compared to formalized gender divisions in traditional sports

De Donder, S., Robeers, T., & Daneels, R. (2022). Virtual athlete or ultimate nerd? A framing analysis of eSports in Flemish printed media. *Sport in Society*. Advanced online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2022.2063119>

competitions (Summerley, 2020). While Harper (2010) suggested that female players are not good enough compared to men in playing games (competitively), Taylor (2008) argued that the reason so few eSports players are women is because it goes against existing socio-cultural societal standards and values (e.g., ‘violent and aggressive content within many games are not for women’ or ‘playing games is not a traditional activity for women to be passionate about’).

Second, while representing eSports (and playing digital games in general), stereotypes on eSports promoting and instigating violence, (drug) addiction, and corruption have been fueled by moral panic. For example, mental implications can be caused by the pressures imposed via the requirements to practice for many hours in view of the increasing professionalization in eSports (Orme, 2020; Robeers and Sharp, 2020). Taylor (2012) suggested the increasing requirements of professionalism within eSports creates friction between the notion of eSports as a subculture or leisure and the notion of eSports as a professional occupation.

Third, and building on the first two observations, more progressive media coverage are suggested to challenge traditional representations of eSports as bad displacement and a waste of time/money through similar notions of emerging professionalism. More so, Tikkanen (2019) found that the emergence of professionalism also raised the status of eSports as mere ‘gaming’ in comparison to traditional sport. For example, in their study on newspaper framing of online sim racing, Robeers and Sharp (2020) identified the influx of professional real-world motor racing drivers in online sim racing incited media framing through a dominant coming of age frame. The authors suggested that an influx of professionalism and subsequent underlying athletic physical prowess did much to challenge pre-existing and stereotypical representations, not least in

De Donder, S., Robeers, T., & Daneels, R. (2022). Virtual athlete or ultimate nerd? A framing analysis of eSports in Flemish printed media. *Sport in Society*. Advanced online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2022.2063119>

terms of being considered a real sport. However, and in spite of this, counter-frames reinforcing traditional stereotypes such as eSports and online sim racing as mere leisure activities through the pastime frame still persist and continue to prevent eSports and its subsidiaries to be accepted as a sport in wider society.

Although many of these studies provide valuable insight into the themes, narratives, and stereotypes underlying the representation of eSports, many studies remain fragmented and few succeed in providing a clear understanding into how eSports is represented in media texts.

### ***Formulating the research questions***

Often, studies on media framing and digital games tend to look at casual players. Because of the growth and increasing professionalization of eSports, as well as the lack of research on eSports' framing in news media, the aim of this paper is to study the media representation of the eSports industry and players. The current exploratory study will form a clearer picture of eSports representation in Flemish printed media, focusing specifically on newspapers and magazines. The overall research question of the current study is therefore:

*RQ1: How are eSports represented, or framed, in Flemish printed media?*

Besides this, we also posed three additional research questions that stem from the literature overview mentioned above:

*RQ2: How are eSports accepted as a legitimate form of sports in Flemish printed media?*

*RQ3: Which stereotypes are used to talk about eSports players in Flemish printed media?*

*RQ4: How does coverage of male and female eSports players differ in Flemish*

De Donder, S., Robeers, T., & Daneels, R. (2022). Virtual athlete or ultimate nerd? A framing analysis of eSports in Flemish printed media. *Sport in Society*. Advanced online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2022.2063119>

*printed media?*

## **METHODOLOGY**

### ***A framing and case study approach of eSports in Flemish printed media***

As a means of operationalization, this study combines a case study design with a qualitative and inductive framing analysis. First, despite some existing criticisms pertaining wider academic relevance (Flyvbjerg, 2006), the distinctive need for utilizing a case study approach emerges from a desire to comprehend complex social and contemporary phenomena, particularly so as it enables a more in-depth analysis of relationships between the media and eSports (Yin, 2017). A case study design is aptly suited to unravel operational links needing to be viewed diachronically and allows for an exhaustive overview of frames embedded in a sample of media texts (Van den Bulck and Claessens, 2013).

Second, and enjoying a deep-rooted tradition in sports-media research, framing has increasingly been applied in studies looking at media and eSports, as it allows for the study of either or both encoding (media frames) and decoding (audience reactions) with the same analytical tool (Robeers and Sharp, 2020; Turner, 2014). Specifically, framing facilitates the study of interplay between the textual level (media frames), various cognitive levels (audience schemata), extra-media levels (discourse by frame sponsors), and additional shared cultural ideas as a macrostructure (Van den Bulck and Claessens, 2013; Van Gorp, 2010). Framing as a process can be understood as increasing or reducing salience whereby a frame determines which aspects of reality are selected, rejected, emphasized or modified in the production of a media text whilst providing the audience with a context and suggested meaning (Entman, 1993, 52; Van Gorp, 2010). This process is enabled through the rendering of frames as constituting meta-communicative messages

De Donder, S., Robeers, T., & Daneels, R. (2022). Virtual athlete or ultimate nerd? A framing analysis of eSports in Flemish printed media. *Sport in Society*. Advanced online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2022.2063119>

(i.e. “persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual”) that overarch and contain discursive segments such as themes and narratives (Gitlin, 1980, 7). Frames display themselves in texts through a set of defining functions: problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation (Entman, 1993), referred to as reasoning devices which constitute the core logical flow that comes about when an issue is linked to a specific frame (Van Gorp, 2010). Additionally, frames employ framing devices or manifest elements within a text that function as indicators of a (re)constructed frame and include word choice, catchphrases, depictions, and stereotypes (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989) as well as frame sponsors used to endorse the frame (Van Gorp, 2007). Lastly, Van Gorp (2010) indicates that the variable level of salience in framing is identifiable through a system of categorization that encompasses dominant frames (occur most frequent), secondary or marginal frames (occur rather infrequent), counter frames (opposing the dominant frame(s)), and neglected frames (do not occur at all). Frame salience was operationalised in frequency of occurrence and relationships between frames (dominant, secondary, counter, and neglected; Zhou and Moy 2007).

### ***Stages of analysis***

#### ***Sampling***

To analyze media coverage of eSports in Flanders, we opted for an exhaustive sample of traditional Flemish media articles published in popular newspapers or tabloids and quality newspapers or broadsheets as well as magazines. Publication and distribution of these news outlets is exclusively spread among Flanders and they all have a Flemish readership. Via the online press database GoPress Academic, we entered the keywords (Flemish

De Donder, S., Robeers, T., & Daneels, R. (2022). Virtual athlete or ultimate nerd? A framing analysis of eSports in Flemish printed media. *Sport in Society*. Advanced online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2022.2063119>

translations of) *eSports*, *professional gaming*, *online sports*, *online gaming* and *gaming*, which yielded 103 articles between May 2011 (the earliest publication retrieved) and March 2020 (the moment of sampling) across 9 newspapers and 7 magazines. The following newspaper outlets were included in the sample: *De Morgen*, *De Standaard*, *De Tijd*, *Gazet van Antwerpen*, *Het Belang van Limburg*, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, *Krant van West-Vlaanderen*, and *Metro*. News magazines included are: *BRUZZ*, *Dag Allemaal*, *Data News NL*, *Humo*, *Knack*, *Sport Voetbalmagazine*, and *Trends*.

#### *Unit of analysis and coding procedures*

In line with existing inductive and issue-specific framing approaches, the unit of analysis corresponds to a single media article and allows for the emergence of multiple frames per unit (Matthes, 2009). To minimize subjectivity, we followed Van Gorp's (2010) three step coding process of open, axial, and selective coding. Data were compared and contrasted, looking for similarities and patterns, after which overall consistencies were combined into frame packages (i.e. reason and framing devices) to constitute an exhaustive signature matrix (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989). Coding was conducted by the first author who is well-initiated in the application of framing theory and analysis. Additionally, the second author coded 10% of the sample. Initial results were discussed and discrepancies addressed by going back to the relevant frame packages in the signature matrix and collectively re-evaluating the identification of each reasoning and framing device. Frame salience was operationalized in terms of frequency of occurrence and relationships between frames (dominant, secondary, counter, and neglected; Zhou and Moy 2007). As a means of reflection, a complimentary deductive analysis featured revisiting a segment of the sampled data with the frames generated to ensure a high level of applicability (Shenton, 2004; Van Gorp, 2010).

## FINDINGS

The qualitative framing analysis resulted in six clearly identifiable frames across both Flemish newspapers and magazines. Additionally, two frames functioned as complimentary neglected frames. On the basis of the overall group of frames reconstructed from the data, an important division becomes apparent between frames relating to the game/industry and frames relating to players. In what follows, we will address the reconstructed frames according to their adherence to each of these groups.

### *Frames representing the ‘game/industry’ of eSports*

#### *Legitimacy frame*

This dominant frame is defined via the allocation of validity, in this instance as it relates to eSports as a legitimate sport. Although eSports are seen as a form of competition, the physical aspect thereof often remains questioned. The biggest form of legitimacy is manifested via the constant comparison with the most popular sport in Flanders, soccer. This becomes apparent in (1) the way players build their career in a similar fashion: “It’s just like in soccer: you have to get the chance to play, and that’s how you get spotted”, as quoted by *League of Legends* player Christophe “Kaas” Van Oudheusden, here used as a frame sponsor (Stassijns, 2017) and (2) the game itself: “In soccer you would call him a box-to-box player”, according to *Overwatch* player Alexandre “Spree” Vanhomwegen, similarly used as a frame sponsor (Meeus, 2018). In an article from the newspaper *Gazet van Antwerpen*, a journalist depicts eSports as “top sport behind a computer screen” (Stassijns, 2017), whereby the treatment of eSports players is compared to that of professional footballers. The motivation to watch eSports too is in turn compared to that of soccer by frame sponsor and *League of Legends* player Gabriël “Bwipo” Rau: “Those high ratings might seem strange, but it’s just like soccer. ... At a

De Donder, S., Robeers, T., & Daneels, R. (2022). Virtual athlete or ultimate nerd? A framing analysis of eSports in Flemish printed media. *Sport in Society*. Advanced online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2022.2063119>

certain point you get so good at the game that it becomes particularly entertaining, and people like to watch it” (Vancaeneghem, 2018). Further, the soccer simulation game FIFA occurs as the most often-cited and discussed example when talking about eSports, and is often depicted as the bridge between online soccer and traditional soccer. The newspaper *Het Nieuwsblad* describes it as: “Children today learn about soccer through FIFA on their PlayStation. Only after that do they start playing on the town square” (Le Bacq, 2018).

#### *Limited institutional support frame*

The ‘limited institutional support’ frame points towards the lack of institutional and governmental support for competitive eSports to develop. This frame functions in two distinct ways. On the one hand, it functions as a dominant frame within the framing of eSports and on the other hand as a counter-frame to the legitimacy frame. The limited institutional support frame functions by showing how Belgium (i.e Flanders and Wallonia) is disadvantaged when it comes to eSports. Players and other eSports professionals are found to commonly refer to Belgium and Flanders as a “developing country” (Marien, 2018; Martin, 2018). As a first step in the mitigation process, several articles such as the 2018 article in *De Morgen* subsequently call for a one-sided eSports policy by quoting Freek Borghgraef (frame sponsor) of Kayzr, a Benelux eSports platform: “There is currently no neutral body that provides some framework for players or teams.” (Martin, 2018). The same article also cites the lack of subsidies for the sector:

In addition to sponsors from the private sector, it is even more difficult to get financial support from the regions or municipalities, according to Goossens. ...

De Donder, S., Robeers, T., & Daneels, R. (2022). Virtual athlete or ultimate nerd? A framing analysis of eSports in Flemish printed media. *Sport in Society*. Advanced online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2022.2063119>

Why would politicians spend precious subsidy money so that teenagers would play even more games behind their desks?

This shows the challenging issue that recurs throughout several articles. The lack of physical exertion causes the government to struggle accepting eSports as a real sport. Further, this frame creates a blame game in the failure of Belgian eSports whereby the government is designated as the final responsible party in the success story of eSports.

### *Big business frame*

As a sub-frame situated within the bigger ‘legitimacy frame’, the big business frame is defined via situating eSports within notions of capitalism and emphasizing the profitability of the eSports industry. Articles frequently refer to the “billion-dollar business called eSports” (Meeus, 2016, 2018). This way of legitimization emphasizes the massive growth the industry underwent in just a few years, which is further aided by the potential revenue generated through streaming rights and for which the expensive acquisition of Twitch.tv serves as an example of the lucrative streaming side of eSports:

That the gaming industry is big business was proven by Google's monster takeover earlier this week. Twitch.tv was acquired by the search engine for one billion dollars (746 million euros). With 43 million monthly viewers, Twitch.tv is one of the world's most watched TV channels within an industry that is more lucrative than the film and music industries. (Feys, 2014)

News articles within the current ‘big business’ sub-frame frequently seem to assert eSports’ financial strength and importance.

### *Frames representing ‘the player’*

De Donder, S., Robeers, T., & Daneels, R. (2022). Virtual athlete or ultimate nerd? A framing analysis of eSports in Flemish printed media. *Sport in Society*. Advanced online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2022.2063119>

### *The 'rock star' frame*

Functioning as a dominant frame, the 'rock star' frame is defined by the revenue potential generated via eSports players' popularity and by representing them as celebrities. For example, an article from *De Morgen* titled "Gamers are the new rock stars" (Feys, 2014) draws a comparison between the success and fan base that both rock stars and gamers seem to share. Expressions such as "star status" (Serrure, 2018) in news articles clarify that eSports players are commonly recognized as international celebrities. This evolution is most apparent on social media, where the majority of the gaming and eSports fan base is now located: "Meanwhile, paid professional players are becoming true rock stars and uphold that status by praising themselves via social media and showing their gaming skills to thousands of fans through live streams on Twitch" (Feys, 2014). An article from *Het Laatste Nieuws*+ describes how some Belgian eSports players are "well on their way to become [a] millionaire[s]" (Vancaeneghem, 2018). Because of this, news coverage within this frame emphasizes the high wages of eSports players and whereby a further connection between the 'big business' and the 'rock star' frame seems to exist. Where the former frame projects a clear focus on the magnitude of the eSports industry, the latter emphasizes the money that can be earned within eSports. This way, similar to the eSports industry in the 'big business' sub-frame, eSports players are legitimized as actual top athletes earning high wages.

### *The 'laziness' frame*

Defined through a lack of effortful agency, the secondary 'laziness' frame functions as a counter-frame to the 'rock star' frame. A remarkable tendency to consider eSports players as lazy persists, not least by creating the impression that they have to show little effort to play professionally. "At best, they get clammy hands from touching their keyboard and

De Donder, S., Robeers, T., & Daneels, R. (2022). Virtual athlete or ultimate nerd? A framing analysis of eSports in Flemish printed media. *Sport in Society*. Advanced online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2022.2063119>

mouse for several hours” (Meeus, 2018) or “For the semi-finals and finals of Rocket League and shooting game Counter-Strike: GO, eSports players were dragged from their desk chairs to the FACTS convention” (Martin, 2017). It is noteworthy that eSports are considered an actual sport within the aforementioned ‘legitimacy’ frame. Yet players often fall outside of this frame and are described as lazy.

### *The ‘mental health’ frame*

The ‘mental health’ frame counters the ‘rock star’ frame and is defined by its emphasis on mental pressures that eSports players are subjected to. For instance, the popularity of eSports players relies almost entirely on their online presence, which exposes them to constant critique. Nicolas “Atomium” Farnir (frame sponsor), team manager at eSports team Schalke 04, talks about this topic:

The pressure caused by social media carries the most weight. The accessibility of our athletes is one of the strengths of our sport. ... But you know how it’s like on Facebook and Twitter: the praise is extreme, the critique is ruthless. You have to be mentally strong – and do not forget that we are talking about young men ages 16 to 24. (Van Baelen, 2018)

Herein lies the difference with athletes from traditional sports as they can be shielded from online commentaries more easily, while professional gamers do not possess that possibility. *FIFA* player Stefano Pinna (frame sponsor): “Lots of practice and keeping your skills ‘warm’ is one thing. You also need to be very sure of yourself mentally. Other professional players even rely on a therapist” (Ponsaerts, 2018).

### *Neglecting what matters? From gender to education*

De Donder, S., Robeers, T., & Daneels, R. (2022). Virtual athlete or ultimate nerd? A framing analysis of eSports in Flemish printed media. *Sport in Society*. Advanced online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2022.2063119>

Representation occurs as much through what is being shown as through what is not (Hall, Evans, and Nixon, 2013). Two important and at least partly inter-related aspects remain largely absent from the media framing of eSports in Flemish newspapers and magazines: gender and education in eSports.

On the one hand, some of the frames set out above have already demonstrated an established male hegemony in eSports. In addition to this, only a negligible number of news articles explicitly raise the issue of gender in professional eSports. The few articles by Flemish media that highlight such gender-related issues do so through causes of sexism and subsequent toxic gaming environments, as well as a pre-supposed and naturalized sexual difference compared to male gamers. In an article in *Het Laatste Nieuws* titled “How sexism causes so few female gamers,” sexism is described as the cause of women's absence in the professional gaming world: “Women play video games just as often as men. But the toxic atmosphere online is a barrier for many women to really compete. Male gamers apparently still can't stand being defeated by a girl.”, according to frame sponsor and *FIFA* player Laura ‘Lauve91’ van Eijk (Belgers, 2017).

On the other hand, an education-related frame was not found in a meaningful number of Flemish media articles either. Although educational issues related to gender were absent, what did appear to some extent were oppositional narratives of gaming as an educational component. One such narrative pertains the issue of gamification as a complementary, yet mandatory component of children’s curriculum to benefit future job prospects, as mentioned by Yung Shin Van Der Syke (frame sponsor), specialist in law and IT: “Just like physical education, eSports should be a mandatory part of the curriculum in primary and secondary schools.” (Freys, 2017). However, the limited

De Donder, S., Robeers, T., & Daneels, R. (2022). Virtual athlete or ultimate nerd? A framing analysis of eSports in Flemish printed media. *Sport in Society*. Advanced online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2022.2063119>

prevalence of such narratives and the lack of elaborate extrapolation as frames indicates Flemish media favor more traditionalist framing to report on eSports.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

### ***(De)legitimization, stereotyping, and a way forward***

The primary aim of this study was to build on, and contribute to, the body of existing research on media and eSports by investigating how different printed media represent eSports in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking region in Belgium. Drawing from a qualitative framing approach, we performed an inductive analysis to obtain a better understanding of the function and validity of eSports as a sport as well as how it relates to issues of gender and nerd stereotyping.

The frames identified from the sample indicate a range of different ways in which eSports is represented in the Flemish printed media, not least as part of two categories, i.e. frames regarding the game and gaming industry as well as regarding eSports players specifically (RQ1). The interplay between this division provides a range of meaningful insights.

First, industry-focused frames such as the ‘legitimacy’ frame and its ‘big business’ sub-frame as well as the player-focused ‘rock star’ frame reveal positive comparisons with traditional sports to help validate and legitimize eSports (RQ2). As one of the most dominant news frames, the Flemish printed press constructs the legitimacy frame to facilitate parallels between traditional sports such as soccer and eSports as an actual sport, with The Olympics of 2024 in Paris being frequently marked as “the logical next step” (Van Baelen, 2018). Also, watching eSports and traditional sports is being compared within this frame, aligning with research by Hamari and Sjöblom (2017), where

De Donder, S., Robeers, T., & Daneels, R. (2022). Virtual athlete or ultimate nerd? A framing analysis of eSports in Flemish printed media. *Sport in Society*. Advanced online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2022.2063119>

26 consumption motives for watching traditional sports are equated with the motives for watching eSports. This is in line with previous findings that suggest the lack of physical efforts in eSports is either countered or avoided for the benefit of drawing positive comparisons (Bowman and Cranmer, 2019; Orme, 2020; Steinkuehler, 2020). Further sporting legitimization of eSports is provided by highlighting significant economic advantages of the industry via the ‘big business’ sub-frame, where comparing the sector to that of the larger entertainment industry (i.e. film and music) not only attributes a level of validity to eSports, but also highlights the fact that the big business aspect of this sector is due to the symbiotic collaboration between sports and media that makes up the ‘sports/media complex’ (Rowe, 2013). As Taylor (2012) suggested, eSports have emerged online making collaboration with certain media inevitable compared to traditional ‘offline’ sports. In this way, one could argue eSports are increasingly validated as a real sport, both by the revenue generated and the viewers. A third legitimization pattern of eSports occurs via the framing of players as rock stars, whereby emphasis lies with players acquiring fame and fortune through online achievements and players being represented as celebrities. With celebrities being products of capitalist society (Van den Bulck and Claessens, 2013), this frame shares the capitalist context already adopted by the aforementioned ‘big business’ sub-frame. As a result, such legitimization efforts by Flemish printed media appear to be situated in line with both the interrelated workings of the eSports-media complex as well as the profit-via-performance focused sport-industrial complex (Maguire, 2011). However, as a counter-frame, the ‘limited institutional’ frame also shows that due to a lack of physical exertion, the Belgian government struggles to accept eSports as a real sport. More so, the government is designated in the frame as the final responsible party in the success story of eSports, which is in line with research

De Donder, S., Robeers, T., & Daneels, R. (2022). Virtual athlete or ultimate nerd? A framing analysis of eSports in Flemish printed media. *Sport in Society*. Advanced online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2022.2063119>

by Parshakov and Zavertiaeva (2018), among others, suggesting the importance of the country itself is seen as a determinant within the performance of eSports.

Second, despite positive representations in view of the eSports industry, language used to represent players remains largely negative (RQ3), which also furthers traditional stereotyping of gamers as ‘nerds’ and being predominantly male. The ‘laziness’ frame is frequently adopted to represent players as laid-back and passive. Although explicit ‘nerd’ stereotyping is largely avoided, previous studies have shown this association of laziness to be a key characteristic of the classic ‘nerd’ stereotype (Kendall, 1999) that is often used to describe gamers, despite various demographic data contradicting this (Kowert et al., 2012), as well as a key contributing factor in delegitimizing eSports as a ‘true’ sport due to a lack of physical efforts when playing digital games (Jenny et al., 2017). More so, the rather negative valence attributed to players is further apparent through the presence of the ‘mental health’ frame. This frame highlights eSports as a source of addiction due to eSports’ players drive to train several hours per day to reach the top, something which might be identified as addictive behavior. However, Nielsen and Karhulathi (2017) argue that professional players need to play this intensive to ensure their income and develop their careers, and thus intensive play can be regarded as something essential, which is unrelated to addictive behavior. Furthermore, the frame also focuses on subsequent psychological issues among eSports players. As indicated by Tikkanen (2019) as well as Robeers and Sharp (2020), mental health among eSports players frequently suffers from negative connotations enabled via representations of moral panic, i.e. stress induced by performance pressure on the part of players. However, recent research poses that eSports teams are starting to focus on their players’ mental health, hiring team psychologists, and even scheduling yoga or meditation sessions (Orme, 2020). Finally, such stereotyping is

De Donder, S., Robeers, T., & Daneels, R. (2022). Virtual athlete or ultimate nerd? A framing analysis of eSports in Flemish printed media. *Sport in Society*. Advanced online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2022.2063119>

continued via a media focus on young male players that either associates female players with sexism or, more prominently, neglects female players all together (RQ4), subsequently confirming the continuation of male hegemony in Flemish (e)sports. This corroborates other findings which suggest that, despite efforts such as in-house sensitivity training by media corporations, media coverage of eSports still often marginalizes and bypasses female gamers (Davis and Weaving 2009; Maclean, 2016; Robeers and Sharp, 2020). When coverage does include gender-related aspects, they often revolve around issues of negative representation that contribute directly to sensationalist coverage (Maclean, 2016).

### ***Implications for eSports in Flanders***

In view of this study's findings, some discussion on the impact of these frames on eSports in Flanders is merited. For instance, it seems that the Flemish printed media hold the government responsible for Belgium lagging behind other countries when it comes to eSports investments, developments and overall performances. In this sense, it certainly seems plausible that due to a continuing debate surrounding the lack of physical effort regarding eSports (Jenny et al., 2017), the Flemish – and potentially the overarching Belgian – government does not view eSports as an actual sport. In other words, the eSports industry in Flanders suffers from a lack of opportunities enabled by a subsequent lack of efficient governmental policy-making and funding, leading to the Flemish eSports industry and players lagging behind on the international eSports playing-field. By attributing higher validity to eSports as a complimentary sport with international perspective, the government could likely nurture current and future Flemish players to

De Donder, S., Robeers, T., & Daneels, R. (2022). Virtual athlete or ultimate nerd? A framing analysis of eSports in Flemish printed media. *Sport in Society*. Advanced online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2022.2063119>

develop themselves and escape existing stereotyping as well as reap benefits from interdisciplinary technological applications to other areas of society (Taylor, 2012).

Seemingly spilling out of these frames regarding the legitimacy of eSports, some very recent initiatives are being set up to invest in gaming and eSports in Flanders. First, a ‘tax shelter’ governmental initiative that provides lower taxes for investors, and which already exists for industries such as film and theatre, is in progress of being instated for the Belgian game industry as well (Matheï, 2021). This will facilitate local industry growth and likely stimulate eSports in Flanders as well. Second, seeing eSports as a legitimate sport has led local Flemish governments acknowledging the potential of eSports. One such example concerns the recent opening of the ‘Outplayed eSports Center’ in the city of Kortrijk, the first Belgian venue dedicated exclusively to eSports (eSportsClub, 2020). The Outplayed center features an eSports bar and a small arena that serves as a place where both eSports players can compete (e.g., working together with the local branch of KV Kortrijk’s eFootball team) and eSports fans can experience their favorite eSports matches. Via these governmental acknowledgements and actions, gaming itself could get the opportunity to prove its use within education. However, for now, the focus within the ‘educational’ frame remains on preparing young people for the job market. Furthermore, such governmental interventions could also serve as an inroad to tackle gender inequalities in eSports head-on, much in the same way the Flemish government already does for traditional sport (ICES, 2019).

### ***Limitations and future research***

Finally, this study does have some limitations that could hamper wider generalizations. For one, the sampled data have been restricted to the region of Flanders and are therefore

De Donder, S., Robeers, T., & Daneels, R. (2022). Virtual athlete or ultimate nerd? A framing analysis of eSports in Flemish printed media. *Sport in Society*. Advanced online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2022.2063119>

not representative for Belgium as a whole. As such, future studies would benefit from including media samples from the Walloon region to obtain a more comprehensive overview and unearth (longitudinal) differences between the two regions. Additionally, a more international pool of news coverage of eSports, not least from the US or South Korea as the birthplaces of eSports, would be especially interesting to examine (Goetomo, 2016; Hope, 2014). Further, and considering the massive impact the pandemic has had on the global popularity and subsequent growth of eSports (Robeers and Sharp, 2020), future studies would be well suited to follow up on how and to what extent these changing contexts have changed media coverage of eSports in Flanders from March 2020 onwards, and Belgian state support as a prerequisite to this, not least with respect to a possible continuation or fragmentation of the game/industry versus player dichotomy and further gender stereotyping.

De Donder, S., Robeers, T., & Daneels, R. (2022). Virtual athlete or ultimate nerd? A framing analysis of eSports in Flemish printed media. *Sport in Society*. Advanced online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2022.2063119>

## REFERENCES

Belgers, J. 2017. “Hoe seksisme ervoor zorgt dat er zo weinig vrouwelijke gamers zijn.”

*Het Laatste Nieuws*, December 15. <https://www.hln.be/internet/hoe-seksisme-ervoor-zorgt-dat-er-zo-weinig-vrouwelijke-gamers-zijn~a561766a/>

Bhardwaj, P. 2018. “Gaming Tournaments Now Offer Prize Pools Comparable to Some of the Most Established Traditional Sporting Events.” *Business Insider*, June 8.

<https://www.businessinsider.com/esports-prize-pools-vs-traditional-sports-2018-6?r=US&IR=T>

Bowman, N.D. , and G.A. Cranmer. 2019. “Can Video Games be a Sport? Debating and Complicating Esports as Physical Competitions.” In *Understanding Esports: An Introduction to the Global Phenomenon*, edited by Ryan Rogers, 15-30. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

Chadwick, A. 2013. *The Hybrid Media System: Politics and Power*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Davis, P., and C. Weaving. 2009. *Philosophical Perspectives on Gender in Sport and Physical Activity*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Entman, R.M. 1993. “Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm.” *Journal of Communication* 43 (4): 51-58. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x>

eSports België. 2021. “Lees alles over de Belgische eSports.” eSports België. Accessed July 31 2021. <https://esportsbelgie.be/belgische-spelers/>

eSportsClub.nl. 2020. “Nieuw in België: Outplayed Esports Center opent begin 2021 hun deuren.” *eSportsClub.nl*, August 20. <https://www.esportsclub.nl/nieuws/nieuw-in-belgie-outplayed-esports-center-opent-begin-2021-hun-deuren>

- De Donder, S., Robeers, T., & Daneels, R. (2022). Virtual athlete or ultimate nerd? A framing analysis of eSports in Flemish printed media. *Sport in Society*. Advanced online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2022.2063119>
- Feys, S. 2014. "Gamers zijn de nieuwe rocksterren." *De Morgen*, August 2. <https://www.demorgen.be/nieuws/gamers-zijn-de-nieuwe-rocksterren-bf7d0aea/>
- Freys, J. 2017. "Uur wiskunde, uur Frans en twee uur gamen." *De Standaard*, July 15. [https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20170714\\_02973448](https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20170714_02973448)
- Flyvbjerg, B. 2006. "Five Misunderstandings About Case-Study Research." *Qualitative Inquiry* 12 (2): 219-245. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800405284363>
- Frandsen, K. 2019. *Sport and Mediatization*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Gamson, W.A., and A. Modigliani. 1989. "Media Discourse and Public Opinion on Nuclear Power: A Constructionist Approach." *American Journal of Sociology* 95 (1): 1-37. <https://doi.org/10.1086/229213>
- Gitlin, T. 1980. *The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making & Unmaking of the New Left*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Goetomo, F. 2016. "Esports in Korea: A Study on League of Legends Team Performances on the Share Price of Owing Corporations." Senior thesis, Claremont McKenna College.
- Gough, C. 2021. "Leading Esports Tournaments Worldwide as of November 2020, Ranked by Overall Prize Pool" *Statista*, November 27. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/517940/leading-esports-tournamets-worldwide-by-prize-pool/>
- Guttmann, A. 1978. *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Hall, S., J. Evans, and S. Nixon. 2013. *Representation*. London: Sage.

- De Donder, S., Robeers, T., & Daneels, R. (2022). Virtual athlete or ultimate nerd? A framing analysis of eSports in Flemish printed media. *Sport in Society*. Advanced online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2022.2063119>
- Hallmann, K., and T. Giel. 2018. “eSports – Competitive Sports or Recreational Activity?” *Sport Management Review* 21 (1): 14–20. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2017.07.011>
- Hamari, J., and M. Sjöblom. 2017. “What is Esports and Why Do People Watch It?” *Internet research* 27 (2): 211-232. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IntR-04-2016-0085>
- Harper, T.L. 2010. “The Art of War: Fighting Games, Performativity, and Social Game Play.” PhD diss., Ohio University.
- Hope, A. 2014. “The Evolution of the Electronic Sports Entertainment Industry and its Popularity.” In *Computers for Everyone*, edited by J. Sharp and R. Self, 87-89.
- ICES. 2019. *Genderongelijkheid en heteronormativiteit in de sport. Een verkennende analyse van de Vlaamse context*. Gent: ICES (Centrum Ethiek in de Sport). [http://www.ethicsandsport.com/images/uploads/downloads/ICES\\_2019\\_Genderongelijkheid\\_en\\_heteronormativiteit\\_in\\_de\\_sport.pdf](http://www.ethicsandsport.com/images/uploads/downloads/ICES_2019_Genderongelijkheid_en_heteronormativiteit_in_de_sport.pdf)
- Jarvie, G. 2018. *Sport, Culture and Society: An Introduction (3<sup>rd</sup> Edition)*. London: Routledge.
- Jenny, S.E., R. D. Manning, M.C. Keiper, and T.W. Olrich. 2017. “Virtual(ly) Athletes: Where Esports Fit within the Definition of ‘Sport’.” *Quest* 69 (1): 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00336297.2016.1144517>
- Jin, D.Y. 2010. *Korea’s Online Gaming Empire*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Kelly, M. 2020. “The Most Watched Esports Events of 2020” *Dot Esports*, December 24. <https://dotesports.com/streaming/news/the-most-watched-esports-events-of-2020>
- Kendall, L. 1999. “Nerd Nation: Images of Nerds in US Popular Culture.” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 2 (2): 260-283. <https://doi.org/10.1177/136787799900200206>

- De Donder, S., Robeers, T., & Daneels, R. (2022). Virtual athlete or ultimate nerd? A framing analysis of eSports in Flemish printed media. *Sport in Society*. Advanced online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2022.2063119>
- Kendall, L. 2000. "'OH NO! I'M A NERD!' Hegemonic Masculinity on an Online Forum." *Gender & Society* 14 (2): 256-274. <https://doi.org/10.1177/089124300014002003>
- Kim, S.J. 2017. "Gender Inequality in eSports Participation: Examining League of Legends." Master's thesis, University of Texas.
- Kowert, R., M.D. Griffiths, and J.A. Oldmeadow. 2012. "Geek or Chic? Emerging Stereotypes of Online Gamers." *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society* 32 (6): 471-479. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0270467612469078>
- Le Bacq, T. 2018. "Vergeet Mario Bros, Tetris en Call of Duty." *Het Nieuwsblad*, September 29. <https://academic.gopress.be/vy2r0ds5k8/>
- Limelight Networks. 2017. *The State of Online Video 2017*. Scottsdale, AZ: Limelight Networks. <https://www.limelight.com/resources/white-paper/state-of-online-video-2017/>
- Maclean, E. 2016. "Girls, Guys and Games: How News Media Perpetuate Stereotypes of Male and Female Gamers." *Press Start* 3 (1): 17-45. <https://press-start.gla.ac.uk/index.php/press-start/article/view/44>
- Maguire, J.A. 2011. "Development Through Sport and the Sports-Industrial Complex: The Case for Human Development in Sports and Exercise Sciences." *Sport in Society* 14 (7-8): 937-949. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2011.603550>
- Marien, S. 2018. "Wordt e-sport mainstream in België?" *Data News*, May 18. <https://datanews.knack.be/ict/nieuws/wordt-e-sport-mainstream-in-belgie/article-longread-1148707.html>
- Martin, M. 2017. "Balkunstenaars met controllers." *De Morgen*, October 23. <https://www.demorgen.be/nieuws/balkunstenaars-met-controllers~b6100ed6/>

- De Donder, S., Robeers, T., & Daneels, R. (2022). Virtual athlete or ultimate nerd? A framing analysis of eSports in Flemish printed media. *Sport in Society*. Advanced online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2022.2063119>
- Martin, M. 2018. “Gezocht: beleid voor e-sports.” *De Morgen*, August 20. <https://academic.gopress.be/hg4mx16017/>
- Matheï, S. 2021. “Kamercommissie keurt fiscale ondersteuning gamingsector goed,” *Steven Matheï* (blog), July 13. <https://www.stevenmathei.be/blog/2021/7/13/kamercommissie-keurt-fiscale-ondersteuning-gamingsector-goed>
- Matthes, J. 2009. “What's in a Frame? A Content Analysis of Media Framing Studies in the World's Leading Communication Journals, 1990-2005.” *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 86 (2): 349-367. <https://doi.org/10.1177/107769900908600206>
- Meeus, R. 2016. “Games kijken is big business.” *De Morgen*, September 12. <https://academic.gopress.be/wc8ucuaes1/>
- Meeus, R. 2018. “Bedenk een videogame, en bouw er een stadion bij.” *De Morgen*, January 13. <https://www.demorgen.be/nieuws/bedenk-een-videogame-en-bouw-er-een-stadion-bij~b5289815/>
- Mortensen, T.E. 2018. “Anger, Fear, and Games: The Long Event of #Gamergate.” *Games and Culture* 13 (8): 787-806. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412016640408>
- Newzoo. 2020. *Newzoo Global Esports Market Report 2020*. San Francisco, CA: Newzoo. <https://newzoo.com/insights/trend-reports/newzoo-global-esports-market-report-2020-light-version/>
- Nieborg, D., and M. Foxman. 2016. “The Mainstreaming of US Games Journalism.” Paper presented at the First International Joint Conference of DiGRA and FDG, Dundee, August 1-6.

- De Donder, S., Robeers, T., & Daneels, R. (2022). Virtual athlete or ultimate nerd? A framing analysis of eSports in Flemish printed media. *Sport in Society*. Advanced online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2022.2063119>
- Nielsen, R. K. L., and V.-M. Karhulahti. 2017. "The Problematic Coexistence of "Internet Gaming Disorder" and eSports." In *Proceedings of the 12th International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games*, edited by Sebastian Deterding, 1-4. Hyannis, MA: ACM.
- Orme, S. 2020. "Playing to Win: The Global Esports Industry and Key Issues." In *The Video Game Debate 2: Revisiting the Physical, Social, and Psychological Effects of Video Games*, edited by Rachel Kowert and Thorsten Quandt, 65-79. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Parshakov, P., and M. Zavertiaeva. 2018. "Determinants of Performance in Esports: A Country-Level Analysis." *International Journal of Sport Finance* 13 (1): 34-51. <https://fitpublishing.com/articles/determinants-performance-esports-country-level-analysis>
- Ponsaerts, S. 2018. "21-jarige Limburger is vicewereldkampioen 'FIFA 18': 60.000 euro verdiend dit jaar met spelletjes." *Het Laatste Nieuws*, August 7. <https://www.hln.be/de-krant/21-jarige-limburger-is-vicewereldkampioen-fifa-18-60-000-euro-verdiend-dit-jaar-met-spelletjes~adcff3d8/>
- Reitman, J.G., M.J. Anderson-Coto, M. Wu, J.S. Lee, and C. Steinkuehler. 2020. "Esports Research: A Literature Review." *Games and Culture* 15 (1): 32-50. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412019840892>
- Robeers, T., and L.C. Sharp. 2020. "British and American Media Framing of Online Sim Racing During Covid-19". In *Sport and the Pandemic: Perspectives on Covid-19's Impact on the Sport Industry*, edited by Paul M. Pedersen, Brody J. Ruibley, and Bo Li, 95-105. London: Routledge.

- De Donder, S., Robeers, T., & Daneels, R. (2022). Virtual athlete or ultimate nerd? A framing analysis of eSports in Flemish printed media. *Sport in Society*. Advanced online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2022.2063119>
- Rowe, D. 2013. "The Sport/Media Complex: Formation, Flowering, and Future." In *A Companion to Sport*, edited by David L. Andrews and Ben Carrington, 61-77. Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell Publishing.
- Serrure, B. 2018. "Miljoenenpubliek, sterrenstatus, toploon: Welkom in de lucratieve wereld van de e-sports." *De Tijd*, February 10. <https://www.tijd.be/tech-media/entertainment/miljoenenpubliek-sterrenstatus-toploon-welkom-in-de-lucratieve-wereld-van-de-e-sports/9981135.html>
- Shenton, A.K. 2004. "Strategies for Ensuring Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research Projects." *Education for Information* 22 (2): 63-75. Doi: 10.3233/EFI-2004-22201.
- Sjöblom, M., L. Hassan, J. Macey, M. Törhönen, and J. Hamari. 2018. "Liking the Game: How Can Spectating Motivations Influence Social Media Usage at Live eSports Events?" In *Proceedings of the 9th International Conference on Social Media and Society*, 160-167. New York, NY: ACM.
- Stassijns, J. 2017. "Topsport achter een computerscherm." *Gazet van Antwerpen*, November 4. [https://www.gva.be/cnt/dmf20171103\\_03167513](https://www.gva.be/cnt/dmf20171103_03167513)
- Steinkuehler, C. 2020. "Esports Research: Critical, Empirical, and Historical Studies of Competitive Videogame Play." *Games and Culture* 15 (1): 3-8. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412019836855>
- Summerley, R. 2020. "The Development of Sports: A Comparative Analysis of the Early Institutionalization of Traditional Sports and E-Sports." *Games and Culture* 15 (1): 51-72. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412019838094>
- Taylor, T.L. 2008. "Becoming a Player: Networks, Structures, and Imagined Futures." In *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat: New Perspectives on Gender, Games, and*

De Donder, S., Robeers, T., & Daneels, R. (2022). Virtual athlete or ultimate nerd? A framing analysis of eSports in Flemish printed media. *Sport in Society*. Advanced online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2022.2063119>

*Computing*, edited by Yasmin B. Kafai, Carrie Heeter, Jill Denner, and Jennifer Y. Sun, 51-66. Cambridge, MA: Mit Press.

Taylor, T.L. 2012. *Raising the Stakes: E-Sports and the Professionalization of Computer Gaming*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Tikkanen, S. 2019. "From Basements to Stadiums: Representations of Esports in Online Newspapers." Bachelor's thesis, University of Jyväskylä.

Turner, J.S. 2014. "A Longitudinal Content Analysis of Gender and Ethnicity Portrayals on ESPN's SportsCenter From 1999 to 2009." *Communication & Sport* 2 (4): 303-327. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167479513496222>

Vancaeneghem, J. 2018. "600.000 supporters en 8.000 euro voor Belg die Europees kampioen werd: Twaalf uur gamen per dag loont." *Het Nieuwsblad*, April 11. <https://academic.gopress.be/vy2r0ds5k8/>

Van Baelen, J. 2018. "Topsport met een toetsenbord: de onstuitbare opmars van het professioneel gamen." *Knack*, June 6. <https://www.knack.be/nieuws/belgie/topsport-met-een-toetsenbord-de-onstuitbare-opmars-van-het-professioneel-gamen/article-longread-1156803.html>

Van den Bulck, H., and N. Claessens. 2013. "Guess Who Tiger is Having Sex With Now? Celebrity Sex and the Framing of the Moral High Ground." *Celebrity Studies* 4 (1): 46-57. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2012.750110>

Van Gorp, B. 2007. "The Constructionist Approach to Framing: Bringing Culture Back In." *Journal of Communication* 57 (1): 60-78. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0021-9916.2007.00329.x>

- De Donder, S., Robeers, T., & Daneels, R. (2022). Virtual athlete or ultimate nerd? A framing analysis of eSports in Flemish printed media. *Sport in Society*. Advanced online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2022.2063119>
- Van Gorp, B. 2010. "Strategies to Take Subjectivity Out of Framing Analysis." In *Doing News Framing Analysis: Empirical and Theoretical Perspectives*, edited by Paul D'Angelo and Jim A. Kuypers, 84-109. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Vermeulen, L., and J. Van Looy. 2016. "'I Play so I am?' A Gender Study into Stereotype Perception and Genre Choice of Digital Game Players." *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 60 (2): 286-304. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2016.1164169>
- Wagner, M.G. 2006. "On the Scientific Relevance of eSports." Paper presented at the International Conference on Internet Computing, Las Vegas, June 26-29.
- Williams, D. 2003. "The Video Game Lightning Rod." *Information, Communication & Society* 6 (4): 523-550. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118032000163240>
- Wood, L., O. Hoeber, R. Snelgrove, and L. Hoeber. 2019. "Computer Science Meets Digital Leisure: Multiple Perspectives On Social Media and Esport Collaborations." *Journal of Leisure Research* 50 (5): 425-437. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00222216.2019.1594466>
- Yenişehirlioğlu, E., Ç. Erdoğan, S. Şahin, and Ş. Ulama. 2018. "A Conceptional Research on Determining the Tourism Potential of Electronic Sports Events: e-Sports Tourism." *The Journal of Kesit Academy* 4 (16): 341–353. <http://dx.doi.org/10.18020/kesit.1515>
- Yin, R.K. 2017. *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods (6<sup>th</sup> Edition)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Zhou, Y., and P. Moy. 2007. "Parsing Framing Processes: The Interplay between Online Public Opinion and Media Coverage." *Journal of Communication* 57 (1): 79–98. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0021-9916.2007.00330.x>