

## Esports Clubs' Work in Media Spaces: Distinctive Features

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### ABSTRACT

On 7 May 2015, the term "esports" was officially added to one of the most extensive online English dictionaries "Dictionary.com." The dictionary gives the following definition of the term "esports": "competitive tournaments of video games, especially among professional gamers" (IGN, 2015). The history of esports began in the late 20th century with the game Quake, which allowed users to play together through a LAN or internet network. Since then, a tremendous number of new esports leagues have emerged. Every year, game publishers promote esports disciplines; create a media space around them, and make competitively oriented games, creating an active audience. The popularity of computer-based esports grows each year at an increasing speed. Therefore, it is not surprising that the traditional for typical sports (football, basketball, volleyball, etc.) model of interaction between professional players (esports athletes) and sports clubs (esports organizations) emerged quite rapidly. This interaction aims to optimize the training process to increase athletic achievements and develop the media component for players and clubs. This article analyzes how esports clubs function in media spaces: their goals, tools, strategies, results, and development prospects on the examples and experience of professional esports organizations in Germany, Finland, and China.

**KEYWORDS:** esports, esports media, Schalke 04 Esports, SMG Esports, ENCE Esports Club.

## Робота кіберспортивних клубів у медіа-просторах: відмінні риси

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### Резюме

7 травня 2015 р. термін «esports» був офіційно доданий до одного з найбільших онлайн-словників англійської мови «Dictionary.com». Історія кіберспорту почалася наприкінці 20 століття з гри Quake, яка дозволила користувачам грати разом через локальну мережу або мережу Інтернету. З тих пір з'явилася велика кількість нових кіберліг. Щороку видавці ігор презентують та пропагують кіберспортивні дисципліни; створюють для них медіапростір та роблять конкурентно орієнтовані ігри, що створює навколо них активну аудиторію. Популярність кіберспорту зростає з кожним роком зі зростаючою швидкістю. Тому не дивно, що традиційна для традиційних видів спорту (футбол, баскетбол, волейбол та ін.) модель взаємодії між професійними гравцями (кіберспортсмени) та спортивними клубами (кіберспортивні організації) виникла досить швидко. Ця взаємодія спрямована не лише на оптимізацію тренувального процесу, а також для розвитку медійного компонента як для гравців, так і для клубів. У цій статті ми аналізуємо, як функціонують кіберспортивні клуби в медіапросторі: які їх цілі, інструменти, стратегії, результати та перспективи розвитку на прикладах та досвіді професійних кіберспортивних організацій у Німеччині, Фінляндії та Китаї.

**Ключові слова:** кіберспортивні медіа, кіберспортивні клуби, Schalke 04 Esports Club, SMG Esports, ENCE Esports Club.

### Introduction

The world's scientific community has hardly studied the topic of esports clubs' work in media spaces. Huang conducted individual studies on the history and distinctive features of esports clubs' work (2019). Taylor examined the topic of esports broadcasts (Taylor, 2015). Druks researched PR and advertisement in esports on the example of Ukrainian esports club Natus Vincere (Na`Vi) (2014). Lokhman, Karashchuk, and Kornilova studied the prospects of esports as a commercial activity (2018). Petryk made a study on the thematic content of esports media (2018). With the development of esports, there is a need to study further this phenomenon from all possible angles. One should pay attention to the media in esports: they have several differences from sports media and require analysis. This article concerns itself with the

distinctive features of the following esports clubs in both the internal (domestic) and external (global) media spaces: Schalke 04 Esports, SMG Esports, and ENCE Esports Club.

In 2016, the German sports club Schalke 04 was the first in Germany to establish an esports division. At the time, the Gelsenkirchen organization was working with athletes in six categories. Esports became the seventh one: as part of the experiment, the sports club first signed an entire team of League of Legends players, followed by several players of the FIFA football simulator. Over the next three years, the club actively studied an entirely new audience, market, and media space. The summary of the Schalke 04 expansion's efficiency was published in the Otto Beisheim School of Management's academic journal (Schmidt & Holzmayer, 2018).

In 2019, the Finnish Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences conducted a seminal study of esports clubs' current situation and development opportunities in Finland and China, including ENCE Esports Club and SMG Esports Club, respectively (Huang, 2019). These esports clubs, unlike Schalke 04, did not start as sports clubs but have emerged independently and function only in the esports field. On the examples of these esports organizations, it is possible not only to compare the structure of the media department of an esports club and the esports division of a sports club but also to analyze the differences between the means of engagement with the audience in radically different cultural and linguistic regions: Europe and Asia.

## Methods

The idea to conduct this study arose from exploring the structure of the media environment in the world of esports. There are many examples of successful and unsuccessful attempts by sports clubs to integrate into the esports media space. In the future, many other clubs or sports organizations will want to break into esports due to its prospects. The experience of previous organizations in this process will be helpful to them.

The initial research preparation stage was studying several sports clubs' work strategies with the esports audience. For example, the Kyiv football club Dynamo announced opening of an esports division in late 2016: a contract was signed with the then champion of Ukraine in the esports football simulator FIFA. Dynamo started a comprehensive communication with the audience on the internet (social media pages), particularly with Ukrainian fans of the FIFA video game (FC Dynamo Kyiv launched a series of tournaments in this esports discipline). Later the club signed several more Ukrainian esports athletes and continued to move in the same direction, but failed to achieve great success either in the international context or the media space and, as a result, ceased its activity in 2020. A similar story happened to the Danish football club Copenhagen (F.C. København): in 2017, a separate esports organization North was established on its base. It stood out among other esports clubs due to its professional sports approach to the preparation of esports athletes for competitions. The club immediately signed one of the strongest teams in the world in the CS: GO esports discipline. Later professional FIFA and Apex Legends players joined the club. North engaged in a typical for an esports organization media activity and worked productively on its image and the image of FC Copenhagen. However, the club achieved desired results neither in sports nor in the media domain, and therefore in early 2021, North announced its termination.

FC Schalke 04 Esports has been successfully developing in the direction of esports since its foundation. Members of the club have publicly shared detailed information about their development strategy, which is why the German club can be an excellent example for future sports clubs that will plan to establish their esports division. Therefore, we concluded the initial stage of the work by selecting the club that will be the research object, namely FC Schalke 04 Esports.

The research had a direct, clear, and understandable structure: from obtaining the specific knowledge about the journey of the Schalke 04 sports club towards the creation of an esports

division and its active development to the universal conclusions for all future or current members of the esports industry. During all stages of the research, we made many separate mini-inferences about certain nuances of the Schalke 04 Esports project: they will be of great practical value for esports media workers. The esports field is very young and has existed for about 25 years: currently, there is a shortage of experts in the world who have experience in creating new projects in this industry and even fewer experts who publicly share their findings. Therefore, we approached each piece of available information very carefully.

In solving the research tasks, we used the following scientific methods: the structural-functional approach, the diachronic approach, expert survey, analysis, synthesis, and analysis of documents.

The structural-functional approach is fundamental to this study. Scholars use this method to study system objects, first and foremost social systems, phenomena, and processes. The article examines the structure of the esports industry and, in particular, its media part. We pay special attention to esports clubs as an integral part of the esports media space. In the first step of the research, we examined the creation and development of media assets of the Schalke 04 sports club among the esports audience. Thanks to the available work report of the club during this period, it is possible to identify and document the critical stages of the formation of esports media assets of the club.

The next step was to establish a timeline of events described in the club report. We used the diachronic approach to set out the facts and actions related to the research object in chronological order.

The third step of the research was to identify critical data needed to achieve the aim of the study (to verify the effectiveness of the outlined means used by esports clubs in the media space of computer sports).

The fourth step. We used the expert survey method (individual) to investigate the prioritization of sports achievements and media assets of esports athletes. Specifically for the article, we interviewed the COO of the Danish e-sports club Heroic and ex-esports athlete Oleksiy Kucherov. He has extensive experience in various, including international, esports companies and clubs. His expertise can be considered qualified. The expert comments add weight to the study results and explain non-obvious details and highlight significant points.

Besides, we used document synthesis and analysis methods throughout the study, particularly during the processing of information published in the Otto Beisheim School of Management academic journal. In this journal, the results of the Schalke 04 Esports media department were first reported during the early years of the esports division. Using document analysis and synthesis methods, we transformed the obtained data into integrated knowledge, which is further subject to universalization.

Thus, step-by-step work using several scientific research methods made it possible to yield the necessary research results. To highlight the beneficial experience of a successful project, which both media workers and other esports officials can put into practice in the future.

## **Results and discussion**

In 2017, Schalke 04 adopted an updated development strategy, which listed overall internationalization as one of its crucial points. To achieve this goal, the football division held training camps and a series of friendly matches in the US and China. But a breakthrough in this direction came along with the creation of an esports division. Among German sports clubs, Schalke 04 became a pioneer in the esports market. In the debut Schalke 04 League of Legends roster, there was only one representative of Germany (Erberk Demir, nickname—Gilius), two Swedes, a Frenchman, and a Dane. Four out of the five players in the team were members of team Elements. They had extensive experience in international competitions and their fan base,

so for Schalke 04 the acquisition of these players allowed them to expand their audience and move towards the internationalization of the sports club.

At the time of the esports division's creation, Schalke 04's management also aimed to improve the club's financial performance and the internationalization and expansion of the fan base. At the start of Schalke 04's esports project, the profit levels of esports in Germany were already on par with basketball, hockey, and handball. Alexander Jobst, a senior member of the club's board, said that creating a new esports division would allow the budget of FC Schalke 04 to approach its competitors in Germany (FC Bayern Munich and FC Borussia Dortmund) (Schmidt and Holzmayr, 2018). It held given the research of the esports industry, which recorded almost fourfold growth of the total market value over the five years from 2012 to 2017.

The active growth of the financial results became both the cause and the consequence of the increase in audience. According to Newzoo, the audience of esports competitions in the world has more than doubled between 2012 and 2017, from 134 million to 335 (Newzoo, 2017). This audience has its peculiarities, too. In one of the fundamental studies on esports (Hamari and Sjöblom, 2017), researchers have come to interesting conclusions due to conducting an online survey via social networks. Firstly, more than 70% of the respondents were university and school students. Secondly, more than 85% watched esports broadcasts at least once a month. Thirdly, the main factors that prompted the respondents to watch the broadcasts were sympathy and empathy with the teams or players and the enjoyment of communicating with other people watching the broadcast.

Thus, with its expansion into esports, Schalke 04 has discovered a unique share of audience that traditional media channels would not be able to reach. Schalke 04 formed a new group of fans during the senior league season, primarily young people under 35, including women—about 30% (The Nielsen Company, 2017). In the first year of its operation, Schalke 04's League of Legends team has not achieved any success, dropped to a lower division in the world league, and was forced to look for new players to improve the results. However, even the lack of results did not stop the club from achieving its financial and media goal, from having new, mostly young fans out of the football media reach. Tim Reichert, head of Schalke 04's esports division, also stressed the twofold effect that the club is trying to achieve. "Our goal is to make FC Schalke 04 interesting for the young esports community—but on the other hand, we also want to grow the interest of our football fans in esports." (Schmidt and Holzmayr, 2018).

From a geographical point of view, the creation of the esports division has enabled Schalke to find fans in new countries and regions. Let's compare the data of the anglophone official Twitter accounts of the football (@s04\_fc) and esports (@s04esports) divisions in terms of follower geolocation (according to trendmaps.com). We can highlight several exciting features.



Figure 1. *Geography of FC Schalke 04's Twitter account followers: (Trendsmap.com, 2020)*

As you can see, most of FC Schalke 04's Twitter account followers are from Germany (where the club is based) and the United Kingdom (the language of the account is predominantly English, and there are many football fans in the UK). Certain regions of the world or countries whose representatives are or were a part of the team are also highlighted (e.g., Schalke was long represented by Japanese Atsuto Uchida, Ghanaian Kevin-Prince Boateng, Brazilians Rafinha, Naldo, et al.). In other regions, the fan base is distributed evenly.



Figure 2. *Geography of Schalke 04 Esports' Twitter account followers: (Trendsmap.com, 2020)*

Key differences: North America is the second-largest region after Europe by the number of followers, particularly the central and western US states. Due to the popularity of the League of Legends and FIFA esports disciplines in this country, no US player has ever represented Schalke 04 Esports (as of early 2020). In other parts of the world, the fan base spreads evenly.

We may infer that the creation of the esports division has allowed Schalke 04 to significantly expand its North American fan base, which, as it turns out, prefers esports over football. We also see a double trend: Schalke 04's subscribers from South America and Africa have become interested in esports because the football club they supported has opened a new division.

Schalke 04 Esports' media activity began immediately with the creation of the esports division. The club created a separate section on its website (<https://schalke04.de/esports/>), Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/S04Esports/>), Twitter (<https://twitter.com/S04EsportsDE> and <https://twitter.com/S04Esports/>), Instagram ([https://www.instagram.com/s04\\_esports/](https://www.instagram.com/s04_esports/)), YouTube ([https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCW5NJHURAfjEywb\\_2SOlrbA](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCW5NJHURAfjEywb_2SOlrbA)), and Twitch (<https://www.twitch.tv/s04esports/>).

Table 1. *Number of followers of Schalke 04 Esports' social media accounts as of early 2020*

Social network	Language of the account	Number of followers
	English	41000

Twitter	German	15400
Instagram	English and German	24700
Facebook	English and German	32000
Twitch	English and German	8100
YouTube	English and German	7000
<b>Total</b>		128200

The company's media assets include the personal social media pages of Schalke 04 players. As with traditional sports, the popularity of players sometimes grows faster than the popularity of the whole club. A prime example is Tim Schwartman (nickname—Tim Latka). He started creating videos about FIFA on his own YouTube channel in early 2017 when he became an esports player of Schalke 04. With the help of the club, his first videos received more than 100,000 views, which allowed him to gather an audience quickly. Tim Latka's YouTube channel stands at 193,000 subscribers three years later, while Schalke 04 Esports' channel has only 7,000. Due to Schwartman's popularity, he went on business with the Schalke 04's football team to China because through their influencers, Schalke 04 has the potential to become an increasingly well-known brand around the world. The club understands that social networks are an effective tool for engaging with the esports audience. To this end, the company has standardized its approach to communicating with the audience across all divisions, focusing on players such as Schalke 04 brand ambassadors (Schmidt & Holzmayer, 2018).

Table 2. Number of followers of Schalke 04 Esports players' social media accounts as of early 2020

*League of Legends*

	Odoamne	Gilius	Abbedagge	FORG1VEN	Dreams
Twitter	48600	39100	8100	137000	4900
Instagram	4900	3600	800	10000	250
Facebook	12200	3500	1800	80000	-
Twitch	13000	42000	2500	59000	320
YouTube	-	400	-	-	-

<b>In total</b>	78700	88200	13200	286000	5470
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*FIFA and Pro Evolution Soccer*

	Tim Latka	Julii	Deos	Meromen	GooL	El_Matador
Twitter	48500	677	1100	331	555	482
Instagram	51200	670	10500	431	452	594
Facebook	8600	90	-	171	1100	368
Twitch	31500	-	1140	18	-	-
YouTube	193000	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Total</b>	332800	1437	12740	951	2107	1444

The esports subdivision has accelerated the whole club's digitization process. The club introduced new technologies into its media system through the unique communication channels used in esports. Training courses were conducted for the club's media staff to bring their knowledge up to date, understand digitization processes, and gain new experience. According to Schalke 04's head of esports subdivision Tim Reichart: "These sessions soon bore first fruits as the football and the eSports divisions started to grow together" (Schmidt & Holzmayr, 2018).

The club quickly learned the critical differences between popularity in football and esports. The central indicator of the football team's popularity is the number of spectators in the stadium and viewers on TV. In esports, there are no stadiums and television. Therefore, the focus should shift to the online audience. To this end, the club has agreed with the online streaming platform (online television analog) Twitch, where fans can communicate with the players and management of the club live. To develop official accounts on social networks, the club hired a team of media experts and PR professionals.

The creation of the Schalke 04's esports division brought the club to the home pages of top news websites for some time. The club reported a total of 200 million views of its announcement of the creation of Schalke 04 Esports in the online media (Schmidt & Holzmayr, 2018). Alexander Jobst, a senior member of the club's board, said: "On the day of the announcement, our esports engagement was the number one news item on ESPN—our football business has never managed to achieve that before" (Schmidt & Holzmayr, 2018).

Among the pivotal decisions that have contributed to the development of Schalke 04's esports media is the emphasis on internationalization:

- \* the abandonment of exclusively German language use on social media and the official website;
- \* promotion campaigns in America and Asia;
- \* digitization and change of engagement type with the audience from the television to the internet (live streams on Twitch, content on social networks);

\* emphasis on the development of professional esports players' influence to increase interest in the club's brand and loyalty among the audience.

As a result, the sports club has significantly expanded its fan base by creating an esports division and changing its media strategy, both quantitatively and geographically. The esports audience is more active in North America and Asia, where football (as Schalke 04's main media asset) is not as popular as in Europe. In addition, Schalke 04 has significantly rejuvenated its audience, as 61% of esports viewers are under 35 (Muchneeded.com, 2019), while in traditional sports (football, basketball, etc.), the audience is of a different age group and received coverage in mass media that report esports news.

We have closely examined a sports club's expansion and development of its esports division from the perspective of the media. Nevertheless, most clubs operating in the esports market have emerged on their own and are active to date only in the domain of computer games. In most countries, esports clubs are legally closer to a commercial organization than to a sports club. Still, in terms of their purpose, function, and peculiarities, esports clubs are closer to sports, so there is a trend to expand sports organizations towards the creation of esports divisions in recent years. Schalke 04 (Germany), Beşiktaş (Turkey), Dynamo Kyiv (Ukraine), FC Copenhagen (Denmark), et al.

An esports club (team, organization) is one of the critical elements of the esports industry. According to the financial report of the Danish Astralis Esports Club, which was publicly disseminated on the occasion of Astralis' IPO, clubs in the esports ecosystem are on par with:

- \* game developers (Electronic Arts, Valve, Riot Games, Blizzard Entertainment, etc.);
- \* with players, viewers, and online streaming platforms (Twitch, YouTube, Douyu, etc.);
- \* tournament organizers (ESL, Dreamhack, Starladder, PGL, etc.);
- \* tournament venues (Elmia, Lanxess Arena, ESL Studio, etc.);
- \* media (HLTV, ESPN, Cybersport, Gameinside, etc.);
- \* sponsors and investors (Astralis Group A / S, 2019).

Developers focus on creating as competitive games as possible by implementing multiplayer (the ability to play against other players on an even playing field) and seamless gameplay. It may be possible by balancing in-game elements and, of course, by creating leagues and competitions, increasing the prize pool or the audience through in-game systems. Fans are rewarded for watching streams or for participating in tournaments, etc. But more than often, it is the responsibility of tournament organizers to provide logistics, advertising, broadcasting, and all other elements of tournament organization from the local to the global levels. Streaming platforms in esports have become an alternative to television. Live streams are the most sought-after type of content. Streaming platforms provide the technical capability for an unlimited number of people to watch the developments in esports competitions and communicate with the streamer. Other viewers live via online chat built into the streaming player of any online streaming platform, which is not typical for television broadcasts. Media in esports are mainly online publications, which play a role similar to sports media in traditional competitive sports: they inform the audience about the significant events, analyze breaking news, report match results, statistics, etc. As one of the primary sources of funding in esports, investors and sponsors provide for the media, tournament organizers, and esports clubs by using them to promote their products or services, create an image and a reputation. Esports clubs ensure the necessary conditions to improve the performance of esports athletes and work on their popularity, image, and recognizability. It facilitates profit growth for the club from sponsorships. Athletic performance has the most decisive influence on the popularity of an esports athlete.

The COO of the Danish esports club Heroic and ex-esports athlete Alexey Kucherov said the following regarding the priority of athletic achievements and media assets of esports athletes:

“Advertisers and sponsors are the main sources of income of any esports club. For them, one of the most important factors in choosing a team for a partnership is the fans' perception of the team. If they view the club as a market leader, then the sponsor will gain a loyal audience as well

by supporting that club and putting their brand next to the winners. Thus, athletic performance is a higher priority for most business partners. In addition, it should be noted that viewers perceive the club just the same, thus, the most effective method of building a fan base and increasing audience loyalty to the team and its players are their victories. That's why we come to the conclusion that athletic performance is at the core of the media prominence and the popularity of a player or a team".

In 2019, the Finnish Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences conducted a fundamental study of the structure of the following esports clubs: ENCE Esports Club (Finland) and SMG Esports Club (China) (Huang, 2019). Formed in 2018, the SMG Esports Club was founded by Wang Kang (nickname—shou), a popular Chinese PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds (PUBG) player. In August 2019, popular Asian pop singer JJ Lin acquired the club to launch a promotional campaign to bring his music's esports audience and fans together (Sg.news.yahoo.com, 2017). In China and other Asian countries, it is popular among celebrities to purchase esports clubs.

China E-Sports Value Ranking 2019 is the Chinese ranking of the most successful esports teams (Rank.uuu9.com, 2019). The site evaluates the performance of clubs in sports and media. As of early 2020, SMG Esports Club has the best PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds (PUBG) rating in China. The experts of this reputable in China website describe the team in the following way:

"As a newly established esports club, its development speed is indeed very fast, but it also exposed many problems. The state of club members is in a downturn and leaving the biggest problem in the development of SMG Esports Club. Whether a club can continue to develop, the results of the game competition is essential, and all factors of club development are based on the results of the game competition" (Huang, 2019).

Thus, the team becomes highly dependent on athletic results, and in case of losses in global or regional competitions, the team risks closing down. Prominent clubs with long-lasting partners and extensive experience in marketing and media, such as Schalke 04, have learned to overcome this problem. Still, for most esports teams, especially newcomers or little-known ones, athletic performance is crucial. Nowadays SMG Esports is a leader in one of the most popular esports disciplines in its region and therefore has the opportunity to confidently secure its position at the top due to the development of the players and the team's brand.

Table 3. *Number of followers of SMG Esports' social media accounts as of early 2020*

<b>Social network</b>	<b>Language of the account</b>	<b>Number of followers</b>
Weibo	Chinese	608930
Instagram	Chinese	24400
YouTube	Chinese	110000
Facebook	Chinese	284500
<b>Total</b>		1027000

From this table, we can see the internationalization of the club and the brand, which is represented and operates only in China. No player on the team is developing their accounts in

English-language social networks; the team pages on Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram are in Chinese. Therefore, they cannot be used to develop the club's popularity around the world. As a result, non-Asian esports media hardly cover this team in their reports. The news that JJ Lin has acquired the SMG Esports team (Cybersport.ru, 2019) and the news of the scandal surrounding mass protests by Chinese teams at the MET Asia Series (The Esports Observer, 2019) were among the exceptions.

However, it is worth noting that in less than three years of its existence, the club has created a million-strong fan base in China. It makes it one of the key figures in the Chinese esports market.

The Finnish ENCE Esports Club was founded in 2013. As stated on the team's official website, its main objective was to return Finland to the list of leading countries in the world of esports (ENCE Esports, 2016). As of early 2020, the club has teams in four esports disciplines: Counter-Strike: Global Offensive, PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds (PUBG), Starcraft 2, and Hearthstone. The organization is considered the most prestigious in the country and when choosing its players the club adheres to its leading principle—they have to represent Finland. ENCE players have become champions in many European and world competitions in different disciplines; therefore, the club no longer has competitors in the domestic scene and instead is working to succeed globally.

Finland as a country is one of the world leaders in the field of esports. The Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences (Helsinki), in its study, highlights the following critical factors for the rapid development of the Finnish esports industry: an international perspective, strong governmental support, and a high level of gaming education (Huang, 2019). In many countries, esports and sports are entirely separate. For example, sports athletes have many privileges, while esports athletes do not. However, Finnish esports athletes can delay or postpone military service to attend competitions and display good results. To promote the development of young esports players, the Finnish military has set up esports schools where it is possible to maintain their gaming prowess during service. The structure of Finland's esports industry is quite excellent (Huang, 2019).

ENCE Esports Club is the face of Finnish esports on the global level. Understanding this, the club works on its image and actively maintains engagement with the audience through all possible communication channels. The official site of the club (ENCE Esports, 2016) serves as its business card: it contains information about the current club rosters of all its esports disciplines, a brief history of the organization, its goals, upcoming tournaments and matches, latest games results and a list of partners. There is a particular spot for a fan shop, where fans can buy brand-name clothing or club accessories.

The club maintains direct engagement with the audience through its social networks. Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram accounts are in English, occasionally interspersed with Finnish. The club responds to followers depending on the language they are speaking: English or Finnish. In most cases, their posts talk about upcoming tournaments, events, or matches involving ENCE players; share results and conclusions of completed games. The club holds a Q&A session with its players, posts promotional material, and wishes its followers happy holidays.

ENCE Esports' YouTube channel deserves special attention (YouTube, 2013). During 2019, 17 "ENCE Behind the scenes" videos ranged from 10 to 20 minutes. Viewers could see how ENCE Esports players interact with each other when traveling to competitions, during, or after key matches. The backstage content became widespread, especially among the Finnish audience who cheer for their countrymen and are actively interested in the team's future. The most popular video of this series, "The Road to IEM Katowice 2019 - Making History - Episode VII," gathered 215,000 views, while the average view count of this series is ~ 100,000 (ENCE TV, 2019). Such content allows viewers to get closer to their idols and learn more about the relationships inside the team, the circumstances in which players end up, and how esports athletes go through moments of defeat and victory. Thus, the club gets a more loyal audience, which is ready to

support the players in the absence of athletic results, and also increases the number of fans even between tournaments. In order to reach an international audience, ENCE Esports Club always subtitles its videos in English, emphasizing its goal to represent Finland in front of a worldwide audience.

ENCE Esports Club is discovering exciting ways of finding a new audience in Finland. The club actively cooperates with the country's non-sports media. The team's players often frequent Finnish sports news on television and print media; they visit television channels as talk shows and analytic program guests. The gaming industry, especially the mobile gaming and app industry, is very developed in Finland, and therefore esports topics that are close to gaming are often covered on TV. In early 2019, the national broadcasting company of Finland YLE aired a 30-minute documentary "Inside ENCE" about the CS: GO team's trip to the Ukrainian Starladder i-League Season 6 championship. Besides, the broadcaster introduced the players in detail to the audience, including at the time 16-year-old star player Jere Salo (nickname—sergej) (Yle Arena, 2019). Such projects positively affect the popularity of the club's brand in the country, the popularity of the players, and promote esports in general.

Another notable success story for media engagement of the ENCE Esports Club is the music track "EZ4ENCE" ("easy for ENCE") made by the Finnish band The Verkkars. The band posted the track on the day the club's CS:GO roster lost in the world championship finals at IEM Katowice 2019 (The Verkkars, 2019). The song talks about the team's players who, as a great surprise to everyone, reached the finals of one of the year's major championships. The music video went viral not only in Finland but all around the world. The developers of Counter-Strike: Global Offensive (Valve Corporation) later on even added this track directly into the game as a Music Kit (Blog.Counter-Strike.net, 2019). Any user could purchase the kit and use parts of the original song as a soundtrack for certain parts of the game (winning a round, selecting a team, starting a game, etc.). ENCE Esports became the first esports club to have a song about it featured in a Music Kit for Counter-Strike: Global Offensive, and the "EZ4ENCE" music video has garnered over 6.5 million views on YouTube as of early 2020 (The Verkkars, 2019).

ENCE Esports Club strives to best represent Finland in the world of esports, both from the sports and in the media perspective—and this is the club's main feature. Through its achievements in competitions and active communication with the audience, ENCE has earned itself the status of a leader in Finnish esports. It garnered a significant loyal audience and continues to expand it both within Finland and around the world.

## Conclusions

In the nature of their work in media spaces, esports clubs do not have a clear standardized strategy and are constantly looking for a universal approach to engage with their audience. The example of Schalke 04 Esports shows that many years of experience working with football fans has helped the club learn to analyze their audience. This is what helped the German sports club's media division to make the right and timely decisions and get the desired results from entering the esports market, despite the lack of successful results of its esports athletes at the beginning.

The main feature of the Chinese media market is isolation. In the case of SMG Esports, one of China's most popular esports clubs, we conclude that there is an issue of brand and club internationalization in the Asian region due to excessive focus on the domestic audience. It allows SMG Esports to have a million-strong fan base and to be one of the key players in the Chinese esports market, but it hinders further growth of popularity outside the country.

The Finnish ENCE Esports Club can be considered one of the most successful media figures in European esports. After a 2016 relaunch, it conducted a fruitful media campaign and not only became the leader of the esports scene in Finland but became the face of the country on the global stage. ENCE Esports Club has garnered a significant loyal audience and continues to expand it both within Finland and worldwide. Successful media campaigns with the participation

of Finnish media and celebrities have made the club and its esports players well-known in all the Finland and not just among the esports audience.

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