

Local eSports media analyzed through the circuit of culture framework: Onet-RAS case study

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Abstract. This paper focuses on the analysis of audiovisual materials according to the media circulation model of eSports-related content. Its aim is to assess the process of strengthening the commercial potential of formalized eSports enterprises in a relatively new, national market. This goal is achieved through looking at a case study of one of the leading media groups in the Eastern Europe taking interest in the eSports market and launching a multi-platform campaign to promote particular eSports titles, brands and initiatives in a short period of time. The methodological framework used for the analysis encompasses media circuit model developed through the work of British Cultural Studies. Paul du Gay and Stuart Hall's concepts used in the text involve aspects such as production, consumption, regulation, identity and representation. Data concerning the multi-platform informational shows, websites, social media presence and the overall business model of supporting the local eSports scene have been gathered in the period of six months after the initial investment made by the Onet-RAS media group in connection with ESL (previously known as Electronic Sports League) in August 2018. The main research outcome and thesis of the paper states that the media production supporting the eSports initiatives relies on network-based activities which do not necessarily change the models of consumption and engagement concerning eSports broadcasts, and instead rely on providing a know-how basis for potential contributors and content creators. In conclusion, it is argued that such media strategy can be named "edumotion" (education, promotion and emotion), as it equally involves knowledge sharing strategies and paid promotional content stimulating affectionate user engagement. Edumotion is aimed at introducing eSports fanbase to the new teams and business initiatives in a local market, while retaining a constant influx of eSports-related information to capture the attention of its core audience.

Keywords: eSports, media consumption, platforms, circuit of culture

1 Local eSports media ecosystem

1.1 Circuit of culture model

This paper wishes to contribute to the understanding how eSports, that is a form of organized, competitive play, become a point of interest for major media companies and

are subsequently turned into a commodity distributed and curated through various digital platforms. The key goal of focusing on the particular case study of Onet Media Group is to look at strategies implemented by the local, yet relatively powerful media conglomerate to control the emerging eSports market. Implementing Paul du Gay's circuit of culture framework allows to take into consideration strategies which involve building on existing, grassroots communities and their engagement, as well as corporate strategies, e.g. taking over existing media communication channels.

The main purpose of the circuit of culture model is to identify the places in which meanings are produced through a particular set of practices [6,3]. As there are several ways of such meaning-making, determining through which channels the circulation of ideas is advocated in particular media environments is a crucial step in the assessment of business strategies aimed at influencing the whole process. Paul du Gay's circuit of culture model [21] has been extensively used and enhanced throughout the media studies [see 2, 3], and is implemented in this article as a scaffolding for an in-depth look into the media circulation environment developed and maintained by the Onet-RAS Media Group (further referenced as "Onet Media Group" or "Onet") in the eSports segment. It includes the following elements: production, regulation, consumption, identity and representation, all of which can be employed to describe crucial aspects of the media presence in a multi-platform environment. The overarching strategy executed by the Onet Media Group concerning local eSports market has been studied since August 2018, which was the date of signing an official contract with ESL (previously known as Electronic Sports League), a major eSports production company with worldwide reach. Data analyzed in this study include VOD materials supported by participant observation of live streamed broadcasts (especially three seasons of *Misja Esport* program), *Esportmania.pl* website content, and activities documented through official social media channels directly affiliated with Onet Media Group. From the legal standpoint, in 2018 Onet-RAS officially joined forces with Ringier Axel Springer Polska. However, for the sake of maintaining continuity between the initial eSports investments made by the Polish media group and its currently applied market strategies, I will consequently use the label "Onet" while referring to this now-subdivision of a larger media entity.

Commenting on du Gay's model, Aphra Kerr agrees that the production and consumption of the game-related media can be conceptualized as a "circular process" [13] (p. 103), especially considering the fact that game release is only a beginning of its business life cycle. This is especially true in eSports, where it is mandatory to maintain users' interest even after the game goes through the cycle of patches and has been adjusted to assure competitive balance. Kerr also observes that among British Cultural Studies scholars, it is perhaps John Fiske who highlights the importance of interpreting consumption as a productive process (1992), albeit his stance towards meaningful consumers' agency would be difficult to reconcile with eSports audience studies, which seem to highlight local cultural contexts and political factors [3] as the most decisive in the assessment of fans' agency.

In the recent works regarding the production and consumption of eSports media [8, 17], the participatory elements of eSports coverages and performances were highlighted as crucial for successfully establishing a mutual and satisfactory relationship between

the eSports media content creators and their target audience. Studies of user engagement in the digital media also point towards the importance of social curation [22], which with the proliferation of interactive tools offered by chief internet platforms allow to harness the cross-platform sharing activities of fans and include them in the business strategies. Twitch.tv clips (fan-made excerpts from the streamed material), online memes generators and Reddit algorithms favoring most-liked visual content support the new models of engagement, which in turn incentivize content creators to design with the aforementioned tools and functionalities in mind. The analysis of the case study of Onet-RAS Group involvement in the local eSports market proves the viability of cross-platform, fan-focused approach, albeit with an important modification with regards to its core content: the focus on providing business-related information which have the potential to turn consumers and spectators into eSports content creators.

1.2 Local eSports business development

ESL-Onet RAS partnership¹ marked an important breakthrough in terms of local, mainstream internet outlets interest in eSports. Shortly after the announcement, Onet RAS Group officially joined Ringier Axel Springer Polska, which arguably strengthened its impact on Eastern European market regarding content creation, curation and dissemination, especially in terms of entertainment & media sector. One of the chief consequences of this merge was broader media coverage for key local eSports tournaments, including 2019 Poznań Game Arena (PGA), where Autumn round of Polish Esports League and Farming Simulator League were conducted for the first time on a public event of such scale.

The concentrated business effort to develop eSports market in Poland resulted in establishing multi-platform media ecosystem, including Esportmania.pl portal (responsible for news reports and short commentaries on recent developments in local eSports scene), *Misja Esport* multi-platform program (a weekly hour-long TV-like feature involving invited eSports personalities) and Polish Esports Awards initiative.

In the following sections, these divergent media will be analyzed based on du Gay's media circuit model in order to assess the ways in which the eSports-related content is produced and disseminated.

2 eSports circuit of culture

2.1 Production

In the section just before introducing the circuit of culture model, Paul du Gay names computer games a form of "cultural software" [21,2]. More recent works which explore the cultural significance of software – especially in the vein of *software studies*, which insist on threatening the code as one of the most important forms of modern cultural

¹ Interaktywnie.com page, <https://interaktywnie.com/biznes/newsy/portale/onet-konsekwentnie-stawia-na-esport-wlasnie-nawiazal-wspolprace-z-esl-257743>, last accessed 2020/02/28.

expression [see 7] – seem to follow British Cultural Studies in their insistence on the importance of processes overseeing the ways in which cultural artifacts are produced and circulated. In this element of the circuit, one needs to discover how “practices of production are inscribed with particular meanings” [21,4], that is, not only how the artifact is constructed in technical terms, but also how it is culturally positioned in terms of its usage. I would argue that the software studies term *expressive processing* [23] aptly contributes to this meaning of production by establishing a connection between expression and rhetoric evocated by the digital cultural artifact.

Just as the Walkman example in du Gay et al. analysis, Twitch.tv signifies a change in contemporary media scape when it comes to both production and consumption of video games. Its influence extends beyond the streaming platforms and forces contemporary content providers to adjust to the certain audience expectations. The pressure of immediacy requires the once well-established media formats, such as that represented by the studio-talk *Misja Esport*, to include at least some forms of on-the-spot audience participation. The global media landscape of eSports has also changed - from the community-driven experience of fans organizing grassroot tournaments [19] to multi-million dollar industry with well-known brands sponsoring large-scale tournaments [20]. The website Esportmania, one of the pillars supporting the divergent media strategy of Onet Media Group, is a testament to this shift. Besides nowadays standard inclusion of Twitter, Facebook and Twitch as additional plugged-in channels of communication, the portal’s content predominantly covers sponsored professionals and large-scale events, occasionally commenting on the latest advancements in eSports-related technology, such as the AI algorithms posed against human players. The list of main categories on the website include three games (*Counter Strike: Global Offensive*, *League of Legends*, *FIFA*), *Misja Esport*, “business” and “hardware”. Esportmania site also uses embedded, proprietary videos, which support or even substitute written articles. Materials broadcasted in this format are predominantly focused on some forms of conversation or interview. This approach goes well with promotional strategies aimed at introducing audiences to new business initiatives and familiarizing them with changes in the eSports tournament circuit². The extended length of such videos allows for a more in-depth insight for the more engaged eSports audiences, and the conversational, pre-recorded studio format allows for the maximum control from the broadcaster.

The flagship Onet’s initiative launched after the merger is a multi-platform (Facebook live stream, Twtch.tv, embedded website Onet player, YouTube) talk-show including three to five invited guests discussing topics concerning mainly local eSports market. *Misja Esport* presents high production values, albeit the format is largely copied from the *Misja Futbol*, program previously featured on the internet platforms controlled by the Onet Media Group. As such, it makes no conscious effort to maintain inclusivity standards³ regarding e.g. female guests, and the spokespersons invited to take part in the program display varying levels of awareness when it comes to issues of

² See interview with vice-president of ESL, Michał “Carmac” Blicharz, <https://bit.ly/2RBmfOP>, last accessed 2020/02/28.

³ It is important to note that currently there are organized efforts to formulate guidelines regarding inclusivity and social conduct standards in the area of eSports – a good example is AnyKey initiative supervised by T.L. Taylor.

minorities or underrepresented groups in the professional eSports. That being said, *Misja Esport* formula allows for the last ten to fifteen minutes of the show (the so-called “extra time”) are a free-form discussion on topics introduced by the program host. This is the place where the usual business-related issues yield to the more controversial matters, when guests are encouraged to share their personal opinions. On third episode of the third *Misja Esport* season, small part of the “extra time” was dedicated to the Activision Blizzard ban of professional Hearthstone player involving his pro-Hong Kong statement during a post-match interview[24]. Even though some Twitch.tv streamers at the studio distanced themselves from such display of political activism and spoke in favor of strictly obeying rules which force sponsored individuals to refrain from any form of involvement outside the play frame [see 11], the host summed up the discussion by expressing the need to be more aware of eSports as a place of sharing culturally significant messages – including the ones which may go against the corporate business. This can be read as an attempt at evoking personal, emotive involvement in the eSports. Given the grassroot origins of local eSports initiatives, the business-focused materials must be balanced with stories referring to the cultural symbols and traits recognized by the local eSports fandom, and these include the struggle against the state authorities which initially were reluctant to support the new forms of collective, computer game play. Interestingly, nowadays the discourse has shifted, and eSports fans in Poland (and, to same extend, also Eastern Europe) are gradually subsumed by the nationalist rhetoric sponsored by the state. During the aforementioned PGA Arena an official Polish national team competed for the *Tekken 7* and *PES2020* teams to enter 1th Esports World Championships 2019. The sponsorship deals are similar to those issued for football teams, and the merge of promotional strategies for eSports and other, already well-established “traditional” sports gradually becomes a new business standard. In that regard, taking control over both emotional/affective and business aspects of large-scale eSports is already starting at the production stage, and is carrying over to the other parts of the media circuit – with visible interests from the state-level groups of interest, eager to use eSports media presence and market penetration for their own agenda [see 2]. Esportmania.pl website regularly features news-like articles reporting the personal transfers and matches of Polish National eSports Team; such content gets increased visibility through the regular, albeit short notes appearing on main site’s front page. Thus, it can be argued that Onet Media Group partially contributed to paint the picture of eSports as “a key area of nationally specific and global popular culture”, which has been claimed by Hutchinson & Rowe with regards to traditional sports [9].

2.2 Consumption

In the assessment of the eSports related promotional strategies introduced by the Onet Media Group it is crucial to ask about their target audience. The selection of *Misja Esport* guests would suggest aiming at gamer audiences who are interested in streaming content in general, not so much in eSports in particular. The inclusion of YouTube personalities, sometimes even variety streamers [see 12] or influencers experimenting with online music industry would suggest the overarching goal is to reach out as far as possible to ensure maximum market penetration. The significant portion of invited

guests can be labeled as professionals, i.e. individuals who “have entered into agreements with platform providers like YouTube to enter into their walled gardens and participate under the terms of service of these platforms” [14]. Data gathered throughout the period of participant observation conducted at the time of live broadcasts of *Misja Esport* suggest that the audience – especially during Facebook live streams – notice and comment on this issue. The majority of comments pointed out the discrepancy between the declared eSports-centered main theme and the range of topics on which guests share their expertise. It is important to note that the local eSports market has relatively few professionals with both experience and willingness to share their insights during the hour-long online program, which may well contribute to the fact that the showrunners have to rely on people with relatively little interest in the eSports market.

Misja Esport is primarily aired weekly on a Onet VOD platform, but whole episodes are subsequently posted on YouTube, and several derivative formats – selected clips from episodes or extra video content under the umbrella brand Esportmania are distributed through Twitch.tv, Facebook, and occasionally other social media. This facilitates cross-platform media convergence, which opens up the possibility of active fans’ participation and content curation, but at the same time limits the opportunity of conducting constructive criticism and other collective actions, mainly due to the issue of audience fragmentation [see 13, 14].

2.3 Regulation

The attempts at moderating the online content has to take into account multiple groups of interest, from platform owners and corporate investors to eSports players and their audiences. Although it is noticeable that the language of eSports programs, clips, interviews and other online materials posted on Esportmania follow certain internal guidelines, the invited guests and spokespersons have relative freedom when it comes to sharing personal stories and opinions. The *Big Stories* section on the website, which features longer texts (also periodically advertised on the front page), presents a very wide range of topics, ranging from international politics⁴ to inspirational stories about eSports careers. The second category corresponds with the range of topics on the *Misja Esport* agenda: the narratives on how to achieve success in the eSports industry are among the key persuasive messages sent by this particular program and Onet Media Group content in general. This educational content is tied with broader promotional strategy: successful personalities share their road to sponsorship deals and are encouraged to mention brands which “enabled” their development as eSports professionals.

Navigating the streaming media environment in terms of both formal and informal regulation practices is crucial to understand the mutual synergy between the influencers/content creators and game designers/companies invested in the eSports industry on the development side [10]. The Esportmania content creators, including journalists, program hosts and social media managers, are careful not to err on the side of allowed content, but the potentially inflammatory topics are included in the forms of stimuli for

⁴ See features on Iran-USA trade war: <https://bit.ly/2w9ROXL> or USA politics: <https://bit.ly/3ceelmJ>, last accessed 2020/02/28.

the discussion. Thus, issues such as “women in eSports” are highlighted in the promotional materials – usually in the form of short excerpts from the *Misja Esport* programs – and posted as separate clips on YouTube or circulated via social media channels with a call-to-action title, often ended with a question mark. Such media dissemination strategy works in favor of stimulating affective response in the audience; the particular outcome of this engagement is secondary to the attention and internet traffic generated by it. Even though the percentage of materials featuring underrepresented groups in eSports compared to other eSports business media outlets is relatively high, they function more like an attention-grabbers rather than integral elements of a broader media strategy. However, given the state of the local gaming-related media circuit, the sole fact of providing a media platform for the efforts aimed at enhancing the visibility of women eSports can be considered an important step in the direction of implementing inclusivity standards.

2.4 Identity

The attempts at creating a consolidated brand image of Esportsmania is clearly visible in most of the Onet Media Group internet activities, although the relationship between the contracted content creators and advertisers highlights a number of issues connected with the arguably outdated media formats. *Misja Esport* follows a man-dominated “expert panel” modes of featuring topics, which arguably does not correspond well with the more interactive interface of modern streaming platforms. What is more, the key advertisers – in this case *Old Spice* brand – incentivize the program hosts to include hybrid forms of promotional campaigns, aimed at “playful” approach to building brand presence and identity with connection to eSports. The last broadcast of *Misja Esport* in 2018 featured one of the contracted streamers who was faking the act of washing his hair in front of the audience gathered in the lobby at the time of one of the local eSports tournaments. This act was part of the Christmas competition: the aforementioned streamer allegedly lost a bet, and as a result was “forced” to let his dreadlocks be washed by the *Old Spice* employee. The discrepancy between the “expert desk” format of *Misja Esport* and the stand-up act featuring blatant brand promotion was a testament to the difficulties which have to be considered in the cross-platform promotional strategies, especially if they involve a medium that allows the audiences to be as responsive as in the case of social media and streaming platforms.

As it was observed by T. L. Taylor, successfully functioning in the streaming media context means “(...) jettisoning an old network era model, and imagining a media future that understands the role of the internet, interactivity, and on-demand and context-driven viewing” [20]. The Onet Media Group attempt at re-integrating some of the elements from previously successful formats (such as *Misja Futbol*) arguably fail in the confrontation with the demanding eSports audiences. The additional issue connected with the question of identity falls on the cultural capital which is needed to consume the eSports content. Albeit the Esportsmania website attempts to diversify content in order to attract the more mainstream consumers, the news-like format fails short of alleviating the difficulties involved in following the more in-depth broadcasts. Coming

back to the British Cultural Studies critical vocabulary, the decoding phase of communication requires external knowledge, which is not made available by the content main provider - “if the meaning is not articulated in practice, it has no effect”[7]. The educational message is covered only in its business aspect, and even entertaining tutorials on how to become a successful streamer still require a significant portion of foreknowledge to achieve its desired goal: the identity is based on exclusion rather than successful inclusion, even if the business perspective demands broadening the scope of audiences.

2.5 Representation

The issue of inclusivity leads us to the representation, which, along with identity, in the circuit of culture model remains on the “visible” side, at least from the perspective of the general audience. What a given cultural artifact “represents” is a matter of discourse – or, referring back to the software studies framework of expressive processing, also a matter of communication between its constitutive elements [23]. How the Onet Media Group eSports strategy operates is thus dependent on the algorithms of knowledge transfer between the instances which normally function in their respectable niches – bubbles of information micro-circuits. Fans are following streamers and YouTubers who become e.g. *Misja Esport* contracted content creators, but these people do not cease to conduct their activities in connection with other media outlets. Commentating eSports events, hosting podcasts, creating YouTube guides and maintaining social media presence demands various forms of affective labor [15], which do not always leave enough place for maintaining professional integrity in the advent of the popular “personal branding” strategies.

In terms of identity Esportmania succeeds in part which involves creating an image of a semi-professional eSports fan, an individual who follows the news, knows which sponsor takes care for her favorite team, appreciates the business coaching from YouTube and Twitch.tv influencers and accepts the occasional advertising input while consuming the online media. However, this may get problematic in juxtaposition with the issue of representation: what is present in the visual form (e.g. women in eSports), does not necessarily translate into “invisible” discursive inclusion, which manifests in practices of day-to-day media consumption. In the “media entertainment” phase of eSports [20] this aspect of eSports business would demand more attention from both content providers and fans alike.

3 Edumotion at play: Moving the circuit

This article argued that the combined aspects of business education, brand-themed promotion and affective emotion characterize the core pillars of Onet Media Group strategy aimed at forging and maintaining eSports media presence in the local, Eastern European market. Through bringing awareness to the current state of sponsored eSports teams, personal transfers and major tournaments staging local players, and maintaining high levels of brand visibility while employing strategies stimulating affectionate user engagement, Onet strives to thrive on the difficult market of eSports online media.

To sum up the analysis through the circuit of culture model, I would like to suggest the term “edumotion” as a label which can be used to characterize the strategy of Onet Media Group with regard to eSports. The core idea of various strategies implemented to secure the desired market share and curate the eSports-related media platforms relies on three pillars: providing educational content, consequently pursue goals related to promoting certain initiatives, and facilitating emotional response from the target audience. Thus, education, promotion and emotion effectively become key elements of the five cultural processes which put together complete the local eSports circuit of culture. This model assumes a great deal of control over the said circuit; in the current Eastern-European media landscape the trend towards unification and cross-brand integration regarding eSports initiatives is gaining significant momentum. By 2021, the StarCraft World Championships will probably have been integrated in the IEM tournament circuit, which means that the officially acclaimed best player will be announced after a tournament in Poland instead of a tournament during Anaheim’s BlizzCon. Furthermore, the new ESL Pro Tour initiative gathers major tournaments – and games, including *Warcraft III: Reforged*, *StarCraft* and *Counter Strike: Global Offensive* – under one umbrella company, which will also involve close partnership with DreamHack, currently the largest digital games festival. It can be argued that at this stage of development in the local eSports market, both Onet / Ringier Axel Springer Polska and ESL focus on “branding” the large-scale tournaments, which means taking over the control of their organization and distribution of the content generated through them.

Edumotion understood as a framework sketch can be reconciled with some other interpretative concepts, e.g. those presenting eSports-related streaming services (such as Twitch.tv) as sites where visual and discursive strategies are used to capture and occupy the chief users’ commodity – their attention [1]; similarly, the idea of eSport as commercial gaming governed by the power of executive ownership [12] corresponds with Onet’s attempts at shaping the discursive field of electronic sports.

The final goal of this paper is to introduce the edumotion concept as a potentially useful framework for assessing the development of eSports-related media circuit outside the Eastern European context. As such, the three categories of education, promotion and emotion may work as a measure stick against the increasing commodification of fan-based work in the globalized eSports business.

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