Individuals, Representatives, and Racers – Instagram Images of F1 and F1 Esports Series Drivers

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Abstract

Aims: This article aims to deepen the understanding of how traditional motorsports and esports stars' images are represented and maintained in the form of individual social-media content and how they compare with one another. This will allow for a better understanding of the images of and variation between stars in Formula One (F1) and the F1 Esports Series as the synergy between these series continues to grow.

Methods and Results: The methods used were critical discourse analysis and close reading. The theorical frameworks featured Kellner's critical cultural theory and Dyer's and Christine Geraghty's star theories regarding Western societies.

The results showed a clear difference in the volume, quality, and variety of content and discourse between F1 drivers and F1 esports drivers (sim racers). 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 weight than F1's. Sim racers also had less variation in their stardom, but their fans are likely to congregate on other media platforms.

Conclusions: It appears that much of F1 esports stars' power derives from the real-life racing teams that provide the resources to create and maintain stardom regardless of an individual star's characteristics. Stakeholders seem to regard esports as less worthy of investment, viewing the industry as more of a superfluity related to brand image and visibility than a necessity. This subject requires further examination by including other media and continued scrutiny to determine whether these series drivers' images are growing more equivalent.

Keywords: Esports, Formula One, stardom, Instagram

Highlights

- Formula One and Formula One Esports stars' Instagram profiles vary regarding in their amount, quality, and breadth of content
- The significance of individual character and team bonding are explicit in F1 drivers' content
- The lack of team resources (and presence) is evident in F1 esports drivers' content
- Instagram seems to be a secondary medium to reach (new) fans for sim racers

Introduction

This article investigates the image differences between top F1 and F1 Esports Pro Series drivers by analysing their social-media posts on Instagram throughout 2021. The research questions are two: what kinds of images do these 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 build-up and maintenance of a certain driver-specific image or brand. As with other forms of stardom, sports-star characters and the images they have built vary, thus attracting different audiences and creating versatile fan behaviour **(1, 2)**. The present study sheds light on these unexamined areas of esports.

In this article, the term esports denotes organised competitive gaming. Emotorsports refers to various motorsports-themed titles within esports. Sim racing, a subgenre of emotorsports, refers to simulated racing games with a high degree of realism. Instagram was chosen as the analysed social-media platform because it is a leading contemporary platform used globally by various public figures to present their professional images textually and visually, thus simultaneously influencing the images of teams and brands **(3, 4)**.

Motorsports have been bound for decades by mediatisation and commercialisation in various ways **(5)**. Furthermore, gaming and motorsports have long shared a history, since the dawn of early racing games, which have often incorporated intertextual references to real racing series from the 1982 Pole Position to the 2014 released Assetto Corsa franchise **(6, 7)**. Since the mid-1990s, racing games have embraced realism and official licenses as a form of institutionalised acceptability, and the possibility of global online racing has given new value to them as products, especially as a platform to reach newer and larger audiences. Such games have varied from simulations, such as iRacing (published in 2008), to "simcades," like the 1997 launched Gran Turismo franchise, a mixture of simulation and arcade gameplay.

The desired credibility and attractiveness of racing games has had consequences: an increased level of competition, general acceptability of gaming as a form of competition, and growth in the use of simulation games as practice for real-life racing **(8)**. Ultimately, these trends have attracted the attention of motorsports teams, the automotive industry, and sponsors, simultaneously lifting the value and status of sim racing **(9, 10)**. When COVID-19 cancelled racing events, emotorsports gained new audiences on the order of hundreds of thousands **(11)**.

The synergy between these two different forms of competition has grown significantly in recent years. In the case of F1, this growth has been exponential. As a part of Liberty Media's (LM) takeover of F1's commercial rights, since 2017, the company has invested in attracting social-media visibility and other "new" media and channels ranging from Netflix to Twitch, including forming the official F1 Esports Series in 2017 **(12–14)**. Traditional motorsports have long had a relationship with linear, televised broadcasting, but the primary platform for emotorsports has been online streaming.

While F1 and its stars have become more approachable and generally popular through social media platforms, the drivers remain distant from their fans. Sim-racing stars, on the other hand, have become relatable and available within the highly competitive world of esports, which lacks the barriers to entry typical of traditional F1. Compared to F1, however, the emotorsports domain still lacks the history, physicality, and visibility of its over-70-years-old counterpart **(15, 16)**. Still, sim racing gets closer to realism than most other esports **(17)** The goal of this study is thus to further explore whether and how these differences manifest in the respective drivers' public images.

ESPORTS

The Instagram profiles of drivers analysed in pairs include 2021 world champions Max Verstappen (F1) and Jarno Opmeer (F1 Esports), Finns Valtteri Bottas (F1) and Joni Törmälä (F1 Esports), and McLaren drivers Lando Norris (F1) and Bari Baroumand (F1 Esports).

Methodology

Critical discourse analysis (CDA), which embraces the socio-political divisions of power and language and helps identify structures of language and communication, was used to examine the posts [18]. As a method, CDA assumes that, behind a text, there are some submissive (and oppressive) social relationships; hence, CDA is used to scrutinise the communicational practices that uphold and justify these reigning power relationships [19].

Fairclough's [20] CDA of communication situations is particularly suitable for this study, as it emphasises how individual texts and larger socio-cultural contexts signify each other. It employs three levels to display the power of ideology from the level of the text to the level of discourse practice, from where the text is produced and consumed all the way to social and cultural practice, including the textual and communicative situation [20]. Relevant discursive practices used by communities are network-like and formed from discourses and language: discourse is a language that represents social practices from a certain angle, and genre is the use of language that is related to its socially repeated practices [20].

The circularity among text, reader, and social context is an important feature of this analysis. This circularity helps conceptualise how the ideal audience might read these texts, make sense of them, and relate them to their own knowledge of motorsports, esports, and, most of all, to their existing image of a driver. To deepen the analysis of these connected parts, this study applied further close reading, the central principle of which entails interpreting materials multiple times, as such repetitive focusing on the same research materials exposes the text to in-depth analysis [21]. Close reading is not neutral, as all readers have presuppositions, but it still deepens one's understanding of the read material as, through repetition, readers discover new insights from the material while simultaneously distancing themselves from previous suppositions that may have coloured their previous insights [21]. The positionality behind the interpretation of these texts entailed a historical awareness of both series: while not having personally participated in any related competitions, the researcher has followed F1 closely since the mid-1990s and F1 Esports since its recent emergence and rise in global popularity.

Following CDA standards, a total of four discourses, separated into two pairs, were selected for analysis, emphasising essentially opposite features within the pairs while acknowledging that they might overlap. First, the analysis centred on how much team presence contributed to drivers' images in their content. Based on the previously described priors, the presence of a team was perceived to reflect the resource power differences between F1 and F1 Esports series, the former of which operates by immense financial advantage that can manifest in various forms of team omnipresence. Second, the analysis also investigated how the accounts fluctuate between professional and private (or the "off-stage"), a fluctuation that, in turn, is perceived to reflect differences in social position and power. The more established cultural status of F1 as a respected and valuable sport can manifest in their drivers' professionally focused social-media profiles in diverse ways.

Discourse pairs

- Individual presence and effort (driver) – group presence and effort (team)
- Driver at work – driver enjoying leisure

The classification of individual as *driver* involves clear signs of significance or focus being centred on the driver in question. This involves material in which drivers are embracing their own personal presence and/or significance in relation to their achievements and images of work—for example, images of them competing, doing promotional work, or celebrating (alone). In turn, the *team* classification involves group effort being clearly or explicitly present or being given credit for being one with the driver, chiefly regarding their successes. In such cases, team effort takes precedence over the driver or the brand and other individual members, such as in group celebrations, team members' working, promotional material, explicit tagging, and written embracing of team's work: in other words, how much the presence of an athlete and (acknowledging) team contribution creates the image of a driver, balancing power between a) active individual character and skill b) the surrounding resources and environment.

The classification of driver at *work* means that the post is strongly related to occupational themes. These involve competing, promoting, testing/practicing with other series drivers, and attending meetings. *Leisure* comprises the driver's time off from professional activities. This includes vacations, free time, practice and/or exercise without team professionals or colleagues, and other non-professional material ranging from wildlife pictures to memes. These two discourses categorise the active, versatile, and even spectacled public sports image statuses that drivers present as individuals on and off duty.

These discourses were also chosen to determine how occupation and the possible influence of employers (teams) may affect drivers' personal social media images. Although among professional athletes and gamers the division between personal and professional image content can be relative, the power of employers and third parties (such as sponsors and associations) may set limitations on ideal image. This can result in embracing the values and interests of such groups. These represented images (as texts) are decoded in specific socio-cultural contexts by audiences who negotiate these and contribute to image building. In other words, drivers are "read" and mediated onwards as cultural texts.

Theoretical premises

The first frame comes from Dyer (22), who has described stars as unique individual agents with their own personal ideologies who are not only produced and consumed but also publicly signified. Stars are hence not solely consumable conceptual figures because of markets manipulated for audiences (22). The criteria that determine which stars become successful are deeply rooted in why and how audience members might relate to them, reflecting the dualistic negotiation among the production forces (referring, for example, to mass media, producers, promotion, and distribution) behind stars and how the public perceives them (22).

As in this study, the status of being a star is not tied just to aiming for or even attaining high achievements or performances; instead, stardom involves ensuring that one has both enough production support (from team, sponsors, and sport establishment) and a vast audience to remain popular.

The second theoretical frame comes from Geraghty (23), who has reworked the concepts, features, and factors of stardom espoused by Dyer. She (23) proposes a division through which stars can be approached as celebrities (fame as a lifestyle and lives outside of their work), professionals (fame mediated through their work and undermining their private lives, meaning that consistent identities and characters might be hard to distinguish from one other), or performers (work and private lives are included but emphasised by the quality of their skills with higher cultural value). Each of these categories overlaps to some extent

regarding the star in question (23). The key is to see stardom as something that is simultaneously created and exploited in different media and entertainment formats (23).

In support of this, the consumption of esports has been found to depend on a multitude of factors among fans, with varying interest towards traditional sports, but implying that esports fan identification is oriented less towards teams or players (who can achieve celebrity-like status) and more about the game itself compared to traditional sports and their fans' motives (24, 25).

These concepts and notions regarding stardom naturally transition the theoretical frame into Kellner's theory of media culture, which is based upon the lineage of critical theory (26). According to Kellner, media has become a *force* in culture, socialisation, politics, and social life (26). He finds media culture in capitalist countries to primarily be a form of culture that seeks financial benefit by selling products to large audiences, which requires the products to be relatable at a societal level (26). Kellner (27) also stresses that spectacles mediate reigning feelings, needs, political representations, and discourses of power. Such a framing helps read culture: how media culture and spectacles affect and reflect society instead of functioning solely as entertainment (27). As for media sports and esports, they are inseparable from spectacle and commerce.

Research data

The present study uses qualitative social-media data in the form of over 780 social-media posts from six top drivers. Because the drivers are celebrated public racing figures with public social-media posts as part of their professional personae, the present study did not necessitate an ethics review according to the Finnish Research Integrity Guidelines (28).

Although Instagram is currently the most-used public social-media platform among F1 drivers (29), gamers tend to resort to Instagram following YouTube and Facebook (30). Ultimately, identifying and entertaining fans via social media are vital for esports players' and teams' popularity (31). There are also larger structural differences between these groups. For example, the fan and team support for F1 is much more extensive than that of F1 esports (32, 33). There are also drastic salary differences between the two groups (34, 35) (Table 1). This sets strong priors for analysis. It is logical that some differences between the two groups derive from their social-media profiles' being crafted in these different contexts.

Table 1. Series media popularity and top salaries.

Formula One
Social media followers: 49.1m (2021, 40% growth from 2020)
Cumulative TV audience: 1.55bn (2021, 4% growth from 2020)
Race attendance: 2.69m (2021, pre-COVID-19 4.69m attendees)
Highest driver base salary in 2022: Lewis Hamilton, $40m

F1 Esports Series
Social media engagements (Pro Championship): 10.5m (262.5% growth from 2020)
Cumulative digital views: 23m (47% growth from 2020, 13.8m views from Pro Championship)
Cumulative TV audience: 858k (313.5% growth from 2020)
Highest driver prize money in 2022: $93.7k for 1st and 2nd place; Lucas Blakeley and Frederik Rasmussen

The drivers, three from both F1 and the F1 Esports Series, were chosen in comparative pairings based on three principal criteria:

> 1) reigning champions of 2021: Max Verstappen and Jarno Opmeer
> 2) same nationality (Finland): Valtteri Bottas and Joni Törmälä
> 3) same team (McLaren F1 Team): Lando Norris and Bari Boroumand.

The pairs represent different forms of success, nationalities, and association with traditional sport institutions. These criteria were chosen for multiple reasons. Firstly, it seemed ideal to examine the popularity and image of the (then-) reigning champions, as it is safe to assume that these figures would be significant to and meaningfully representative of the sport. Second, two drivers from the same country, preferably one that is smaller yet historically successful in motorsports, would mitigate possible geographic influences. Finland was selected due to its success in both motorsports and professional esports. Third, pairing two drivers racing for a team with a long heritage while competing in different racing series could mitigate the influence that a particular team's popularity might have on the findings. As McLaren has a history as one of the most successful and oldest active F1 teams, including eight constructors' and twelve drivers' championships, and participates in the IndyCar and Extreme E Series, it was chosen as the representative team. The data were collected between 3–16 October 2022.

Table 2. Information about F1 drivers.

Formula One drivers:
Max Emilian Verstappen (@maxverstappen1)
Birthdate: 30 September 1997
Represented nationality: Dutch
Race debut year: 2015 (test driver in 2014)
Teams: Scuderia Toro Rosso (2014–2016) Oracle Red Bull Racing (2016–)
Wins (by the end of 2021): 20
2021 championship finish: 1st
Notable prior championship finishes: 3rd in 2020 and 2019

Valtteri Viktor Bottas (@valtteribottas)
Birthdate: 28 August 1989
Represented nationality: Finnish
Race debut year: 2013 (test driver in 2012)
Teams: Williams Racing (2012–2016), Mercedes-AMG Petronas Formula One Team (2017–2021), Alfa Romeo F1 Team (2022–)
Wins (by the end of 2021): 10
2021 championship finish: 3rd
Notable prior championship finishes: 2nd in 2020 and 2019, 3rd in 2017

Lando Norris (@landonorris)
Birthdate: 13 November 1999
Represented nationality: British
Race debut year: 2019 (test driver in 2018)
Team: McLaren F1 Team (2018–)
Wins (by the end of 2021): 0
2021 championship finish: 7th
Notable prior championship finishes: 6th in 2020

Table 3. Information about F1 esports drivers.

<u>**F1 Esports Pro Series drivers:**</u>
Jarno Opmeer (@jarnoopmeer)
Birthdate: 11 April 2000
Represented nationality: Dutch
Race debut year: 2019
Teams: Renault–Vitality (2019), Alfa Romeo Racing Orlen Esports Team (2020), Mercedes-AMG Petronas Esports Team (2021–)
Wins (by the end of 2021): 9
2021 championship finish: 1st
Notable prior championship finishes: 1st in 2020

Joni Törmälä (@jonitormala)
Birthdate: 15 August 1996
Represented nationality: Finnish
Race debut year: 2017
Previous team(s): Red Bull Racing Esports (2018–2019), Scuderia AlphaTauri Esports Team (2020–)
Wins (by the end of 2021): 0
2021 championship finish: 11th
Notable prior championship finishes: 7th in 2018

Driver: Bardia Boroumandgohar (@baribroumand)
Birthdate: XX.XX.2002/2003 (age unclear)
Represented nationality: Iranian
Race debut year: 2020
Teams: Mercedes-AMG Petronas Esports Team (2020), McLaren Shadow (2021–)
Wins (by the end of 2021): 0
2021 championship finish: 5th th
Notable prior championship finishes: 21st in 2020

Max Verstappen is a Belgian-Dutch F1 driver from a motorsports family who won the F1 championship in 2021 with team Oracle Red Bull Racing, breaking the seven-year dominance of Mercedes. He also holds such records as the youngest F1 race debutant and race winner.

Jarno Opmeer is a Dutch F1 Esports Series driver who won series championships in 2020 and 2021. He has also competed in the Formula E virtual series. Opmeer has a background in traditional motorsports, competing in karting and lower Formula series. He switched to F1 esports in 2019 after his racing career stagnated after 2017.

Valtteri Bottas is a Finnish F1 driver who represented Mercedes from 2017 to 2021, racing with seven-time world champion Lewis Hamilton and contributing to five constructors' championships. He was regarded generally as the team's number-two driver after replacing then-champion Nico Rosberg in 2017, when the latter retired unexpectedly.

Joni Törmälä is a Finnish sim racer driving for Scuderia AlphaTauri. He began his career in 2009 and represented Red Bull in F1 Esports Series' first year in 2017. Törmälä has finished four times in the drivers' championship top ten, helped win the constructors' championship in 2019, and had the highest number of fastest laps in 2020 F1 esports.

Lando Norris is a Belgian–British driver for McLaren Mercedes and is regarded as one of most talented drivers in the sport. He began his stint with McLaren in 2017 and debuted as an F1 driver in 2019. He is also an avid sim racer and gamer.

Bari Boroumand is an Iranian sim racer who joined McLaren's sim racing team in 2021. His background includes karting and racing in Formula 4. In 2019, he won the F1 Esports Challenger Series, progressed to driving for Mercedes in 2020, and finished fifth in the 2021 drivers' standing.

Results

The content varied between both series and drivers: F1 drivers' posts ranged from 150 to over 300 and F1 esports drivers' from only three to almost 100. There were also differences in Instagram content variation and posting cycles. This finding underlines the expected differences between F1 and F1 Esports drivers, the former using social media more effectively while enjoying greater audience interests and financial benefits. All the analysed data are organised in Supplement 1, and citations of specific posts refer to this supplemental file.

Figure 1. Relationship between Instagram follows and followers per driver by 27 October 2022.
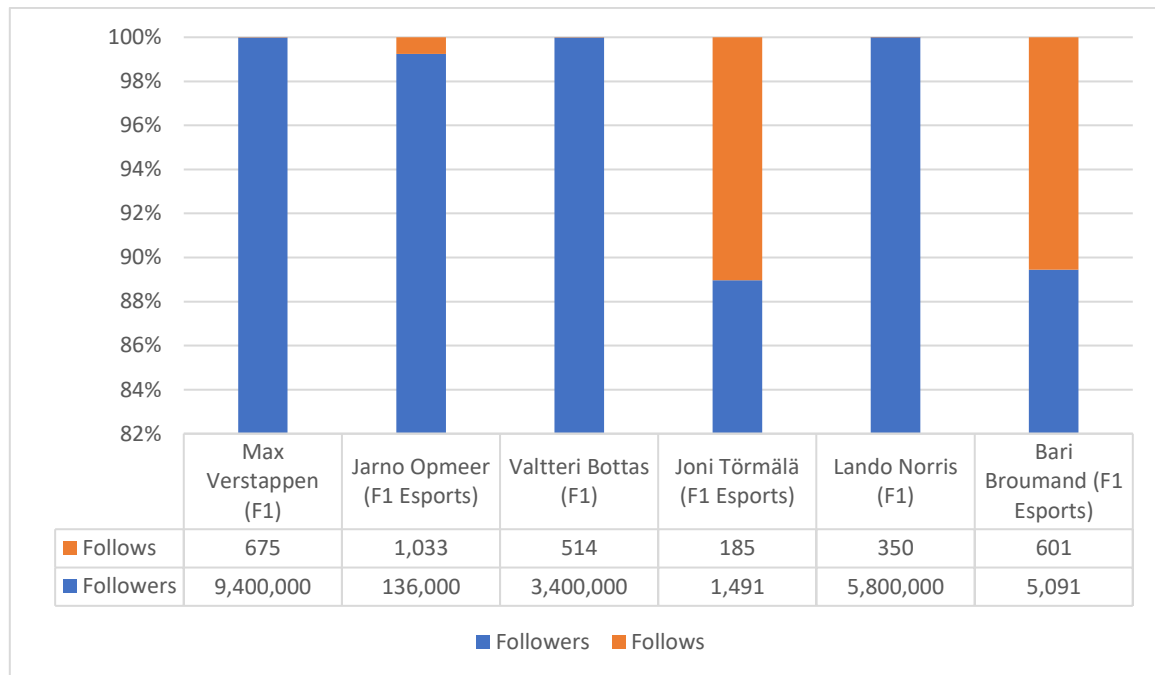

	Max Verstappen (F1)	Jarno Opmeer (F1 Esports)	Valtteri Bottas (F1)	Joni Törmälä (F1 Esports)	Lando Norris (F1)	Bari Broumand (F1 Esports)
Follows	675	1,033	514	185	350	601
Followers	9,400,000	136,000	3,400,000	1,491	5,800,000	5,091

■ Followers ■ Follows

Figure 2. Posts by medium per driver in 2021

	Max Verstappen (F1)	Jarno Opmeer (F1 Esports)	Valtteri Bottas (F1)	Joni Törmälä (F1 Esports)	Lando Norris (F1)	Bari Broumand (F1 Esports)
Photos	206	43	271	10	140	1
Videos	17	55	22	3	6	2
Photo(s) and video(s) in a single post	4	0	0	0	3	0

■ Photos ■ Videos ■ Photo(s) and video(s) in a single post
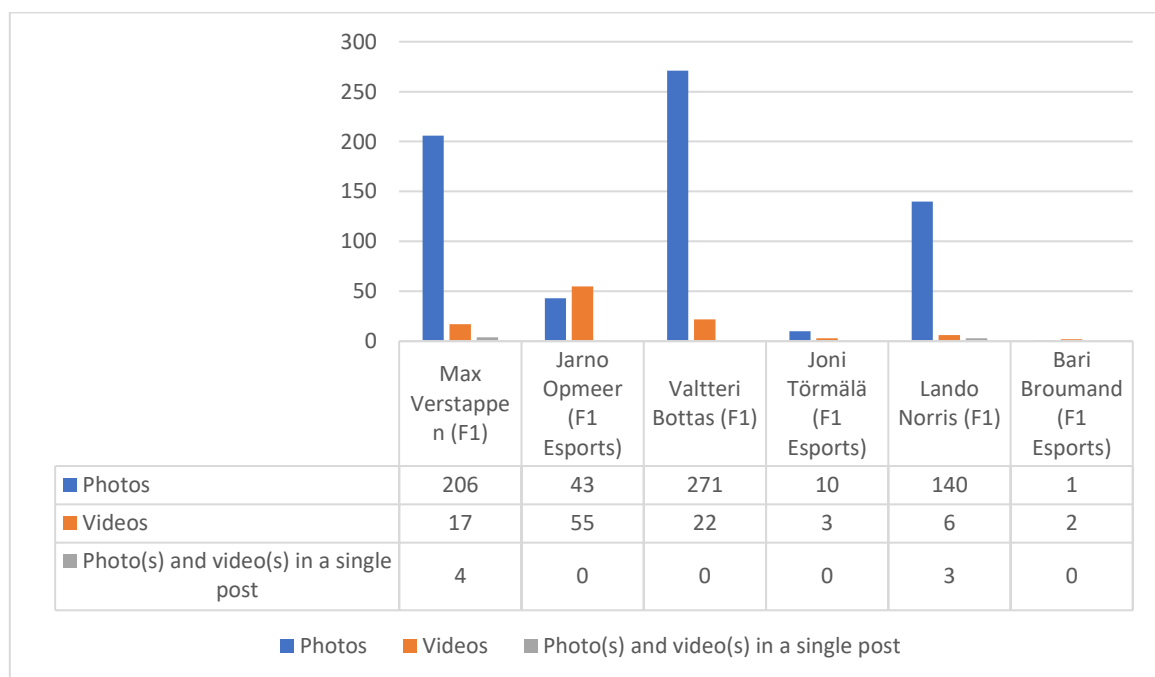
Figure 3. Likes and views per driver in 2021.

	Max Verstappen (F1)	Jarno Opmeer (F1 Esports)	Valtteri Bottas (F1)	Joni Törmälä (F1 Esports)	Lando Norris (F1)	Bari Broumand (F1 Esports)
■ Likes	107,576,504	883,961	30,488,171	2,538	74,517,332	3,550
■ Views	34,505,577	2,676,741	11,216,846	5,094	8,451,920	24,343

■ Likes ■ Views
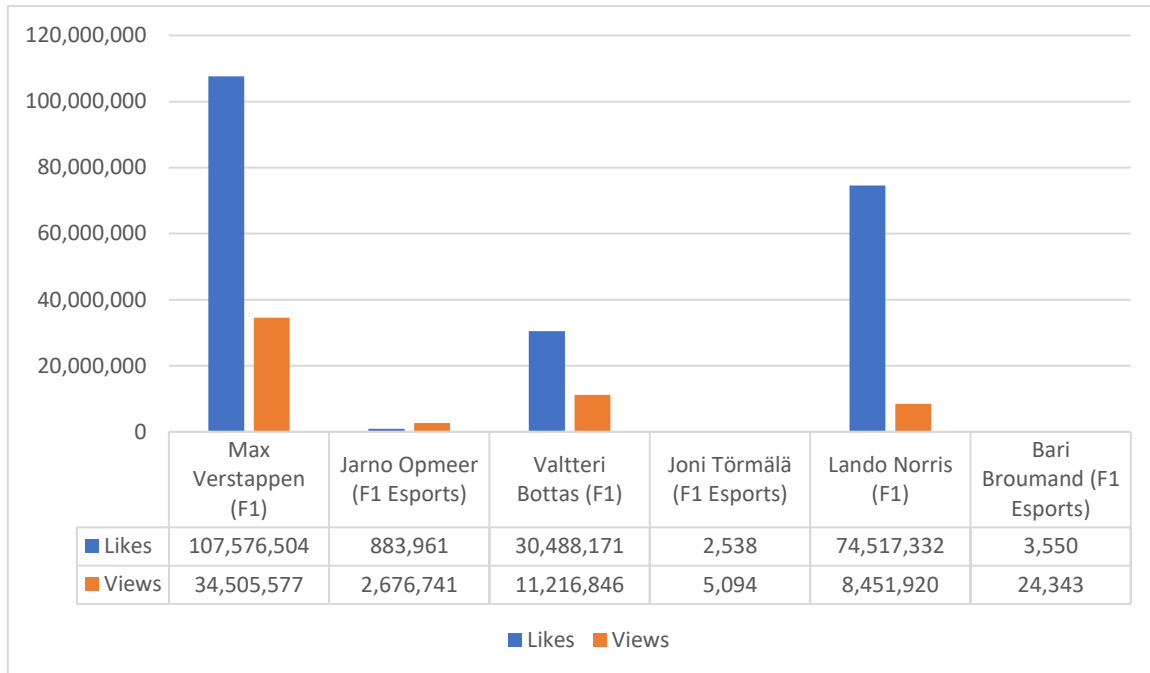
Figure 4. Discourse in posts per driver in 2021.

	Max Verstappen (F1)	Jarno Opmeer (F1 Esports)	Valtteri Bottas (F1)	Joni Törmälä (F1 Esports)	Lando Norris (F1)	Bari Baroumand (F1 Esports)
■ Driver	204	92	292	13	148	3
■ Team	90	5	210	3	57	3
■ Work	176	47	199	10	101	3
■ Leisure	56	51	76	6	23	2
■ Total amount of posts	227	98	293	13	149	3

■ Driver ■ Team ■ Work ■ Leisure ■ Total amount of posts
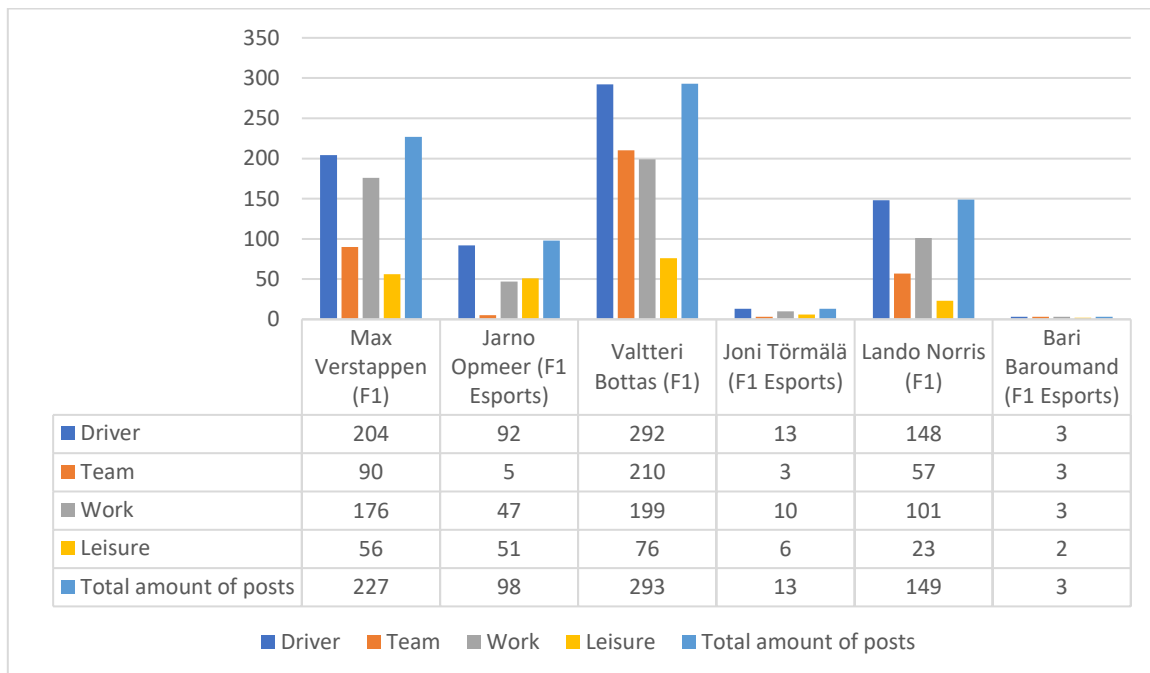
Figure 5. Ratio of discourses per driver and represented series posts.

	Max Verstappen (F1)	Jarno Opmeer (F1 Esports)	Valtteri Bottas (F1)	Joni Törmälä (F1 Esports)	Lando Norris (F1)	Bari Baroumand (F1 Esports)	F1 overall ratio	F1 Esports Pro Series overall ratio
■ Driver	89.80%	93.80%	99.60%	100%	99.30%	100%	96.20%	94.70%
■ Team	39.60%	5.10%	71.60%	23%	38.20%	100%	53.30%	9.60%
■ Work	77.50%	47.90%	67.90%	76.90%	67.70%	100%	71.10%	52.60%
■ Leisure	24.60%	52%	25.90%	46.10%	15.40%	66.60%	23.10%	51.70%

■ Driver   ■ Team   ■ Work   ■ Leisure

Verstappen's social-media posts seem versatile and created with high visual production values. He posted regularly, both through race weekends and during season breaks. Team involvement in his profile was consistent and present both explicitly and implicitly in pictures or texts but rarely with hashtags or tagging, which implies sufficient pre-existing fan engagement. The division between an individual driver and a brand (as a driver and team member) blurs in his posts. Teamwork, dedication to achieving the best results, and pre- and post-race excitement at the events were present throughout the season, underlining the element of "we/us" (team Red Bull).

His feed comprised pictures of himself in various activities from paddock to podium and from pit box to track walks (MV #24–30) and from physical training (MV #223) to PR responsibilities (MV # 156). Free-time (non-promotional or working out) posts were not very common, but they were popular among fans when measured by likes. Racing footage was generally featured less than other activities during Grand Prix weekends. Leisure posts ranged from family and relationship time to exercise and sports, as well as two posts of sim racing. Nationality was also expressed occasionally: in his case, this was most often done by giving credit to Dutch fans, the "Orange Army," during races (MV #112–114). Fans were also addressed directly in videos about unique merchandise.

Verstappen's social-media image seems to fit more within the category of performer than professional, as well as exhibiting certain celebrity features, as his popularity and steady success have given him a solid reputation synonymous with the success of team Red Bull. Discourse-wise, although Verstappen's success is "provided" by Red Bull, his individual skills and achievements are crucial to the team's staying competitive, thus embracing collaboration. This was evident during race-weekend postings and celebration content and phrases embracing "we." Regarding Kellner's media theory, Verstappen and Red Bull seemed to be presented as being in symbiosis and an ideal product: an achieving and determined individual with the right team spirit and team around him.

Opmeer's content material and production seemed to involve fewer resources. The most prominent element of Opmeer's social-media material was gaming (leisure/practice or "work" events), but the distinction between practice races and series races were initially difficult to delineate (JO #12, 26, 45). In general, team involvement manifested as a minimal aspect of

Opmeer's driver image. Even if Opmeer did capture his and his team's success (JO #5–6) occasionally, much of his material concentrates on his personal skills in non-championship races.

While he perhaps emphasised his individuality, Opmeer did display gratitude to his fans by posting every time he achieved a new substantial number of followers on platforms, such as Twitch or YouTube (JO #11, #21).

Along with racing videos, gratitude for his increasing social-media follower amounts and (sim racing) memes (JO #16, 83) signalled that Opmeer's account was oriented towards a gaming audience. His past in motorsports was also brought up. Reflecting Kellner's theory, Opmeer seemed to be a professional performer who portrayed his level of success and versatile sports history and supplemented this portrayal with details about his private life, such as holidays (JO #2). Opmeer's discourses embraced individual skills as contributors to his career more than Verstappen's did. Overall, the data signalled more image liberties taken regarding his posts despite expressing himself mainly through his profession but also lacked the resources and external support compared to the team and sponsor visibility of Verstappen.

Table 4. Post samples: The champions

Max Verstappen (F1)

Most liked post: 2021 Dec 17: photo about FIA Prize given with driver's trophy. 2,169,868 likes. Discourses: individual, work.

Least liked post: 2021 Feb 24: video about Carnext (sponsor) helmet. 84,715 likes (352,601 views). Discourses: individual, work.

Most viewed video: 2021 Dec 15, Red Bull Racing team celebrations. 4,060,801 views (1,013,312 likes). Discourses: team, work, individual.

Jarno Opmeer (F1 Esports)

Most liked post: 2021 Dec 16: photo about being F1 2021 Esports Champion. 31,137 likes. Discourses: individual, work.

Least liked post: 2021 Mar 28: video about a hot lap in Bahrain. 1,618 likes (12,175 views). Discourses: individual, leisure.

Most viewed video: 2021 Jun 12: Interlagos circuit (Brazilian Grand Prix) wet-weather world record. 150,327 views (12,780 likes). Discourses: individual, leisure, work.

Apart from his struggles as a driver and tagging the team in most of his posts, the departure from Mercedes was emphasised in Bottas's multi-minute videos, wherein he reviewed his time with the team (VB #6, 8). One narrative through these discourses centres around overcoming struggles through perseverance and embracing his (Finnish) characteristics: an athletic team player who likes nature and coffee (VB #45, 89; the latter two being Nordic stereotypes), and collaborations, such as owning a share of a Finnish ice-hockey team (VB #236).

Bottas thanked his fans for their support, including through giveaways (VB #7), a farewell video (VB #20), birthday wishes he got (VB #111), and for achieving two million followers on Instagram (VB #237). Like Verstappen, his posts revolved less around racing itself. For instance, his most-liked images are about travel and leisure (VB #48) and work-related posts with emotional weight (VB #73).

In this way, the star image of Bottas is mostly as a professional performer. Regarding media culture theory, he represents a narrative of persistence and patience within the highly competitive and even cruel world of professional sports. This humanised persona gives him and his fans more room to negotiate and find features to which to relate as his career image evolves. Regarding discourses, the content signals both individual freedom and loyalty to his ultimate employer by taking a stance balanced between independence and team expectations. As Mercedes was the top team with Red Bull in 2021, with vast resources, high performance and finishes taken as given, but simultaneously he had to consider the durability of his career and personal brand.

Törmälä's content contained less material overall and displayed less polished content than that of Opmeer. Chiefly, Törmälä's posts underlined his personal skills and success, with some reflection interwoven.

Although Törmälä's posts were individually oriented, they did not explicitly address competitions or everyday life. The posts were mainly about gaming, particularly the fastest laps, but this was largely gaming as leisure and training (JT #14). His team was also rarely explicitly mentioned, but there were subtle references to Red Bull, such as posts with an energy drink in the background (JT #10) and logos (JT #8). Results-wise, he did embrace some achievements, such as an image of the trophy for the fastest laps (JT #13). He also included aspects of his personal life in connection to his gaming, such as an image of his home office displaying a new sim rig and a fridge full of energy drinks (JT #8–9). Contrary to Bottas, his nationality was not explicitly expressed, nor were his leisure time or hobbies.

With this persona, Törmälä seems to fit in as a professional but with few features associated with stardom. Regarding social context and his background, he could be categorised as an individual professional with some industry backing but limited fan reception. His image discourses express a tone similar to that of Opmeer, but Törmälä has little room for self-expression apart from work (e.g., few to none mentions of holidays, free time, or humorous content), which signals a lack of interest in or resources with which to build a distinctive and content-rich public image, since many of his posts are about his ability to drive the fastest laps (JT #6, 9, 11) or overall performance (JT #1, 13).

Table 5. Post samples: The Finns

Valtteri Bottas (F1)

Most liked post: 2021 Sep 6: photo about joining Alfa Romeo 2022, 662,917 likes.
Discourses: team, work, individual.

Least liked post: 2021 Oct 23: video about preparing to drive – "Ready to rumble", 28,268 likes (103,576 views). Discourses: team, individual, work.

Most viewed video: 2021 Mar 22: "It's race week" (snaps finger and changes to race outfit), 1,459,181 views (108,391 likes). Discourses: individual, work, team.

Joni Törmälä (F1 Esports)

Most liked post: 2021 Mar 25: photo about sim rig provided by all the partners, 296 likes.
Discourses: individual, work, leisure, team.

Least liked post: 2021 Feb 9: video about Brazil Grand Prix hot lap ahead of final, 1,414 views (62 likes).
Discourses: individual, leisure, work.

Most viewed video: 2021 Jul 15: world record lap of Austrian Grand Prix, 2,564 views (165 likes).
Discourses: individual, leisure, work.

Norris had the fewest posts of the three F1 drivers, but his posts were highly liked. He had more followers than Bottas (but fewer than Verstappen) despite his youth and relative lack of achievements. Based on these numbers, it seems that he has a solid fan base and a relatable image.

Norris was the only F1 driver who included non-sim-racing gaming posts by giving visibility to his team (and lifestyle brand) Quadrant, which began competing in the Halo game franchise (LN #4). His posts were also the most informal and irregular of the F1 drivers. He also had the fewest videos, which were generally short.

Again, individuality was a strong emphasis of his discourse, as his posts focused less explicitly on his team and more on his individual characteristics, doling out praise through selected pictures and texts individually (LN #38–40). Despite strong connections to McLaren, his image seems to put him in a position that allows him to express himself and gain fans by combining a carefree attitude with professionalism. The discourses seem to suggest that the image of Norris is a combination of team synergy (LN #118, 132), and embrace of personal style and space, including reflecting football results (LN #20), and golfing (LN #23) with self-irony (LN # 126). This combination is ideal, as McLaren provides Norris with competitive working conditions and resources, and Norris represents a profile of a young competitive driver who stands out through his easy-going nature and off-work content, which he has the power to produce (LN #70). Based on this dynamic, he best matches the performer category but with a celebrity-professional status in the gaming community.

Boroumand's case is the most contradictory. He had more followers than Törmälä but over 30 times fewer than Opmeer, and he had only three posts from 2021: an announcement and two lap videos. His material was individually oriented but embraced a team presence explicitly or through tags. He also tagged his 2021 teammates, reinforcing a team-oriented image (BB #3). The separation between leisure and work is difficult to discern from his posts. Despite his lack of posts, however, the number of followers and likes garnered suggest that his material and image are popular.

With little material available, Boroumand would appear solely as a professional star. He is gaining status, and his material would define him as a driver who can benefit from the support of the cultural industry. He did not seem, however, to have gotten many resources from McLaren with which to produce content, or it did not seem relevant to them. With or without a personal interest to produce content, the material implies that Boroumand did not have much power to build his own image on Instagram. Considering this and the relatively small cultural role Iran plays in global motorsports, his relative popularity is striking. Hence, his image has very little leeway: he is tied to the team but also represented his image narrowly, with streaming-like content.

The case of Boroumand also demonstrates that the volume of posts does not necessarily correlate with popularity in the form of followers and likes. Therefore, it is justifiable to consider his image work on other platforms and/or outside of social media. The limited amount of material and discourses of his non-distinctive profile imply a lack of personal and team involvement to post and assist with resources and capital to produce content for their sim racer.

Table 6. Post samples: Drivers of a racing institution

Lando Norris (F1)

Most liked post: 2021 Dec 12: photo congratulating champion Max Verstappen, 1,490,789 likes.
Discourses: individual.

Least liked post: 2021 Feb 4: photo about McLaren cars, 181,363 likes.
Discourses: individual, leisure.

Most viewed video: 2021 Mar 8: "*It was a nice game of bowling*" – the starting crash of the Hungarian Grand Prix,
2,483,011 views (576 947 likes). Discourses: individual, team, work.

Bari Boroumand (F1 Esports)

Most liked post: 2021 Aug 23: photo about his "proud" announcement to join McLaren's esports team, 1,463 likes.
Discourses: individual, team, work.

Least liked post: 2021 Dec 21: Jeddah (Saudi-Arabian Grand Prix) world record lap, 996 likes (8,690 views). Discourses: individual, leisure, team, work.

Most viewed video: 2021 Dec 30: Portimao (Portuguese Grand Prix) world record lap, 15 653 views (1,091 likes).
Discourses: individual, leisure, team, work.

Summary of findings

Both F1 and F1 Esports are highly competitive, but, regarding stardom, F1 drivers seem more versatile due to the supreme resources and power they have compared to esports drivers. From their Instagram content and follower activity, F1 drivers seem to enjoy a higher socio-cultural status, more financial resources (contracts and sponsors), and broader (traditional) media visibility.

Being successful in both sports undoubtedly contributes to driver popularity, which is a combination of multiple factors, including available resources, but posting more content does not guarantee increased Instagram fan activity regarding followers and likes. These results would seem to support the idea that, after reaching a certain amount of stable success, skill and talent are taken as given, and other aspects, particularly those off the track, take precedence within the star's media-image and content production.

As sim racing is currently less of a media spectacle than many traditional motorsports, 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 amounts to only minor fame beyond the gaming world and its related sponsors. For example, F1 drivers have had possibilities to display their skill at jet-skiing (MV #87–90), rallying (VB #290), and addressing live audiences of thousands (LN# 72). Apart from displaying their skills and trophies, esports drivers seem pleased with city vacations (JO #1, 17) or new equipment (JT #10). Opmeer stands out from other esports drivers on this front, as he was able to purchase himself a sports car (JO #47).

In both sports, discourses of work and leisure are sometimes difficult to separate, but the discourse of team is harder to distinguish from that of driver mostly for F1 drivers. Despite

individual effort and significance being the most common discourse, leisure-activity and group-effort (team) posts are explicit among F1 drivers. These include, for example, anticipated preparations for the racing season (LN # 143), group celebrations (MV #38), and gratitude (VB #100). Personal attributes and leisure are also less visible among sim racers.

Regarding discourse ratios between the series, that of the individual driver was less surprisingly embraced in both. Team, and the power and resources provided by the employer, were significantly less present in esports drivers' content. Work was more often included in F1 drivers' material, whereas esports drivers posted relatively more often leisure-related content, although there was clear overlap, especially considering their lower overall amount of content.

One common feature was fan recognition, albeit expressed differently. F1 driver fans were more often addressed as consumers of products (MV #16, VB #7, LN #138), whereas esports drivers, albeit mostly Opmeer (JO #63, #75), had a more dynamic relationship with their fans. Another similarity was the lack of open criticism towards other series competitors, employers, sponsors, and series establishment, although disappointment due to racing incidents (VB #11, LN #62) and bad gaming behaviour was addressed (JO #92).

The range of roles was also uneven: celebrity status rarely fit as these drivers' primary category and only for the F1 drivers. Performer and professional seem the most ideal categories for F1, while sim racers operate more exclusively as professionals in their field without explicit depth of character.

The lack of intermedial synergy between these series at the driver level on Instagram was surprising. References to sim racing or gaming by F1 drivers were limited (MV #101, LN #3), as was direct contact with on-track motorsports by esports drivers. Apart from announcing contracts with representative F1 Esports teams (JO #95, BB #3), Opmeer also posted some retrospective material of his prior years competing in karting (JO #41) and Formula Renault series (JO # 59).

Based on this social-media data, the F1 drivers both visually and textually expressed close ties to the teams for which they were working, underlining motivation, synergy, loyalty, and success. The commercial success and synergies around F1 partly explain the strong emphasis on (social) media content production, as teams have professionals responsible for press and PR duties. Although representing F1 teams through esports, the sim racers seemed to have less content production support and obligations associated with F1 Esports. The popularity and salary differences between the two series manifested systematically through Instagram content: F1 Esports drivers seemed to lag F1 drivers in content, resources, power, and follower activity. Esports teams also do not seem to be actively involved with their drivers' content (production).

Discussion

The lack of explicit team involvement with esports drivers in their personal Instagram posts stands out among the findings. Esports stars appear as professionals in their emerging field without structured professional images on this platform—perhaps apart from Opmeer, whose profile comes closer to imitating more versatile F1 stars. Conversely, Norris's image slightly overlaps with the elements of esports drivers, as, although infrequently, he does post about sim racing and esports.

This raises the question of whether stakeholders perceive sim racers as valuable representatives or as more superfluous. Putting potential resources into the emotorsport-driver content creation would likely increase the reflection of stakeholders' bias in drivers'

posts but also affect the nature and mindset of the sport. Other overlapping image elements between the series vary. F1 thrives on drama, close competition, and big, colourful personas, as reflected in the amount of social-media content highlighting big emotions and followers' interaction with said content. The ability of F1 esports to capture and capitalise on these aspects remains challenging.

Considering posted content and the resources and power of drivers, some observations stand out. First, F1 drivers seem to have better abilities to build their social-media images on features other than just their work. This is something they can afford, and do consciously, such as with Bottas, who actively published content about his private time and lifestyle, such as cycling and travelling. Second, contrary to the bias that tagging and the use of hashtags would seem less necessary for globally known stars, Bottas was the one most regularly using these. The need for drivers to expand their popularity and visibility is present also in F1. Third, content about actual competition was lacking in both F1 and F1 Esports accounts and absent from material involving racing against other drivers of the series. This most likely due to broadcasting and streaming rights and limiting the visibility of competing teams' drivers and their sponsors. Finally, regarding types of content, it is obvious that F1 Esports drivers more commonly stream videos than do F1 drivers, who do sim racing irregularly and more as a hobby. Regardless of F1 Esports drivers' power limitations, as they mostly published videos about practising or open-lobby racing, their content addressed (gaming) fans dynamically and less as consumers, including exhibiting their record-breaking driving skills (BB #1, JT #7) and mishaps (JO #24, 63).

In esports, the demand for an image that has characteristics of the excessive celebrity lifestyle and the leeway of an efficient performer are still perhaps not as emphasised as in traditional media sports, perhaps due to lower institutionalisation, popularity, and visibility (36–39). In this article, media sports are regarded as spectator-friendly, entertaining sports with a notable global following and revenue accompanied by broad media coverage (40). Even if the synergy between these two series has grown, F1 esports drivers' relative lack of resources shows that such synergy remains low. As competitive gaming is still gaining a socio-cultural foothold, stakeholder motivation and general interest are still minor compared to traditional sports, but the evolving potential of esports has led to significant speculation on the subject (41,42). Sim racing's possibilities may indeed surpass those of other esports due to its close imitative simulation of on-track racing, thus contributing to the industry's realism and physicality (43, 44).

Therefore, regarding Kellner's (26) notion about the functions of media culture, all these drivers manifest the entertainment and spectacle of media sports, but the exciting, escapist, and variable images of culturally and economically powerful F1 series drivers are far more popular than those of F1 Esports drivers on Instagram, based on fan involvement. As for Fairclough's (20) CDA, the differences in the quality and volume of circulated material underline the still generally inferior status of emotorsports compared to motorsports. The popularity of simulated racing is still slowly gaining wider socio-cultural acknowledgement, especially in the sphere of media sports, despite the leverage of traditional motorsports and popularity during the COVID-19 lockdowns.

For esports drivers to gain Instagram visibility, new fans, and status with the fewer media image-building resources they seem to have available, posting regularly personalised content alongside their gamer-friendly videos of streamed sim racing and practising could be beneficial. Adding the presence of their team and other motorsports content might also associate them more closely with the realm of traditional motorsports, but character and merit are still required to build a popular image.

Cultural contexts and the position of motorsports and gaming also presents questions, such as the popularity difference between Bari Boroumand and Joni Törmälä. In this case, it is plausible that Boroumand is in the position of a regional pioneer, whereas the achievements of Törmälä have not gained wider attention, perhaps due to the high native expectations regarding motorsports success.

The career paths and expectations themselves differ hugely; a career in motorsports takes years of development, dedication, and resources even to make it to lower series. In addition, the 2021 F1 season had 22 Grand Prix races from late March to mid-December, whereas all 12 F1 Esports Pro Series Championship races were held between mid-October and mid-December. In future studies, team and series social-media accounts should be analysed as well for how they contribute to driver images.

As F1 Esports Series drivers are currently building their images with fewer resources, it will be interesting to see whether their images evolve to align more closely with those of F1 drivers, as the industry continues to gain more money and visibility. Still, the growth and development of esports approaching the level of traditional sports might have undesirable outcomes regarding F1 Esports' accessibility, competition, and healthy ecosystem.

Considerations

In general, esports professionals tend to be most active in gamer-friendly, live-streaming media platforms like Twitch. It is possible that, for F1 Esports drivers, Instagram is not a priority medium to the same extent as it is for F1 drivers. On the other hand, even minimal content output with limited resources and expectations might be cost-efficient for esports drivers. The differences in social-media habits due to the nature of each sport remains a limitation. A database search for studies concerning the activity of sports and esports professionals on Instagram and other social media did not yield relevant results.

Secondly, this research does not answer for the possible longer-term changes in content. The resources available and provided for drivers are contingent throughout their careers.

Although a qualitative study like this does not aim at sample representativeness, the choices regarding the data set limits on the research. The focus on one social-media platform and the chosen drivers set a basis for more wide-ranging research in the future.

Conclusions

This article set out to investigate how traditional motorsports and esports stars' images are represented and potentially differ by analysing the Instagram content of three F1 and three F1 Esports Pro Series drivers from 2021 with close reading and discourse analysis. The findings suggest that the media representation and image of F1 Esports stars are not as closely tied to their series as those of F1 stars, nor do F1 Esports stars seem to have the needed resources (financial, social/labour, and visibility) to create personal content as versatile and spectacled as that of F1 stars. These findings illuminate the growing but perhaps inadequate synergy between the F1 franchise and the evolving strands of sim racing.

The stardom of esports drivers was almost solely professional, and their content had lower production value in terms of variety, spectacle, and refinement, whereas F1 drivers fit into the category of performer, with features of the celebrity and professional categories. Regarding content and discourse, there appears to be some leeway among sim racers regarding their image and obligations to post content, but otherwise they seem to be operating in a more limited context. F1 drivers seem to have a firm image and closer association with their teams

and sponsors that affect the image frame in which they operate, but they are notably better equipped to operate within global-media sports-star culture.

Esports drivers use multiple social and other media platforms of different types (such as Twitch, Discord, and YouTube) that are vital to their careers, whereas motorsports stakeholders have started to harness these new media (alongside traditional broadcasting and press) for their market potential to maintain popularity. Despite the growing synergy and evolving popularity of esports, the future may also bring challenges along with benefits, especially for sim racing.

Acknowledgments

Declaration of interest statement

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