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## 'Roads?! Where we're going, we don't' need, roads': Framing online sim racing during Covid-19 by motorsport forum participants

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## **‘Roads?! Where we’re going, we don’t’ need, roads’: Framing online sim racing during Covid-19 by motorsport forum participants**

### **Introduction**

The title of this contribution aptly quotes Doc Emmett Brown at the moment of travelling forward 30 years in time during the final scene of the 1985 blockbuster *Back to the Future* (Zemeckis & Spielberg, 1985). Admittedly, time has proven the film’s depicted 2015 world of hoverboards, flying cars and skyways as largely fantastical. However, considering the Covid-19 pandemic has caused businesses and social life to dramatically ground to a halt on an unprecedented global scale during the first half of 2020, motorsport is finding itself living up to Doc Brown’s depiction of 21<sup>st</sup> century future, albeit a digital one, by embracing esports and online sim racing.

On 12 March, the WHO labelled Covid-19 a pandemic (WHO News, 2020). During the following weeks, professional motorsport started cancelling upcoming events and operations globally. Formula One cancelled its season-opening Australian GP after a first Covid-19 case was confirmed in the paddock, the World Rally Championship (WRC) cut short its round in Mexico and by 31 March even the Japanese Super Formula reluctantly decided to postpone further racing (Robeers & Sharp, 2020). The sudden void which the shutdown of global motor racing created suddenly left many motor racing organisers, drivers and sponsors looking for virtual alternatives to ensure revenue streams, as well as the motorsport community, kept going. Subsequently, many current and former real-world drivers even ventured into racing series they had no experience with, e.g. Jenson Button, Mario Andretti, Jacques Villeneuve to name but a few. In spite of the current popularity of online sim racing and esports as a result of this, it does not however eradicate the significant problems that have long been associated with esports and continue to undermine esports status as a sport (Jenny et al., 2017). In particular, multiple studies have shown representations of esports regarding a lack of athleticism, geek or nerd masculinity and technological mastery have continuously been produced and maintained by traditional media, including newspapers and subsequent audiences (Jenny et al., 2017; Maclean, 2016; Taylor, 2012; Tikkanen, 2019).

Against the backdrop of the coronavirus pandemic and the rising number of professional celebrity race car drivers, organizers and sponsors taking to online sim racing, this study aims to determine *how and to what extent participants of an online motorsport forum represent online sim racing during the Covid-19 induced global shutdown of real-world motor racing?*

More specifically, this explorative contribution will first contextualize esports and online sim racing in relation to the media as part of a literature review. Second, it will set out the theoretical framework under which this study will operate after which a qualitative and inductive framing analysis will be applied to a sample of 1473 comments taken from the online forum of the magazine Autosport. Further, this study will set out the frames and counterframes identified before discussing them in relation to the literature with the aim of

generating new and complementary insights to the existing body of research on media, esports and online sim racing.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Conceptualizing esports and online sim racing***

Over the course of the past decades, scholars have attempted to categorize and define esports, yet due to the complexity of the industry as well as the convergence of factors including culture, technology, sport, and business, this has proven difficult to come to terms with (Jenny et al., 2017; Jin, 2010; Wagner, 2006). Although Wagner (2006, p. 2) acknowledged this problem earlier as esports were by then commonly identified as “a competitive way of playing computer games within a professional setting”, his own subsequent formulation of esports as “an area of sport activities in which people develop and train mental or physical abilities in the use of information and communication technologies” fell short in its own right. More specifically, it disregarded esports’s online characteristic, its inherent organisational context and its inherent design as an interconnection of multiple platforms such as computing, gaming and sport (Jenny, 2017; Jin, 2010). Bearing this in mind, Jenny et al. (2017, p. 4) defined esports as “organized video game competitions”, a definition this study will adopt.

As a subcategory of esports, sim racing, i.e. simulated racing, has often been largely neglected by academic studies despite its closely aligned realism via gaming cockpits or gaming “rigs” with real-world race car cockpits. Paiva (2015, p. 146) defines this subcategory of esports as “recreating automobile racing in virtual environments [offline against computer-controlled cars or online against other players] so that it matches, as closely as possible, the experiences one would have if he or she were racing a car”. Although in this study we adopt the automobile version of sim racing, it is important to acknowledge Paiva’s (2015) definition bypasses other forms of racing, such as motorcycle, truck, boat, plane and drone racing, and neglects the platforms for participation. Drawing from the above, we choose to refine the definition of online sim racing as organized video racing game competitions that take place online and across different platforms including personal computers and gaming consoles.

Although scientific interest has been sluggish from the get-go, the significant rise in popularity of esports since the turn of the century has subsequently led to a steady increase in academic studies on esports, and to a lesser extent, sim racing (De Donder, 2020). Where some earlier studies investigated competitiveness in videogaming (Borowy, 2013) more recent studies have included perspectives such as marketing aimed at understanding the diverse motives for consuming esports (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017). Interestingly, the rise in global popularity of esports subsequently increased focus on the debate as to whether or not esports fits the category of a game, a sport or rather some hybrid format. Although some studies have highlighted transferable skills between esports and “real” sport, such as interpersonal

competition, skillset development, adherence to rules, goal attainment, and some involvement of coordination and agility (Jenny et al, 2017; Taylor, 2012), many have also outlined a divergence in terms of interactivity and immersivity (Hemphill, 2005), lack of physical activity or skill, i.e. athleticism (Jenny et al, 2017; Taylor, 2012) and ethics of violence and discrimination (the latter less so for sim racing) (Wu, 2019). As long as this argument of an inherent lack of physicality persists, esports will not achieve the authenticity that traditional sport enjoys (Jenny et al., 2017). More so, it maintains and reinforces existing narratives and stereotypes of esports .

### ***Media representations of esports and online sim racing***

As is the case with many other sports, the media continue to be instrumental in representing esports to audiences as they constantly (re)produce, reformulate and shape our understanding of the meaning of (e)sport (De Donder 2020; Robeers and Van den Bulck, 2018; Robeers, 2019a). More so, such ongoing reformulations are enabled through an inherent flexibility, elasticity and interactivity of sport-media texts that enable the integration, exclusion and influencing of boundaries of what constitutes sport in general and, in this case, esports and online sim racing (Jarvie, 2018). Since its earliest conceptualization, gaming and later esports have long been accompanied by negative media representations and stereotyping. (Taylor, 2012). In a study on Anglo-American newspaper framing of online sim racing during the initial months of the pandemic, Robeers and Sharp (2020) found that this has been much reduced. Indeed, some traditional and more negative representations of esports persist, yet the majority of frames attribute online sim racing with greater validity and authenticity. The authors suggest a number of ways in which traditional representations are challenged.

On the one hand, Anglo-American newspaper coverage moved away from traditional criticisms of online sim racing as a mere game due to an influx of sporting professionalism through real-world drivers, such as Max Verstappen, Lando Norris or Simon Pagenaud. Subsequently, heightened levels of sporting physicality also came about through the framing of online sim racing by means of a coming of age frame. This is in line with a study by Tikkanen (2019) which suggests progressive media coverage is increasingly challenging traditional representations of esports in general as bad displacement and a waste of time/money through notions of emerging professionalism. More so, various studies indicate the emergence of professionalism often helps raise the status of esports to being a rival or threat to traditional sport and further authenticity on behalf of, in this case, sim racing (Naess, 2017; Tikkanen, 2019). However, Robeers and Sharp (2020) found this to be only partially the case as online sim racing was not yet represented by Anglo-American newspapers as achieving complete and equal status to its real-world sporting equivalent. According to Sturm (2019), such a hiatus can be ascribed to a longer tradition of sim racing as a “game” for experiential and developmental training of professional drivers.

On the other hand, Taylor (2012) suggests the increasing requirements of professionalism create friction between the notion of esports as a subculture and leisure and the notion of esports as an occupation. Indeed, Robeers and Sharp (2020) suggest that by means of a pastime frame, some newspaper coverage dismisses online sim racing as mere leisurely play, thus reducing authenticity to a certain extent. More specifically, such framing embodies traditional stereotyping of a lack of physicality as well as via stereotypes of predominantly younger and male audiences (Robeers & Sharp, 2020). Specifically the latter has been shown to contribute to maintaining and reinforcing traditional representations of overt as well as covert male hegemony in esports (Maclean, 2016; Tikkanen, 2019; Williams, 2003). Additionally, Taylor (2012) highlights that the prominence of the stereotype of geek/nerd masculinity is declining and gradually shifting in favour of mainstreaming gendered technological advancements and know-how. In the case of the study by Robeers and Sharp (2020), such technological mastery is increasingly becoming indicative of more implicit forms of masculinity and manifested itself through an adapt or die frame. At the same time, the presence of masculinity is often further reinforced through implicit or explicit female gender stereotyping (Davis & Weaving, 2010; Fogel, 2018). Interestingly, both De Donder (2020) and Robeers and Sharp (2020) found that both underlying themes and narratives of female gamers, esports participants and real-world racing drivers functioned as neglected frames and thus remained absent. Such marginalization of women and gender imbalance in esports and online sim racing is prominent and can be ascribed to two causes (Robeers & Sharp, 2020). First, historical arguments reduce women to engaging with sport more from a sociality perspective (Taylor, 2012). Second, online sim racing real-world sporting equivalent has a long history of male dominance through daredevil masculinity (Ameye et al, 2011; Matthews & Pike, 2016; Robeers and Sharp, 2020). According to De Donder (2020), Robeers and Sharp (2020) and Tikkanen (2019), such forms of stereotyping are most likely to be maintained by traditional media, which raises the question if and to what extent other media platforms engage in similar stereotyping.

It is clear that many of these studies provide valuable insights into the themes, narratives and stereotypes underlying the framing, i.e. representation, of both esports and online sim racing. However, some issues remain. Most notably, the study by Robeers and Sharp (2020) has done much to further the understanding of representations of esports and online sim racing by traditional media. Yet, the authors openly acknowledge a lack of wider generalization as a result of their study's exclusive focus on newspaper coverage. As such, complementary efforts that generate representational insights from a more digital audience and reception based perspective are required (Robeers & Sharp, 2020). Subsequently, this study will address this gap and adopt a framing paradigm.

## **Theoretical framework**

### ***Framing theory***

To understand how the recent surge of online sim racing during the first weeks of the Covid-19 pandemic is impacting representations of esports, articulated by media and reflected on by audiences, this study opts for a framing paradigm based on a number of reasons.

Experiencing a deep-rooted tradition in mediated sports research, framing has proven to be a highly successful approach in sports-media research in that it enables for the study of encoding (media frames) and decoding (audience reactions) by means of the same analytical tool, namely the interplay between media frames and audience responses (Robeers, 2019b; Turner, 2014; Van den Bulck, 2017). To this end, framing allows for analysing and understanding how audiences are encouraged to think about what is being suggested by the media or, in other words, how a given topic such as esports that is selected by the media to become news can be presented to audiences (Robeers and Van den Bulck, 2019; Turner 2014). However, audiences do not necessarily take over the media's suggestions (Evans et al, 2013). In fact, and as Van den Bulck (2017) indicates, various studies determined intermediating factors, such as a possible successful fit between audience and media values, norms, and practices (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989); interaction with peers (Claessens & Van den Bulck, 2014) and personal experiences (Claessens & Van den Bulck, 2014). Additionally, a framing paradigm offers a productive approach for longitudinal, and more important, comparative research to be undertaken.

Framing, then, is a process whereby certain aspects of a perceived reality, also referred to as reasoning devices, are selected "in order to make them more salient and, in doing so, promote a problem definition, a causal interpretation, a moral evaluation and a treatment recommendation" (Entman 1993, p. 52). Inherent to this process are frames which, as metacommunicative messages in media texts, refer to "persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organise discourse, whether verbal or visual" (Gitlin, 1980, p. 7). To this end, and complementary to the reasoning devices, frames employ devices such as words and images, metaphors, depictions, slogans and stereotypes (Van den Bulck, 2017). Additionally, frame sponsors are people, institutions, facts, and beliefs that operate outside of the media and are integrated to confirm a given frame, subsequently constituting the extra-media level (Van den Bulck, 2017).

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

Drawing from the literature and theoretical considerations in terms of sport-media communication research, this study aims to determine *how and to what extent online motorsport audiences represent online sim racing during the Covid-19 induced global shutdown of real-world motor racing?*

In order to aid the operationalisation, we formulate a number of sub questions:

1. *How and to what extent do the stereotypes of the nerd/geek and technological mastery contribute to reinforcing male hegemony in online sim racing?*
2. *How and to what extent does the influx of real-world motorsport professionalism help mainstream the status of online sim racing?*
3. *How does the framing of online sim racing by online motorsport audiences compare to the framing by more traditional news media such as newspapers?*

## **Methodology**

### ***Data Sampling***

In order to operationalise the research questions and provide complementary insights to more traditional media framing of online sim racing, this study focusses on online platforms that allow for audience discussions. Analysis of online comments as an inroad to direct fan and audience reactions can be motivated by the more natural results that emerge from mundane research contexts such as online discussion sites and forums (Van den Bulck, 2017). After an initial online search, the online discussion forum of Autosport magazine was selected for a number of reasons. First, the forum provided a subforum discussion entitled ‘esports: Live events during 2020 Motorsport cancellation period’ which was set up on 15 March 2020 by online user dweller23, only three days after the WHO designating the crisis as a pandemic and at the very beginning of the global shutdown of real-world motorsport activities (Robeers & Sharp, 2020; WHO News, 2020). Additionally, this subforum provided 1473 comments by participants between 15 March 2020 and 27 June 2020, which represented the last comment and equates to about the first 14 weeks of the pandemic. Considering the qualitative nature of this study, this amount of comments achieves a sufficient level of saturation (Bryman, 2016). Second, because of the economic realities of the Covid-19 induced lockdown, Autosport magazine paused production of the physical publications and offered readers free access to their digital premium content service, Autosport Plus, through their website (Autosport pauses production due to pandemic impact, 2020). This potentially allows audiences to (re)use more relevant published content whilst actively engaging on the discussion forums. Third, the Autosport Magazine has built up more than seventy years of journalistic authority on motorsport and has a wide following around the world. Lastly, the forum provided detailed information regarding date, time and user identification which enabled greater transparency when coding comments.

### ***Coding and Analysis***

Articles and comments were coded by the author himself and based on an extensive experience with carrying out inductive framing analyses. More specifically, sample data were analyzed by means of a topic list derived from the abovementioned literature study and theoretical framework and which includes both characteristics of a frame, esports, and audiences (Van den Bulck,

2017). Following Van Gorp (2010), a three-step coding procedure was followed that includes open, axial and selective coding and whereby data were compared and contrasted with the aim of determining existing similarities and patterns for use in the signature matrix. In a next stage, overall consistencies were combined into frame packages (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989) and tested for mutual exclusiveness (i.e. counterframes). After coding their individual set of articles, an independent researcher coded 5% of the dataset. These results were compared, discussed and adjustments made where necessary. Further, frame salience was operationalized in terms of frequency of occurrence as well as relationships between frames, i.e. dominant, secondary and neglected (Robeers, 2019b; Zhou & Moy, 2007). As a final step, all frames were then applied deductively to the articles to ensure applicability (Van Gorp, 2010).

### **Framing online sim racing**

Analysis revealed four distinct frames and two subframes. Tables 1a and 1b provide an overview of the signature matrix containing the frames as made up of the individual reasoning and framing devices. In what follows we will first set out the frames and counterframes and their subsequent functions. Following this, framing of online sim racing will be discussed against existing literature.

#### ***Frames and counterframes***

##### ***Frame 1: online sim racing as a pursuit of realism***

The main dominant frame found throughout the online forum is that of the *Pursuit of realism*. The core problem posited suggests no official Formula One game can provide the high factor of realism and complexities necessitated for enticing a substantial line-up of real-world drivers and, subsequently, convincing online racing and broadcasting. Specifically, this is attributed to Formula One's longstanding licensing agreement with Codemasters which limits accurate simulation of the real-physics complexities associated with real-world racing: 'F1 need to get creative; Codemasters have the license for the 'Official game of F1' - fine. So, they need an officially licensed 'Sim of F1'.....for those who want something 'hardcore'' (reaction #526 to dweller23 [Autosport.com], 2020). This is made further obvious through depicting the Formula One game as a mere 'crappy arcade game' (reaction #750 to dweller23 [Autosport.com], 2020) that is simplistic from a technological perspective: 'I mean, if you like simple racing, you could also play Mario Kart' (reaction #613 to dweller23 [Autosport.com], 2020). As such, it is suggested that Formula One should rethink its licensing strategies to include the development of more simulation focussed games and subsequently also appease the more hardcore segment of fans. Findings also revealed the *Pursuit of realism* frame is supported by two further subframes.



Table 1a: Signature matrix with frames, and the related framing and reasoning devices, to interpret the framing of online sim racing on an online motorsport forum

Frame Cultural theme	REASONING DEVICES				FRAMING DEVICES			
	Issue	Cause	Solution	Moral Evaluation	Lexicon	Stereotypes/ Metaphors	Catchphrases	Depictions
<b>Pursuit of realism</b>  <i>Game vs Simulator</i>	No official F1 simulation game exists to captivate large-scale F1 driver line-ups & broadcasting	Licensing limits simulating the real-physics complexities of real-world racing	F1 must rethink licensing agreement to offer a hardcore simulation to drivers and fans	Negative	Simplistic, crappy arcade game, shitty, unstable, hopeless	‘if you like simple racing, you could also play Mario Kart’	/	‘[...] the [F1] game is so shitty. It's not only arcade [sic], but also unstable’
<b>Practice makes perfect</b>  <i>Skills and resources</i>	Drivers need to invest much time to master the dynamics of any given racing game	Different racing platforms use different variables and driving styles	A driver should focus on one or two platforms to apply talent/skills competitively	Positive	Dedicated, invest, time and effort, take quite a bit of time	‘It's not witchcraft, it's mechanics’	, ‘Looks like the real talent shines in the virtual world as well’	‘its [sic] half knowing how to drive and half understanding the code of the game’
<b>Professional conduct</b>  <i>Lack of professional restraint</i>	Many real-world drivers behave unprofessionally in the virtual world of racing	Live-streaming banter/gossip and risk averse driving styles	Teams must incentivise drivers to act professionally	Negative	banter, gossip, wreckfest, amateurs, clumsy overtakes	/	‘racing without rules is bad racing’, ‘lines that are very close to being crossed’	‘Ridiculous bump'n crashfest’, ‘simmers' are far less aggressive’, ‘less than professionals’

Table 1b: Signature matrix with frames, and the related framing and reasoning devices, to interpret the framing of online sim racing on an online motorsport forum

Frame <i>Cultural theme</i>	REASONING DEVICES				FRAMING DEVICES			
	Issue	Cause	Solution	Moral Evaluation	Lexicon	Stereotypes/ Metaphors	Catchphrases	Depictions
<b>(Fun) Pastime</b>  <i>Entertainment &amp; Limited realism</i>	Virtual racing offers a fun alternative but is not the real thing	Limited driving sensations due to lack of physicality	Accept limitations as the casual perception is what counts	Positive	Entertaining, fun, casual, amusement, game, not real	‘The cars aren’t real but the racing is’	‘People take video games far too serious’	‘It’s a completely different sport’, ‘just a game and nothing like reality’
<b>Racing accessibility</b>  <i>Democratization of online racing</i>	F1 Code-masters game provides democratic entry into virtual racing for the masses	Some people just want to race and avoid complexities & costly hardware	Critics should just flip the switch and have a bit of fun	Positive	Engaging, good races, easily accessible	‘Don’t mistake complexity for realism’	‘bring people into the sport by being accessible and fun’	‘Sim for the masses’, ‘sufficient for that entertainment’
<b>Charity opportunity</b>  <i>Societal contribution</i>	Not all real-world drivers use online sim racing’s fundraising potential	F1 driver Max Verstappen does not engage in for-charity races	Drivers need to think beyond their own needs	Negative	Charity event, Covid-19	/	/	‘When charity becomes coerced, it ceases being a charity’

*Sub-frame A to Frame 1: online sim racing as practice makes perfect*

First, the *Practice makes perfect* frame indicates forum participants raises the issue that drivers need to invest a lot of time and effort into mastering the dynamics of a given racing game or simulator as each platform uses different physics and variables: ‘its [sic] half knowing how to drive and half understanding the code of the game’ (reaction #199 to dweller23 [Autosport.com], 2020). Subsequently and as a solution, this frame suggests that drivers should only focus on one or two racing games/simulators and provides a largely positive moral evaluation of the situation.

*Sub-frame B to Frame 1: online sim racing as professional conduct*

A second subframe concerns the *Professional conduct* frame where the issue at hand pertains the inappropriate and unprofessional on-track behaviour of real-world professional drivers in online sim racing, which, subsequently, is suggested to undermine realism of racing. The reasons for this are twofold. First, risk averse driving styles whereby ‘many ‘pro’ drivers [are] sticking their noses up the inside into corners in clumsy overtakes and spinning people around, it ruins the spectacle’ (reaction #199 to dweller23 [Autosport.com], 2020). Second, the utterance of gossip and banter while live-streaming. Particularly in the case of the latter, potentially sensitive and otherwise well-kept information about real-world teams or colleagues is being disclosed during driver live-chat: ‘[...] since Russell and Leclerc have joined, there's been a lot of banter around Williams/Ferrari - which is totally fine, but I imagine there are lines that are very close to being crossed.’ (reaction #847 to dweller23 [Autosport.com], 2020). Interestingly, many participants evaluate such lack of professional restraint negatively and indirectly blame driver’s real-world teams by suggesting the solution lies with them properly incentivising and directing drivers participating in online sim racing events: ‘racing without rules is bad racing. All sports require ground rules to work, and all rules require enforcement.’ (reaction #588 to dweller23 [Autosport.com], 2020).

*Frame 2: online sim racing as a (fun) pastime*

The first of three secondary frames used by online audiences represents online sim racing and esports as a (*Fun*) *Pastime* also functions as a counterframe to the *Pursuit of realism* frame. The posited problem is that although the virtual equivalent of motor racing is fun to engage within times of the lockdown, it is merely something to pass the time leisurely and does not come close to real-world motorsport: ‘this sort of thing usually turns bad once it becomes that serious. Far better to just leave it as an optional fun thing.’ (reaction #1007 to dweller23 [Autosport.com], 2020). Participants argue this is due to a lack of inherent lack of realism and physicality: ‘because although sim racing requires a similar skill set as physical racing there is one cardinal thing missing: the sense of inertia. In german [sic] it is sometimes called the "bum-meter"' (reaction #177 to dweller23 [Autosport.com], 2020). Subsequently, online sim racing is deemed incomparable to real-world motor racing and depicted as a game. Some

participants highlight the fact that although most of what goes on is not physically real, the racing itself between online competitors does constitute the most level of realism: ‘the cars aren’t real but the racing is. The emotion, dedication and skill required are as real as anything’ (reaction #1436 to dweller23 [Autosport.com], 2020). At the same time it is suggested to simply acknowledge this and enjoy the virtual alternative until real-world motor racing starts up again.

*Frame 3: online sim racing as racing accessibility*

A further secondary frame, *Racing accessibility*, also functions as a counterframe and opposes the dominant *Pursuit of realism* frame. Similarly to its counterframe, the issue here revolves around the notion of realism as associated with the 2019 Codemasters Formula One game: ‘It’s not necessary to turn the game into a full time job in order to model the racing physics correctly, it’s just bad game design’ (reaction #600 to dweller23 [Autosport.com], 2020). However, this frame depicts the game indeed as easily accessible but still complex enough to be entertaining. Specifically, participants suggest criticisms uttered against this game miss its market positioning as offering a democratic entry into (online) Formula One racing:

‘Given that the F1 games have been huge commercial successes you can’t fault F1 with going with Codemasters, who at the end of the day have produced excellent GAMES which bring people into the sport by being accessible and fun.’ (reaction #964 to dweller23 [Autosport.com], 2020)

Also, participants that use this frame point out that ‘complexity should not be mistaken for realism’ (reaction #600 to dweller23 [Autosport.com], 2020) and that the F1 game still maintains a good balance between realism and complexity whilst being tailored towards the masses, i.e. those fans and consumers that require instant entry in virtual racing, i.e. without the complexities and costly hardware associated with full-on simulator series such as rFactor, iRacing or Assetto Corsa Competizione. The suggested solution by participants is such that critics of 2019 Codemasters F1 should not only realize but also come to terms that many want an easy virtual racing experience which Codemasters tailors towards: ‘Critics should just flip the switch and have a bit of fun’ (reaction #748 to dweller23 [Autosport.com], 2020).

*Frame 4: online sim racing as a charity opportunity*

A third secondary frame is the *Charity opportunity* frame and embodies the theme of societal contribution by drivers via online sim racing: ‘we [Charles Leclerc and Lando Norris] figured we would try and do something for charity’ doing’ (reaction #947 to dweller23 [Autosport.com], 2020). This frame suggests the fundraising potential of online sim racing is not fully realized as some real-world professional drivers such as Max Verstappen refrain from either setting up or joining existing initiatives. Subsequently, some high profile drivers make

appropriate use of their status and the situation to raise funds for charitable cause in view of the pandemic as stated by a forum participant: ‘where I think he’s [Max] showing poor form is not taking part in the charity races they’re doing’ (reaction #942 to dweller23 [Autosport.com], 2020). Subsequently, such drivers are considered to reassess their situation and consider other options of raising funds and contributing in a constructive manner to both fans and health professionals: ‘[...] there are plenty other ways to help beyond this’ (reaction #947 to dweller23 [Autosport.com], 2020).

### ***On the same track? Differences between newspaper- and online participant framing of online sim racing***

Trying to understand how the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent shutdown of global motor racing events have affected the move towards online sim racing on the part of fans provides some interesting insights.

Similar to Robeers and Sharp’s (2020) findings, this study’s analysis suggests that the virtual platform is considered to provide a valid alternative that offers fans, gamers, real-world race car drivers, organisations and sponsors a much needed landscape in which to continue racing during the lockdown. Likewise, online sim racing is never considered to be on the same level as real-world motorsport. Interestingly though, the stark polarisation between the positively evaluated saviour frame and the negatively evaluated pastime frame found by Robeers and Sharp (2020) in newspapers does not correspond to the findings of this study. Indeed, forum participants of Autosport.com validate online sim racing as a fun alternative to real-world motorsport which can be mainstream in its own right via the *(Fun) Pastime* frame. However, the *(Fun) Pastime* frame, along with the absence of a potential counterframe, indicates towards a widely shared and underlying agreement by participants that online sim racing does not equate to the same level of authenticity as its real-world equivalent. In part, this lower level of authenticity can be attributed to the fact that it takes time to generate authenticity through enjoyable and meaningful experiences, lived and learned, of in this case online sim racing (Naess, 2017). This is particularly important as this proves crucial in the process of creating and establishing its sporting heritage (Naess, 2017). Further, forum participants achieve this implicit understanding of reduced authenticity by framing online sim racing predominantly in view of the level of realism it offers in comparison to real-world motorsport.

On the one hand, the dominant *Pursuit of realism* frame insists on a necessity to approach and simulate driving and broadcasting conditions as realistically as possible for it to attract real-world professional drivers as well as broadcasting, i.e. livestreaming, audiences. Particularly in the case of the former, online sim racing needs to simulate real-world conditions and environments that can allow drivers to maintain and possibly even hone their racing skills and reflexes, something which is further substantiated through the subframe *Practice makes perfect*. This has two consequences. First, it can be said that online sim racing follows tendencies of more traditional sport to act as

an agent for training and competition and even for societal initiatives including fundraising, as the *Charity opportunity* frame indicates (Plumley, 2014). Second, the insistence on a need for heightened realism brings with it a notion of taking online sim racing seriously. The frame *Professional conduct* indicates this aptly. It does not suffice to provide a platform that offers high levels of virtual realism, professional drivers need to also extend the same professional courtesies as they do in real-world motorsport context as not doing so can have damaging real-world implications.

On the other hand, frames such as *Racing accessibility* and *(Fun) Pastime* counter the necessity for realism and suggest accepting online sim racing as mere leisurely play that is accessible to all those who want to engage with motorsport during the lockdown period.

Although the *Pastime* frame is only one of two frames that occurs in both newspaper framing as well as by forum participants of Autosport.com, an important caveat exists. Indeed, in both instances the frame takes up a direction of criticism inherent to the wider realm of esports, namely a stereotypical lack of physicality which subsequently prevents online sim racing from becoming a 'real' sport (Jenny et al, 2017, Robeers & Sharp, 2020). However, where newspaper framing also ventures into stereotypes of younger generations that engage in online sim racing (Robeers & Sharp, 2020), forum participants of Autosport.com do not. Rather, the *(Fun) Pastime* frame is characterized by a more positive valence towards providing online sim racing as legitimate and leisurely play, hence the added prefix. Perhaps most importantly, it does show that although traditional media such as newspapers continue to maintain stereotypes within the contemporary media landscape, the reception thereof by, in this case fans, is much more negotiated and nuanced (Boyle & Haynes, 2009; Evans et al., 2013). Of course, an important consideration is that sports fan-oriented forums are inherently more biased and positive in their representations of their own sport as opposed to news media's expected unbiased perspectives (Crawford, 2004; Boyle & Haynes, 2013). That said, some stereotypical congruences between Robeers and Sharp's (2020) findings on mainstream newspapers and this study necessitate further attention. In view of Evans et al.'s (2013) consideration that representation manifests itself equally through what is shown as through what is left out, frames and underlying narratives of female gamers or racing drivers as well as of the gamer as a geek/ nerd or its more contemporary variant, i.e. the laziness frame, were neglected by forum participants of Autosport.com (De Donder, 2020; Evans et al., 2013). Regarding the former, and despite a large number of female drivers taking part in online sim racing through, for example, the female-only 2020 W Series Esports League or even the 2020 24h Le Mans Virtual that witnessed an all-female LMP2 team, these frames were not meaningfully present as part of larger user discourse. This can be situated within a wider tendency for gender marginalization in both motorsport and Esports that can be attributed to tendencies of naturalized sexual difference and male hegemony as well as subsequent historical arguments that women approach playing sport more from an identity or sociality perspective

than men (Ameye et al, 2011; Davis & Weaving, 2010; Matthews & Pike, 2016; McDonagh & Pappano, 2008; Robeers & Sharp, 2020; Taylor, 2012). More so, the *Practice makes perfect* frame highlights online sim racing's need for a high level of technical mastery as a result of dedication and adherence to only one or two platforms, something which Dunbar-Hester (2008) suggests is further indicative of displaying masculinity in sport (p. 214).

Complementary to gender marginalization, the absence of stereotypical representations through frames and underlying narratives of the gamer as a geek, nerd or lazy individual becomes apparent as well. As is the case with newspaper framing of online sim racing, this can be attributed to a wider tendency of 'technology having shifted the meaning of the nerd or geek in favour of a merging with wider hegemonic masculinity' (Robeers & Sharp, 2020 p. 102). Yet, a further argument seems plausible in this instance. Motorsport has long been a platform for nurturing and showing off daredevil masculinity, male machismo and chauvinism (Ameye et al, 2011; Matthews & Pike, 2016). However, the rise of the digital era and gaming at the end of the previous century has done much to technologically further and normalize the use of racing games and simulators among both motorsport professionals as well as the larger public (Sturm, 2019). As such, it seems plausible that after about three decades, this generational shift implies many people do not consider engaging with such games and simulators as necessarily nerdy/geeky and negating masculine traits. Additionally, it seems plausible that the absence of the more recently appearing laziness frame (De Donder, 2020) can be attributed to the fact that many real-world drivers actually are encouraged and applauded by participants to keep busy during the lockdown via the subframe *Practice makes perfect*.

### **Conclusion**

The primary aim of this study was to build on and contribute to the body of existing research on representations of online sim racing by looking at how participants of an online motorsport forum frame the rise in popularity of online sim racing during the first months of the worldwide Covid-19-induced shutdown of real-world motor racing events. Drawing on an inductive framing approach as developed by Gamson and Modigliani (1989) and Entman (1993), the author performed a qualitative analysis to obtain a better understanding of the function and importance of online sim racing in online motorsport communities. This study found that frames used to represent online sim racing revealed an inherent understanding of online sim racing as being a completely different, yet suitable alternative, sport to its real-world counterpart. In this sense, framing occurred particularly via a dual focus on realism. On the one hand, frames suggests a necessity for online sim racing to achieve the highest possible level of realism in terms of both usability for professional real-world drivers and entertaining broadcasting potential for audiences. On the other hand, frames suggest the complexities accompanying high realism sim racing prevents a wider accessibility, appreciation and enjoyment thereof.

Additionally, the representations of online sim racing by participants of an online motorsport forum align with those by US and UK newspapers (Robeers & Sharp, 2020) by indicating that engaging with online sim racing is no longer stereotyped to be the realm of nerds or geeks, partly due to an influx of professional drivers and notions of technological mastery. Despite such positive progression and in spite of a rise in female participation in online sim racing, this study also highlights female gender marginalization through neglected framing, a problem still all too common in real-world motorsport.

In view of all this, online sim racing seems to have arrived at a crossroads. Namely, it needs to decide how it is going to continue its technological development as both a realistic sporting entity for professionals and hardcore fans as well as an accessible platform for wider and future audiences. At the same time, it needs to determine how and to what extent it can become equally innovative on a societal level, i.e. acting as a platform that actively aims to enhance social inclusiveness and helps mitigate socio-cultural inequalities. Having already lived up to *Back to the Future*'s vision of 21<sup>st</sup> century roads once, perhaps the world of online sim racing can take up another one of Doc Emmett Brown's directions, namely that the 'future is whatever you make it, so make it a great one' (Zemeckis, 1990).

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

This study acknowledges some shortcomings as data was sampled exhaustively from a designated online sim racing during Covid-19 subforum on the website *Autosport.com*. First, the positive valence in framing of online sim racing by its online participants, i.e. motorsport fans, can be attributed to an inherently positive bias for motorsport in general as compared to more unbiased news media. Second, no websites and forums as relating to wider automotive or gaming culture were included, which consequently restricts generalization from a fandom perspective. Future studies could overcome this by adopting a more diversified field of focus. Still, as an explorative study on online sim racing and online motorsport fans, it provides a solid basis for future research. In particular, future efforts could include social media for conducting media production and audience reception analyses during the period of the lockdown. Despite these reflective remarks, the author of this study believes that this contribution provides valuable empirical insights that not only indicate the usefulness of an inductive framing analysis for sports-media research, but also further the understanding of how impactful events such as the coronavirus pandemic can both change and maintain existing views on sport, regardless of its virtual or real-world character.

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