Individuals, representatives, and racers – The images of F1 and F1 Esports Series drivers on Instagram

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INTRODUCTION

This article investigates the image differences between top F1 and F1 Esports Pro Series drivers by analyzing their social media posts on Instagram throughout 2021. The research question is twofold: what kinds of images do F1 drivers create via social media, and do the images of F1 and F1 Esports drivers overlap in this regard? The processes and interests of different parties and their respective attributes—such as fans, sponsors, and nationality—can be expected to affect the buildup and maintenance of a certain driver-specific image or brand. As in other forms of stardom, sports-star characters and the image they have built vary, thus attracting different audiences and creating versatile fan behavior (Sturm, 2011; Cho 2016; Abidin 2018). The present study will shed light on these unexamined areas of esports.

Motorsports have been bound for decades by mediatization and commercialization in various ways (Finn, 2021). As media-friendly sports and commercial interest have evolved congruently for decades, racing sponsors capitalized on early opportunities to tie their brand to a team, thus simultaneously influencing the teams and brands' images (Donahay & Rosenberg III, 2007; Rosenberg III & Donahay, 2008). These features mentioned are also similar to esports (Ward & Harmon 2019). Hence, the mechanisms to create and maintain suitable or desired stardoms are vital features in these forms of elite and professional competition to attract different fan and consumer preferences via different media (Koskimaa et. al. 2021).

Gaming and motorsports have had a long-shared history since the dawn of early racing games, which have often incorporated intertextual references to real racing series (Young 1995; Suominen et al. 2018). Over the years, the desired credibility and attractiveness for racing games, combined with the overall popularity of gaming, has had consequences: increased level of competition, general acceptability of gaming as a form of competition, and grown use of simulation games as practice for real-life racing (Tudor 2020).

Ultimately, these trends have woken up the attention of motorsport teams, automotive industry, and sponsors to take benefit from, simultaneously lifting the value and status of sim racing (Pu et. al 2021; Witkowski et al. 2021). When COVID-19 cancelled

racing events, emotorsports gained new audiences by hundreds of thousands (Furchgott 2011). For F1, this synergy growth has been explicit. (Bond et al. 2016, Dalleres 2021, Richards 2022). Coming together of these two media forms—broadcast television related to traditional motorsports and online streaming essential to esports—allows the industry to reach new, younger audiences and maximize the visibility of the series, guaranteeing its future popularity. Compared to F1, however, the emotorsports domain still lacks the history, physicality, and visibility of its over-70-years-old counterparty (Medak-Seguín 2016; Malinen, 2019).

The method used is critical discourse analysis by Norman Fairclough (1997) to reflect the dualistic effect how individual texts signify in larger socio-cultural contexts. The theorical frameworks feature Kellner's (1998) critical cultural theory to comprehend how media culture and spectacles affect and reflect society instead of functioning solely as entertainment and Richard Dyer (1998) and Christine Geraghty's (2007) star theories regarding Western societies about the functions and forms of stars and stardom.

The present study utilizes large-scale qualitative social media data from six top drivers, three Formula One and three F1 Esports Pro Series drivers, who represent different forms of success, nationalities, and association with a traditional sport institution. Instagram was chosen as the analyzed social media because it is a leading contemporary platform used by top athletes for presenting their professional image textually and visually.

The results show a clear difference in the volume, quality, and variety of content and discourses between F1 drivers and F1 esports drivers. Furthermore, the lack of team presence was apparent within esports stars' posts, underlining the fewer production forces and stakeholders behind the industry, signifying that esports stars have less socio-cultural echo than F1's. Sim racers also have less stardom variation, but their fans likely congregate on other media platforms. As for many professions, participants' work is primarily represented via a medium other than Instagram, namely broadcasting and streaming. However, the lack of intermedial synergy between these series at the driver level is surprising.

Both series are highly competitive and individualist, but, regarding stardom as a negotiable and contingent role between an individual and an audience, crafting and maintaining an image seems to depend on factors like team support and personal characteristics. While individual success, which is a combination of multiple factors, predictably correlates with popularity, a larger volume of posts does not guarantee more fan activity.

The lack of explicit team involvement with esports drivers in their personal Instagram posts stands out among the findings. These drivers' social media images carry generally minimal personal characteristics and display low production content, and their vicarious involvement with fans is scarce. F1 thrives on drama, close competition, and big, colorful personas, which was reflected by the amount of social media content highlighting big emotions and followers' interaction with said content. The ability of F1 esports to capture and capitalize off these aspects remains challenging.

As sim racing is currently lesser media spectacle, it is no wonder that esports drivers foreground their gaming skills. This lack of other content to foreground also exhibits how traditional sports stars have easier access to other fields and forms of fame and success, whereas competitive gaming largely only amounts to minor fame beyond the gaming world and its related sponsors, evident in the vast difference between drivers and sim racers' followers and like counts.

Based on the present analysis, it is apparent that, even if the themes to frame discourses for creating star images are relatively similar, the image and resources put into such processes are not. Then again, the career paths themselves largely differ; a career in motorsports takes years of development, dedication, and resources to even make it to lower series. In future studies, team and series social media accounts should be analyzed as well for how they contribute to driver images in total. Synergies between other motorsport and emotorsport franchises should also be compared.

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