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***Ultras in esports: Who are they, what defines them, and how should clubs and organisations engage with them?***

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## 1. Introduction

When one thinks of football, the image that often comes to mind is that of a stadium with packed stands, trembling with the voices of people singing, shouting, roaring or chanting for their favourite team. At the heart of this crowd, there are two particular groups, each supporting one of the teams competing on the pitch, the ultras.

The term “ultra” truly gained prominence around the 1950s, notably with the emergence of the first organised supporter groups, such as the Ultras Granata in Turin, Italy (Bromberger, 1995). Ultras do not see themselves as ordinary fans who occasionally attend their team's matches. For them, the club is a way of life, a core part of their identity, something they defend with every fibre of their being. To express their devotion, they chant, whether in the stands or outside stadiums, displaying banners, tifos, scarves and face paint bearing their team's colours and emblems, proudly representing their club. This shared passion and desire to rally around a club's flag have laid the foundations for a subculture with its own codes, rules and collective identity, all rooted in local territory but above all in a passion for the club itself (Hourcade, 2004).

There is also a third category of individuals in these stadiums, who are neither there to support a team nor to enjoy the sport. Their aim is altogether different, simply to cause trouble through acts of violence: the hooligans (Stebbins, 2000).

In recent years, in a world where virtual and digital realities are increasingly dominant, groups of ultras have begun to emerge in the world of esports (Electronic Sport), a universe attracting growing interest from both young people and adults. Today, almost one in two people in France plays video games (Statista, 2025). This enthusiasm is also felt at tournaments and esports events. Previously, as with football, spectators were mainly people who came to enjoy the event as casual fans, without necessarily supporting any particular team, organisation or player. In France, the first movements of supporterism and ultras appeared in 2018 with the creation of the Golden Hornets, an association supporting the esports team Vitality.

Nevertheless, it was with the arrival of Karmine Corp on the French League of Legends scene, and above all with the creation of the association Le Blue Wall, that the term “ultra” was truly introduced to the sector, as this group explicitly defines itself as the ultras of Karmine Corp (Arrivé, 2022).

Yet, what does it mean to be an ultra in a world where almost everything happens remotely, via the Internet, with little physical presence except on a few occasions? Are the values, practices and expectations of esports ultras comparable to those of their football counterparts, or have they evolved to adapt to this new environment?

This phenomenon raises many questions that remain largely unexplored, and it is precisely these issues that this dissertation seeks to address.

The reasons for choosing this subject are several. Firstly, scientific literature mainly focuses on ultras in traditional sports such as football, rugby and baseball. Secondly, as previously mentioned, the world of video games and esports is rapidly growing, accompanied by the striking emergence of ultra associations which are making a real impact on the esports scene. Finally, the last reason lies in the lack of empirical research and analysis on this subject, which risks leading to misunderstandings, especially as the arrival of ultras in the esports scene represents a genuine opportunity for all stakeholders, whether players, clubs, event organisers or game publishers (Arrivé, 2022).

It is therefore essential to understand ***who the ultras are in esports, what defines them, and how clubs and organisations should engage with them.***

In order to address this new and complex issue, the dissertation is structured into four main parts. The first part takes the form of a literature review, as comprehensive as possible, to firmly anchor the analysis both in long-term context and current academic research. This section is more than a simple theoretical overview, as it aims to embrace the full richness, sometimes contradictory, of what has been written on the topic, combining classic works and the most recent studies. I have chosen to divide it into two main sections.

The first part of this section focuses on the history and culture of ultras in traditional sports, especially football, where it all truly began. It offers an analysis of the birth of the movement, its rise from the 1950s and 1960s in the Mediterranean basin, with a particular emphasis on Italy and France, which are genuine hotbeds of organised supporterism (Bouzat, 2004; Bromberger, 1995). It seemed essential to me to revisit the deep roots of attachment to clubs, to understand how a strong collective identity was built, through codes, rituals, hierarchies, intergenerational transmission, as well as the tensions, protests and internal conflicts that sometimes run through these groups, perceived as both creators of atmosphere and critical counter-powers vis-à-vis sports institutions (Choluj, Gerard and May, 2020). Through this historical and sociological approach, the aim is to grasp how values such as loyalty, solidarity and territorial defence were forged, which have come to form the foundation of a whole popular imagination.

The second section of this review ventures into much more contemporary territory: that of esports. The challenge here is altogether different, as the academic documentation remains scarce and the subject is constantly evolving. It has therefore

been necessary to draw on a variety of sources, including recent academic analyses, reports from specialised organisations (Nielsen, 2019), and exploratory studies on the structuring of fan communities (Barney and Pennington, 2023). Particular attention is paid to the typology of these new supporters: whether they are casual spectators, core fans or superfans, there is now great diversity in the profiles and forms of engagement. This section details how the digital realm and platforms such as Discord and Twitch have transformed modes of belonging, participation, and identity construction among fans. It also examines the question of attachment: are esports communities more loyal to a club, an organisation, star players, or even to a “spirit of the game”? Finally, I do not overlook the current research limitations, emphasising how the notion of “ultra” in esports is recent, unclear and still very much under construction.

The second part of the dissertation is devoted to the chosen methodology. The absence of secondary data and the youth of the phenomenon led me to adopt a qualitative, open and exploratory approach, privileging attentive listening and the collection of field narratives. The aim here is not to quantify or to fix conclusions, but to grasp the complexity of individual journeys, experiences and discourses. I opted for semi-structured interviews, guided by a set of key themes identified in the literature review, such as individual trajectories, perceptions of the community, relationships with hierarchy, codes, passion, and activist commitment. The interviewee panel was designed to reflect the diversity of the movement: association presidents, board members, and ordinary active members. The analysis was conducted using a hybrid thematic coding, with some themes defined from existing research, while others emerged throughout the interviews.

The third part forms the empirical heart of the work, presenting in detail the results of the interviews. This section is organised around three main areas: firstly, a vivid and accurate portrait of esports ultras, far from caricatures or preconceived ideas, describing their socio-demographic profiles, personal histories, level of seniority and involvement, and how they see their role within the community. The second section explores in depth their values, codes, shared references, as well as the forms of solidarity, mutual support or internal conflict: what meaning is given to attachment to a club, a game, or a collective? What role do they wish to play with respect to official structures: counter-power, partner, or simply supporter? Lastly, the third section investigates the expectations of esports ultras towards clubs: desire for recognition, access to privileges, influence over communication strategy or merchandising management, aspiration to be considered as genuine actors and not just passive consumers. This analysis does not merely provide a static overview but

compares similarities and differences with the world of traditional sport, to identify what is inherited and what truly constitutes innovation.

The fourth part of the dissertation takes the time to step back and reflect on everything uncovered during the investigation. Rather than seeking to oppose or to rank, the aim is to understand, without prejudice, what is shared between traditional ultras and those now emerging in esports, as well as what changes, adapts or disappears. This section looks at the points of contact between these two worlds, their, sometimes, significant differences, and the many grey areas that exist between them. One notable aspect that emerges is the way engagement can be experienced differently depending on whether one is in a stadium or behind a screen: how is social connection built when most exchanges are virtual? Does passion take a different form, or does it ultimately remain the same? Through this discussion, the dissertation also raises the question of vocabulary: can we really speak of “ultras” in esports as we do in football, or do we need to invent new terms to describe a phenomenon that does not fit neatly into established categories? Finally, based on this analysis, suggestions will be offered to esports clubs, publishers and event organisers: how could they better support these committed communities? What strategies might be put in place to nurture this enthusiasm without distorting it?

In conclusion, the dissertation takes care to assess the contributions of the research, as well as its limitations, with complete transparency. I return to the aspects that would have allowed further exploration: the size of the sample, the rapid evolution of the sector, and of course the difficulty in accessing certain key actors. Rather than viewing these limitations as obstacles, I see them as invitations to pursue further investigation. The phenomenon remains in flux, and there is still much to discover, document and understand, both for researchers and for all those interested in the future of sport and the digital world. (OpenAi, 2023)

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Ultras in traditional sports

#### 2.1.1 History and Origins

Talking about ultras means diving into a story filled with noise, the smell of flares, brotherhoods born under the stadium lights, and memories carved into cold concrete benches. The adventure truly begins in Italy in the 1960s and 1970s, a time when Italian society was undergoing profound change, shaped by student and workers' movements and a youth seeking to exist beyond the boundaries of everyday life. (OpenAi, 2023)

#### **Italy, birthplace of the movement**

It all began, or almost, in the stands of Milan and Turin, where popular fervour merged with the rebellious spirit of a generation eager to challenge the established order. The very first groups, such as Fossa dei Leoni in Milan (1968), the Boys of Inter (1969), and later the Commando Ultra Curva Sud in Rome, were born in this context of tension and hope. For these young people from working-class neighbourhoods, the stadium became a field for collective experimentation: it was no longer just a place to watch the game, but a space to exist together, in noise and colour (Louis, 2018; Testa and Armstrong, 2010).

The word "ultra", chosen for its radical tone, embodies a desire to go further than simple support. It's about giving everything, never giving up. Stories are told of young people spending their nights painting banners or organizing improvised trips, even if it meant sleeping outside or walking kilometres to get home after the match (Louis, 2018). The group then becomes a second family, sometimes closer than blood, with its own codes, initiation rites, and moments of grace.

#### **A movement spreading beyond Italy**

This unique model quickly fascinated fans beyond the Alps. In France, it wasn't until the early 1980s that the first structured groups appeared, inspired by the Italians but also shaped by local realities. The Commando Ultra 84, founded in Marseille, is often cited as the pioneer in France. Here too, the popular identity is strong: most members come from southern neighbourhoods, driven by a desire to defend the club "against everyone and everything," sometimes even against the club's own management (Doidge, 2015; Spaaij, 2006).

In Paris, Lyon, and Saint-Étienne, other groups emerged and adapted the codes in their own way: tifos, collective chants, informal hierarchy, solidarity in case of conflict with the police or other supporters. These are stories of missed trains, sleepless nights spent making tifos in a tiny clubhouse, and chants echoing in the streets long after the end of the match (Doidge and al., 2018).

### **A boiling political and social context**

What stands out in the accounts of former ultras is their deep anchoring in a very particular political and social context. Many recount how, for them, the stadium was above all a space of freedom, almost of resistance, against a society perceived as hostile or indifferent. The early years are marked by distrust towards authority: the club, law enforcement, sports institutions. In some Italian cities, the connection with student or workers' movements is obvious: the banner is never far from the political flag, and chants resonate like slogans (Podaliri and Balestri, 1998; Testa, 2009).

Sociologists who have studied the stands emphasize this dimension: being an ultra means, first and foremost, feeling different, inventing a parallel world where you truly exist. The interviews conducted by Testa and Armstrong (2010) with members of Roman or Neapolitan groups show that many saw the curva as a refuge, a place to learn loyalty and collective spirit. Violence, whether real or imagined, is never an end in itself: it is part of a narrative of resistance, of conquering symbolic territory against the invasion of football by money or security politics (Doidge and al., 2018; Spaaij, 2006).

### **Legacy and Transformations**

Despite repression, video surveillance, and the rise of commercial logic, the ultra flame has not disappeared. It has transformed, sometimes becoming more radical, sometimes mellowing, but it continues to shape the identity of stadiums, from Marseille to Belgrade, from Rome to Saint-Étienne. Even today, it is the ultras who keep the myth of "popular football" alive: people come to the stadium to sing, to feel the excitement, and to affirm that the club still belongs to those who truly love it, not just those who own it (Louis, 2018).

Cleland and al. (2018) describe this mix of exhaustion and euphoria after an entire night spent setting up a tifo in the rain, the fearful adrenaline of traveling to a rival city, or simply the pure joy of seeing thousands of people singing the same chant

together, “like a single soul.” Ultimately, the history of ultras is about a universal need: to belong, to fight, to feel alive.

### 2.1.2 Identity, values, and functioning

Being an ultra is not just about posturing in the stands or making noise. Above all, it’s a way of feeling connected to something greater than yourself, a club, a city, sometimes a neighbourhood or an entire generation. Many recount that their ultra commitment came long before their passion for football: it was the need to experience a collective adventure, to feel an intensity impossible to find elsewhere, that drew them to the stands. (Ginhoux, 2015).

#### **A powerful sense of belonging**

As soon as you step into the curva or the stands, you feel like you are entering another world. There are the elders, watching the younger ones with both a protective and demanding gaze. There are rituals: gestures, chants, passwords you must learn. You don’t become an ultra overnight: you have to prove yourself, show your loyalty, and participate in the life of the group. This loyalty is the cornerstone: “You never let go of the club, and above all, never the group, even in the worst moments. That’s what it means to be an ultra: sticking together no matter what” (Spaaij, 2006; Testa and Armstrong, 2010).

In most groups, everything is built on solidarity. Members help each other, share travel costs, and protect their own if things go wrong. Many describe the stand as a second family: it’s where you grow up, where you are shaped, where you learn trust and how to stand strong in the face of adversity (Doidge, 2015).

#### **Values: loyalty, authenticity, resistance**

Over the years, an “ultra code” has developed, often tacit but shared across Europe. Loyalty comes first, above everything else. A true ultra does not abandon ship during difficult seasons. They do not hesitate to oppose the club’s management if it “betrays the spirit” of popular football. This explains the famous chant strikes, the biting banners aimed at the board or even calls for certain presidents to resign (Louis, 2018).

Authenticity is just as central. Ultras reject the image of the “footix,” the occasional fan who comes just to consume the spectacle. They did not only come to watch the game but mainly to defend the colours of the club, whether the club wins or loses (Hourcade, 2004). Loyalty to the stand is almost sacred, hence the contempt for those who leave it for the VIP boxes or who don’t sing for the full 90 minutes.

Finally, resistance: this is expressed both against the commercialization of football (rising ticket prices, modernized logos, clubs bought by foreign investors) and against the increasing control of supporters by the authorities. Ultras defend their autonomy, their right to criticize, to protest, and to mobilize for their vision of the club (Cleland and al., 2018).

### **A highly codified system, between ritualization and transgression**

The ultra group is not chaos; it is a highly structured organisation, with its leaders, chant coordinators, tifo managers, and treasurers. Tasks are distributed, decisions are often made collectively, even though the elders still hold considerable influence. Joining the group can feel like an initiation: you have to prove yourself during away trips, take part in collective life, and respect the elders. Some testimonies even mention a symbolic “baptism,” where you must demonstrate your determination (Podaliri and Balestri, 1998).

All this does not exclude a deliberate form of transgression. Ultras like to see themselves as out of the ordinary, a little on the edge, sometimes provocative. The use of flares, the creation of spectacular tifos, and the invention of controversial chants are all ways to assert their existence in the face of the club and institutions. This “us against the world” culture strengthens cohesion and collective pride (Spaaij, 2006; Testa and Armstrong, 2010).

### **Masculinity, hierarchy, and (slow) openness**

The ultra world remains predominantly male, valuing masculinity, courage, and physical resilience. The stories of former members show how the group could function almost like a military unit: “You had to show you weren’t afraid, that you could take the hits,” recalls a Neapolitan supporter interviewed by Testa and Armstrong (2010). Yet, some groups now see the emergence of new profiles, with women becoming more visible, greater diversity, and even occasional critical reflection on these old codes (Pitti, 2018).

## **Counter-power and identity construction**

One of the most distinctive features remains the desire to be an actor within the club, not just a spectator. Ultras negotiate, protest, mobilize their members during general meetings, launch solidarity or charitable actions, and stand for local values (Doidge, 2015; Podaliri and Balestri, 1998). Identity construction is shaped as much by affirming differences (city, neighbourhood, region, history) as by confrontation: the “ultra” “we” is defined in opposition to a “them” (the club, the League, the media, sometimes historic rivals).

### **2.1.3 typology**

Observing an ultra stand means grasping the richness of a world far more fragmented than it appears. Behind the image of a compact and uniform bloc, each group actually displays great diversity in personalities, forms of commitment, and identity strategies, influenced by local context, club history, or even the dominant sports culture (Cleland and al., 2018; Hourcade, 2004).

### **The hard core: guardians of the “sacred”**

At the centre of the group is what the literature calls the “hard core” or central ultras (Hourcade, 2004; Kennedy, 2013; Louis, 2018).

They are the ones who drive collective dynamics, organize displays, make strategic decisions, and embody the spirit of sacrifice for the group. Their commitment is shown in their regular presence at the stadium, leadership in critical moments, and concrete investment in preparing tifos or managing internal affairs (Bernache-Assollant and al., 2014).

Respect is often earned “on the ground,” through endurance during away trips, creativity in displays, or the ability to stand firm in times of internal or external tension (Hourcade, 2004). This centrality is accompanied by a keen sense of secrecy and control over the group’s image, in order to avoid any misuse or co-option by outsiders (Mignon, 1998).

### **The periphery: active members, “semi-committed” supporters**

Surrounding this core are the “active” members, sometimes called “peripheral” members, who regularly participate in group life without embodying its leadership (Doidge, 2015; Kennedy, 2013).

Their presence remains essential, as they amplify the group’s voice during major events, help with logistics or fundraising, and ensure a kind of generational renewal. This periphery is not simply a pool of future leaders: for many, this “à la carte” commitment is a way to balance personal life and passion, without giving up the intensity of the ultra experience (Bernache-Assollant and al., 2014). It is not uncommon for members to move between the periphery and the core, depending on life events or their level of investment.

### **Sympathizers and satellites: the shifting boundaries of inclusion**

Beyond the active circle, the ultra group attracts a whole set of sympathizers and “satellite” figures (Mignon, 1998; Spaaij, 2006).

These may be former members, young people seeking belonging, relatives, or simply supporters fascinated by ultra culture without wishing to invest themselves fully. This porous boundary is both a strength, it allows for renewal and the spreading of values, and a source of tension, as the hard core is vigilant in preserving the “sacred” against banalization or co-option (Hourcade, 2004).

Belonging is therefore fluid: some sympathizers eventually join the central structure, while others drift away without severing their emotional ties to the stand.

### **Social diversity, age, and backgrounds**

Contrary to the persistent image of a monolithic stand, recent research highlights the social heterogeneity of ultra groups.

You’ll find students, manual workers, precarious employees, but also managers, retirees, and an increasing number of women (Guyon, 2007; Pitti, 2018).

This diversity is partly due to the “cross-cutting” nature of sports passion, but also to the social function of the group: for many, the stand provides a space for mixing, for confronting different backgrounds, and for building a collective identity that transcends differences (Bernache-Assollant and al., 2014).

The generational factor also plays a role: some groups value transmission, with “elders” mentoring newcomers, while others experience rapid turnover, sometimes generating tension over the “right way” to be an ultra (Hourcade, 2004).

### **Dominant masculinity, but recent evolutions**

The ultra world remains, both in the collective imagination and in reality, strongly male-dominated, with an emphasis on codes of masculinity, physical courage, and “displays of strength” (Guyon, 2007; Mignon, 1998).

However, more recent ethnographic studies show the emergence of female figures, sometimes driving internal changes, new codes of respect, or social initiatives (Pitti, 2018).

Diversity remains a fragile conquest, still marked by resistance and division of roles, but it contributes to the reconfiguration of identities and the diversification of modes of commitment

### **Logics of distinction and modes of inclusion/exclusion**

Finally, the typology of ultras cannot be understood without mentioning the logic of distinction, both internal (between hard core and periphery) and external (with respect to other groups, the club, or casual supporters) (Hourcade, 2004; Mignon, 1998).

Inclusion requires mastery of the codes, loyalty to the group, and acceptance of the rituals; exclusion awaits those who betray the spirit, collaborate with the institution, or adopt behaviours deemed “contrary to the honour” of the stand (Kennedy, 2013; Louis, 2018).

It is this articulation between openness and control, between social diversity and identity requirements, that makes ultra groups spaces in constant transformation.

#### **2.1.4 Expectations towards the club and the sporting environment**

What sets ultras apart from other supporters is their demanding, and often ambivalent, relationship with the club, its management, and the entire sporting world. An ultra is never satisfied with the role of a mere spectator: they expect to be recognized, consulted, and respected, while fiercely maintaining the autonomy of their group. These expectations, complex and constantly evolving, are at the heart of

the dynamic between the stands and club leadership (Doidge, 2015; Kennedy, 2013; Mignon, 1998; Podaliri and Balestri, 1998).

### **A demand for recognition and authenticity**

Across testimonies and academic analyses, the first expectation emerges clearly: recognition of their central role in the stadium's atmosphere and the history of the club (Louis, 2018; Mignon, 1998).

Ultras demand not to be reduced to mere consumers or extras. They want to be seen as essential actors, capable of turning a stadium into a "living fortress" and of carrying the club's identity high, even in difficult times.

This quest for recognition is accompanied by a rejection of commercial or institutional appropriation. Many ultras refuse to be used as communication tools or to see their culture diluted for the sake of marketing disconnected from the reality of the stands (Hourcade, 2004; Kennedy, 2013). They insist on their freedom of speech and action, even when it disturbs the club's management.

### **Preserving a "popular football" and the soul of the stands**

The defence of "popular football" is among the ultras' major demands. Ultras oppose price increases, the gentrification of stands, and the transformation of stadiums into sanitized spaces or VIP zones (Doidge, 2015; Spaaij, 2006).

They expect the club to protect access for young people, families, and working-class fans, and to allow the continuation of local traditions, especially standing support, the display of tifos, or the use of musical instruments.

For many, the club must remain true to its history: any change in logo, colours, or ticketing policy without consultation is seen as a betrayal. Mobilizations against these "top-down" changes reveal the deep attachment to a collective identity shaped in the stands (Louis, 2018; Mignon, 1998).

### **Respect for autonomy and coexistence with club management**

At the core of ultras' expectations is the notion of autonomy, both as an organisational principle and a safeguard against outside interference (Hourcade, 2004; Louis, 2018).

Ultras self-finance their displays, choose their own messages, and organize internal

life without club intervention. This independence involves managing dues, crafting tifos by hand, and recruiting members according to the group's own criteria (Bernache-Assollant and al., 2014; Kennedy, 2013).

Coexistence with club management fluctuates between tension, negotiation, and compromise. In practice, club executives know that ignoring or snubbing ultras can lead to a loss of atmosphere, attendance, or even public image. Regular, sometimes informal meetings are held to manage safety, travel, or fan displays, but these exchanges remain "under surveillance": both sides defend their prerogatives and do not hesitate to threaten a break if there is disagreement (Louis, 2018; Mignon, 1998).

The complex dynamics of this coexistence are well illustrated by the case of Legia Warsaw, analysed by Choluj, Gerard, and May (2020). Their study highlights genuine interdependence: ultras are part of a system where the club needs their fervour and mobilizing power, while they depend on the club for the survival of their expressive space. The relationship is never free from tension. In Warsaw and elsewhere, ultras fiercely oppose the commercialization of football, higher prices, logo "marketingization," security restrictions, while knowing that their power within the club comes from their central role in atmosphere and supporter loyalty. Negotiation is ongoing, oscillating between open confrontation (boycotts, chant strikes) and pragmatic compromise depending on the stakes (Choluj and al., 2020).

When management imposes what is perceived as excessive repression (price hikes, flare bans, collective sanctions), ultras quickly respond with chant strikes, protest banners, or media mobilization. This capacity for "disruption" and rapid mobilization explains why many clubs prefer to negotiate, even concede, on sensitive points (Hourcade, 2004; Louis, 2018).

All of this produces a genuine "forced partnership": each side benefits from the other's strength while maintaining a clear boundary. For ultras, preserving this critical distance, this right to insubordination, is existential (Kennedy, 2013).

### **Freedom of expression and the right to protest**

Freedom to criticize is an integral part of ultra culture: ultras expect the club to accept disagreement, the right to denounce what they see as disconnected management, or to reject the normalization of the stands. Any attempt to silence chants, impose quotas, or stifle the group's collective imagination is perceived as an offense to the soul of the group (Bernache-Assollant and al., 2014).

More recently, this autonomy has expanded to include civic and social demands: participation in food collections, support for local causes, and the defence of the stadium as the city's "common good" (Boualam and El Houari, 2023).

The stadium thus becomes a laboratory for collective engagement, where new forms of solidarity are invented, sometimes in opposition to the institution, but also, paradoxically, in dialogue with it.

### **A fragile but vital balance**

Ultimately, the relationship between ultras and club management is never static: it is constantly played out between alliance and mistrust, between the desire for recognition and the need to keep control.

Autonomy is not merely a posture: it shapes the group's daily life, determines its strategies, and underpins members' commitment. This delicate balance, marked by adjustments, ruptures, and reconciliations, largely explains the vitality of ultra culture, despite the modernisation of football and institutional pressures (Hourcade, 2004; Louis, 2018).

#### **2.1.5 relation to spectacle, transgression and loyalty**

For ultras, the stadium is never simply a theatre or an entertainment venue. It is a living territory, a space for performance where the boundary between spectator and actor dissolves. At every match, the stand becomes a stage for popular expression, blending creativity, protest, and a sense of loyalty that defies the commercial logic of modern sport (Louis, 2018; Mignon, 1998; Spaaij, 2006).

### **The spectacle: collective invention and rejection of passive consumption**

Unlike the image of the spectator-supporter, the ultra sees themselves first and foremost as a co-creator of the spectacle. Numerous studies in social psychology and sport management show that ultra groups value the collective construction of atmosphere: making tifos, inventing chants, designing elaborate choreographies, and displaying the stand's own flags and colours (Bernache-Assollant and al., 2014; Choluj and al., 2020).

This active dimension of supporter culture is not merely aesthetic: it is asserted as both a right and a responsibility. Ultras seek to distinguish themselves from the

“consumer audience”, seen as passive and depoliticised, favouring a participatory logic in which the spectacle is reinvented at every match (Newson and al., 2024). In this way, the stand becomes a space for intense socialisation, the transmission of know-how, and symbolic competition between rival groups (Kennedy, 2013).

### **Transgression: a marker of identity and a political act**

Transgression, at the heart of ultra culture, is analysed in many studies as a founding act. It takes the form of controlled excesses: lighting flares, displaying provocative banners, and circumventing rules imposed by clubs or the police (Guyon, 2007; Mignon, 1998).

This taste for risk, far from being gratuitous, contributes to the construction of an ultra “us”, where challenge and ordeal cement the sense of belonging (Testa, 2009).

More recently, transgression has also become politicised. Some groups use the stand as a sounding board for local, social, or political causes: fighting racism, defending the neighbourhood, or denouncing corruption in football (Boualam and El Houari, 2023). This relationship with the rules, sometimes contested, sometimes negotiated, enables ultras to assert their autonomy and defy the security-driven logic of “modern football” (Choluj and al., 2020; Kennedy, 2013).

### **Loyalty: radical fidelity, the pillar of the movement**

Loyalty stands as the backbone of the ultra movement. Allegiance to the club—and to the group itself—goes far beyond sporting results or passing trends (Pitti, 2018).

Numerous studies show that this bond is ritualised through a series of ordeals: costly travel, unwavering presence in the stand, and material and moral solidarity in times of conflict (Guyon, 2007; Spaaij, 2006).

The ultra collective memory is full of examples where loyalty is celebrated as a cardinal virtue: standing strong after a heavy defeat, supporting the club during crises, or protecting a struggling member. Conversely, betrayal, such as abandoning the group, informing the police, or supporting a despised management, is rarely forgiven, as it threatens the unity of the collective (Hourcade, 2004; Mignon, 1998).

## **A critical relationship with contemporary football**

This trio, inventing the spectacle, creative transgression, unwavering loyalty, forms the basis of a highly critical attitude towards “modern football”. Ultras reject the commodification of passion, increased surveillance, and the dilution of traditions.

Through their practices, they reaffirm that football remains, above all, a common good: a space for sharing and popular expression, far from the logics of profitability and pre-packaged spectacle (Boualam and El Houari, 2023; Choluj and al., 2020;; Kennedy, 2013).

## **2.2 Esport fans**

### **2.2.1 Typology**

Esport has given rise to a vibrant fan culture, one that is profoundly different from, yet at times comparable to, that of traditional sport. Contrary to stereotypes, esports fans do not form a homogeneous bloc: contemporary research highlights their richness and complexity (Barney and Pennington, 2023; Hamari and Sjöblom, 2017; Kim and al., 2022; Seo and Jung, 2013). Recent demographic data show that esports audiences remain predominantly male (around 76–89% depending on the game), but the share of female fans has grown to 18–30% in certain scenes. The largest segment is young adults aged 18–34, yet teenagers (13–17) represent 8–20% of the fanbase, demonstrating the generational breadth and dynamism of this public (Nielsen, 2019). The categories below, drawn from recent and complementary research, illustrate the diversity of these fan identities.

#### **The “connoisseurs” and veterans of the scene**

These are the historical enthusiasts: often players themselves, they have followed competitions for several years, know the games in depth, and are sometimes involved in content creation or community management. They place great value on technical skills, performance, and the history of major teams or players (Seo and Jung, 2016; Taylor, 2018).

#### **The “event-based viewers” or casual fans**

Another category comprises those who mainly watch major events: world finals, big LANs, or spectacular tournaments broadcast on streaming platforms. The accessibility

of platforms such as Twitch or YouTube Gaming encourages this kind of occasional engagement, driven by the desire for spectacle, shared emotion, or simple curiosity (Hamari and Sjöblom, 2017; Smith and al., 2019).

### **“Player fans” versus “club fans”**

Several studies show that, in esports, allegiance may be directed towards an individual personality (star player, influential streamer, famous caster) or towards a team or brand (structured club, franchise, fan community). “Player fans” do not hesitate to follow a career across different clubs or games, while “club fans” identify with a history, colours, or a specific project (Kim and al., 2022; Seo, 2013).

Recent studies highlight that 63% of esports fans on Twitch in the United States report spending more time interacting with gaming personalities than with purely competitive content, underlining the central role of individual stars and streamers in the construction of fan allegiance (Nielsen, 2019).

### **“Creators” and active fans**

A hallmark of esports’ digital culture, this group includes those who produce and share memes, videos, analyses, fan art, or podcasts. They are true ambassadors, essential to the vibrancy and reputation of the scene: they spread codes, create trends, and influence consumption patterns (Nielsen, 2019; Taylor, 2018).

### **Community and “tribal” fans**

In certain scenes (Europe, Korea, Brazil), the community dimension is expressed through forums, Discord groups, or “IRL” (in real life) events. Members develop a sense of belonging to a “tribe”, which may go as far as organising collective trips, managing chants, or even founding “fan sections” in certain prominent clubs (Kim and al., 2022, Seo and Jung, 2016).

### **Emerging ultras and organised supporters**

Recently, esports has seen the emergence of fan groups inspired by the ultra model from traditional sport: the display of tifos, coordinated chants, travel to LANs or offline events, and even the creation of membership codes and specific rituals (Gawrysiak and al., 2020). This phenomenon, still a minority but highly publicised (for

example, the “Blue Wall” of Karmine Corp), marks a turning point in the structuring of esports supporter culture.

### **“Cross-scene” and multi-fandom fans**

Finally, the digital world encourages the rise of “cross-scene” fans, who support several teams or games at once, depending on the season, personalities, or trends. This permeability between scenes and fandoms is often cited as a hallmark of esports, linked to career fluidity and the diversity of gaming universes (Smith and al., 2019).

### **Conclusion**

The typology of esports fans defies simplistic readings. Within a single individual, one may often find several forms of allegiance and participation, evolving over the years and with the innovations of the scene (Hamari and Sjöblom, 2017, Taylor, 2018). Moreover, the ongoing diversification of the esports fanbase, as evidenced by demographic and conceptual studies (Barney and Pennington, 2023, Nielsen, 2019), further challenges any attempt to reduce this community to a single profile or motivation.

### **2.2.2 Online Engagement**

The vast majority of engagement takes place on digital platforms, notably Twitch, which remains the leading livestreaming platform for esports (Nielsen, 2019).

Online engagement constitutes the beating heart of esports supporter culture. Unlike traditional sports, where physical presence in the stadium remains central, esports has witnessed the birth and explosive growth of forms of engagement that are entirely mediated by digital technology. This engagement goes far beyond simply watching matches, and takes shape in collective, creative, and sometimes activist practices, at the intersection of digital cultures and fan labour.

### **Following competitions and interactive consumption**

The first level of engagement lies in the active consumption of content: watching live matches, interacting with streamers or casters, and taking part in chats and live polls (Hamari and Sjöblom, 2017; Taylor, 2018).

On Twitch or YouTube Gaming, fans do not simply watch: they chat, exchange memes, launch friendly bets, and sometimes even influence the course of the live event through collective reactions (Sjöblom and al., 2017).

This “digital co-presence” transforms the fan into an active participant in the online atmosphere. The literature refers to the idea of a “virtual stadium”: the platform becomes a place for expression, belonging, and direct interaction between viewers, hosts, and teams (Seo and Jung, 2016).

### **Content creation and participatory culture**

One of the major features of online engagement in esports is the ability of fans to become content creators themselves, especially via social media, streaming, and the production of memes or visuals, but also, and most importantly, in the form of highlights, humorous videos, fan art, strategy guides, or podcasts. This enriches the digital ecosystem on an ongoing basis. This “fan labour” is both a vehicle for social recognition and a tool for structuring the community (Taylor, 2018).

Several studies show that this often voluntary creativity contributes to the emergence of opinion leaders, influencers, or even new professional careers (Smith and al., 2019). It facilitates the transmission of history, codes, and values specific to each team or scene.

### **Online communities and sense of belonging**

Online engagement is not limited to the individual. Most active fans participate in communities, Discord, Reddit, dedicated forums, Facebook groups, private servers, and more.

These spaces are used to organise meetings, share exclusive information, coordinate fan actions (such as voting, support “raids”, campaigns on Twitter), or even to lobby clubs or publishers (Kim and al., 2022).

The literature emphasises the “tribal” dimension of these virtual communities, which foster loyalty, mutual support, friendly competition, and sometimes opposition to other groups (Seo and Jung, 2016).

## **Engagement “militant” and actions collectives**

Online engagement can sometimes take on a militant aspect, as seen in campaigns for boycotts, mobilisation against decisions considered unfair such as bans, publisher policies or cheating scandals, and support for social causes championed by players or clubs (Seo and Jung, 2016; Taylor, 2018).

Digital raids may also be organised to support a team, influence a competition by voting or defend a player's image during a controversy.

### **2.2.3 Behaviours**

Esports fans are characterised by a range of behaviours that reflect both the originality of the digital environment and the adaptation of certain codes from traditional sports fandom. Far from being limited to simple online presence, their practices go well beyond participation, consisting of individual initiatives, collective ritual gestures and dynamics unique to web culture. (OpenAI, 2023)

#### **Rituals and codes specific to each community**

Each esports scene develops its own codes and rituals, such as the use of specific emotes or hashtags during matches, the adoption of inside jokes and references unique to a team or streamer (Sjöblom and al., 2017).

This is not merely a matter of language; these codes create a sense of closeness and draw boundaries between insiders and newcomers, reinforcing group identity and community distinction (Seo and Jung, 2016).

#### **Mobilisation during major events**

Esports fans are able to mobilise on a large scale during major competitions or key moments, organising viewing parties, flooding chats in support of a team, spamming emotes or hashtags during highlights, and launching massive voting campaigns to influence awards or rankings (Smith and al., 2019).

These mobilisations illustrate fans' ability to coordinate spontaneously, transcend the virtual sphere and, at times, influence the course of an event.

#### **Expressing collective emotion and managing conflict**

The collective expression of emotion and the management of conflict are well documented in traditional football settings, where the atmosphere among fans can shift within seconds from euphoria to frustration or rivalry. Following a victory, an

upset or an exceptional move, the collective response often takes the form of chants, displays or waves of support, while defeat can result in criticism, sarcasm or questioning of players (Newson and al., 2024).

Similar patterns can be observed in esports, where online reactions manifest through waves of emotes, gifs or memes in moments of triumph, and cascades of criticism or debate after setbacks. Rivalries between fandoms may escalate into trash talk, but the esports community has also developed self-regulation mechanisms and mutual support to channel these tensions (Cheung and Huang, 2011).

### **Presence and behaviour during physical events**

As LANs and physical events become more frequent, new behaviours are emerging, including wearing clothing in club colours, the gathering of fan groups, collective chanting, and even the organisation of marches or “IRL” tifos (Gawrysiak and al., 2020).

These practices reflect a growing desire to bring digital communities to life and to transpose certain stadium rituals into the world of esports.

### **Creativity, but also risks of going off track**

Finally, fans express their creativity through performances, parody videos or viral memes. While such dynamics have long been documented in traditional football (Newson and al., 2024), they are equally present in esports, where the accessibility and viral nature of online platforms can amplify both positive initiatives and negative excesses. This environment can lead to risks such as harassment, fake news, sudden controversies and antisocial behaviour. (Sjöblom and al., 2017; Taylor, 2018).

#### **2.2.4 Connection to players/personalities vs. connection to clubs**

Esport stands out from traditional sport through a duality of attachment that is rarely as pronounced: some fans identify primarily with a charismatic player or personality, while others are drawn to a team, brand or organisation. This distinction significantly shapes the ways in which communities are structured, interact and evolve.

### **The influence of personalities: starification, identification, mobility**

The stardom of players, streamers and casters plays a central role in the dynamics of esports fandom. On platforms such as Twitch, YouTube, Twitter or Instagram, emblematic figures establish direct relationships with their fans, characterised by closeness, humour and accessibility (Smith and al., 2019; Taylor, 2018). Examples include prominent personalities such as Faker or Rekkles.

Social platforms allow these personalities to shape their image, share their daily lives and forge parasocial relationships with thousands of viewers (Seo, 2013, Taylor, 2018).

One notable feature is the mobility of esports fans. A supporter may follow their favourite player as they move between teams, or even across different games, as it is the individual's style, personality or personal story that unites their fanbase (Seo, 2013). This explains why some communities can reorganise as quickly as player rosters change, and why the careers of certain players or streamers may generate followings that are entirely independent of any club

### **Connection to clubs: emergence of collective identities and tribalisation**

In parallel, attachment to clubs is also intensifying, especially in scenes where organisations develop a strong visual identity, community rituals and carefully crafted communication (Hamari and Sjöblom, 2017; Gawrysiak and al., 2020).

The club becomes a point of reference, a rallying symbol around which songs, gatherings, merchandising and even forms of collective or territorial identity are expressed. In some cases, this process leads to the emergence of dedicated fan groups or even "ultras"-style sections.

Recent studies show that identification with a team encourages long-term loyalty, financial support such as the purchase of merchandise or donations, and participation in physical or virtual events (Kim and al., 2022). The sense of community can, in some cases, even surpass attachment to an individual star.

### **Intersecting logics and hybrid forms of attachment**

In practice, many fans experience a form of hybrid attachment, oscillating between loyalty to a structure and admiration for a personality depending on the season, results or individual stories (Seo and Jung, 2016). This "multi-attachment" model reflects the flexibility of esports fandom but also raises questions about the stability

of communities and the economic model of clubs, which are often dependent on the cycles of popularity surrounding particular stars (Smith and al., 2019).

### **Influence on community dynamics and marketing**

The player versus club duality shapes how teams build their identity, develop merchandising and approach communication. Some organisations focus on fostering loyalty around a collective narrative and shared values, while others highlight key personalities (Hamari and Sjöblom, 2017). Increasingly, marketing strategies seek to “marry” these two logics by promoting team storytelling while leveraging the reach of charismatic individual leaders.

### **2.2.5 Recent emergence of “ultra” groups and limits of current research**

One of the most striking phenomena in recent years within esports is the emergence of organised fan groups adopting some of the codes and practices of the “ultra” movement rooted in traditional sports. While this phenomenon remains a minority, it is attracting increasing media and social attention. However, it has so far received little attention in the academic literature. (OpenAi, 2023)

### **The emergence of ‘ultras’ in esports: importation, reinvention and hybridisation**

Groups such as the “Blue Wall” of Karmine Corp, the “Golden Hornets” at Vitality, or ultra sections at Fnatic or T1 have established themselves as major actors during offline events such as LANs, Worlds or MSI. Their mobilisation can be seen in coordinated chants, digital or physical tifos, banners, constant animation and a desire to defend the “soul” of the club, often in opposition to the purely commercial logic of the spectacle (Arrivé, 2022).

This new form of supporter culture draws on certain rituals inherited from football, such as making flags, singing chants, organising group travel and using Discord servers as platforms for self-organisation. At the same time, it innovates by inventing new forms of engagement, including virtual tifos, slogans launched on Twitter or Reddit, and coordinated campaigns to support a team or criticise publisher decisions (Arrivé, 2022).

Studies such as those by Gawrysiak and al. (2020) have begun to document the development of organised supporter groups in esports, focusing on aspects such as the global and multilingual nature of these communities, generational diversity, high

fluidity of membership, and their ambiguous relationship to the professionalisation of the scene. However, these works do not explicitly address the emergence of “ultra” groups, as this remains a very recent and still largely under-researched phenomenon.

### **Limits of current research: an emerging and fast-changing field**

Despite its media prominence, the rise of ultras in esports remains largely under-explored in academic research.

Several factors explain this situation:

- **Novelty of the phenomenon:** The structuring of ultra groups in esports is a recent development, partly linked to the increase in major physical events and the evolution of fan communities (Gawrysiak and al., 2020). These studies discuss the broader context of organised supporter groups in esports but do not focus specifically on ultras, as this remains a very recent and still under-researched phenomenon.
- **Difficulty of fieldwork:** The digital nature of these groups, their geographical dispersion and rapid turnover make ethnographic studies particularly challenging (Taylor, 2018).
- **Lack of consensus on definition:** The term “ultra” encompasses a wide range of practices and cultures, as shown in the literature on traditional sports, with some groups closely replicating the football model while others create a distinct identity within esports (Hourcade, 2004; Kennedy, 2013). These works focus on football but offer useful frameworks for understanding the diversity of the ultra phenomenon as it appears in esports.
- **Media bias:** The visibility of these groups on social networks can create an impression of scale unmatched in the physical world, while scientific literature still struggles to measure their real influence and scope (Kim and al., 2022).

As a result, there are significant blind spots in current research, with few empirical studies addressing the internal dynamics of groups, conflict management, the relationship with clubs, identity construction or the long-term viability of the “ultra” model in esports. Many scholars have called for a multidisciplinary approach, drawing on sociology, psychology, media studies and digital culture theory to address these gaps (Taylor, 2018).

## **Evolving field**

Given the impact of fan communities, it is therefore essential to understand the full extent of supporter culture within this sector, the ways in which ultra codes have been adapted to fit this environment, and the potential roles these key actors may play in the future within an ecosystem that is evolving so rapidly.

## 3.methodology

### 3.1 introduction

In order to grasp the full richness, complexity and uniqueness of the ultra movement in esports, I have chosen a qualitative, exploratory and immersive approach, centred on the voices of those directly involved. The aim is to provide an insider's perspective, grounded in the accounts of actors who experience and shape the reality of the ultra phenomenon within the digital environment on a daily basis.

### 3.2 Justification of the methodological choice

#### 3.2.1 The relevance of the qualitative approach

The choice of a qualitative methodology was made for several reasons. Firstly, the phenomenon under study, namely ultras in esports, is still largely undocumented by quantitative or statistical research. There is a clear lack of secondary data, making an inductive approach necessary, one that pays close attention to the diversity of lived experiences (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Paillé and Mucchielli, 2016).

Secondly, the central question of this dissertation concerns an in-depth understanding: it seeks to explore how ultra identity is experienced, structured and expressed in a digital context, and how it differs from traditional forms of supporter culture. Only in-depth interviews can reveal these nuances, unique trajectories and sometimes paradoxical representations (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018).

#### 3.2.2. Justification for the choice of semi-structured interviews

This choice is based on recommendations from methodological literature in the social sciences and management, which emphasise that qualitative data collection is particularly appropriate when:

- The phenomenon under study is poorly documented or emerging,
- The aim is to understand the meaning that actors attribute to their practices,
- And access to the perspectives of “key” individuals in the field is essential for shedding light on the complexity of the dynamics observed (Paquet, Schrooten and Simon, 2020).

From this perspective, the semi-structured interview is a preferred tool, as it “makes it possible to reveal the meaning that actors assign to their practices and to the events they experience” (Van Campenhoudt, Marquet and Quivy, 2017, cited in Paquet and al., 2020, p. 57). This format offers both the depth and flexibility required to explore individual experiences, while ensuring comparability of interviews through a coherent and structured framework.

Thus, it is fully consistent with methodological standards for qualitative research on emerging or under-explored social phenomena.

### 3.3. Sampling strategy

#### 3.3.1. Profiles of interviewees

The sample was constructed according to a purposive sampling logic (or reasoned choice) (Blais and Martineau, 2006), with the aim of selecting profiles capable of providing lived expertise on the phenomenon.

Since the movement of ultra in esports has taken a significant leap forward in France and other French-speaking communities in Europe, and has been more developed compared to other regions, we will only focus on this geographical area.

To ensure a diversity of perspectives, the following members were selected as interviewees, representing a variety of roles within three different ultra associations (Karmine Corp, Solary, GentleMates) and one fan association (Vitality):

- **3 Presidents of esports ultra associations:** they are best placed to describe the structuring of the movement, issues of representation and the management of internal tensions. Kc Kateh (Karmine Corp), Sly SLOORK (Solary) and GH Nicolas Gronier (Vitality), all presidents of their respective association, agreed to participate in an interview for my thesis
- **3 Members of the boards of these associations:** they participate in collective decision-making, negotiations with clubs, and hold a strategic vision for the group. Kc Ninouu (Karmine Corp), M8 Ambrxyage (GentleMates) and Sly Utopya (Solary), board members of their respective association, kindly accepted to take part in the interview and sharing their perspectives.
- **3 Ordinary members:** their experience sheds light on daily engagement, evolving involvement and individual motivations. M8 OverR, M8 Shun (both GentleMates) and Gh Koala (Vitality), active members of their respective association, accepted to be interviewed and share their thoughts.

This selection is justified as these individuals are best positioned to define what it means to be an “ultra” in esports, to speak from their own lived experience, and to illustrate both the diversity and internal coherence of their group. Their perspectives provide an informed and embodied understanding of the esports ultra ecosystem.

The detailed list of interviewees, including their pseudonyms, associations, and roles, is provided in Appendix 1.

### 3.3.2. Access and modalities

To build my sample, I contacted relevant individuals directly via Discord, Twitter (X), or email. Some accepted the interview spontaneously, while others did not respond. One advantage of this approach was the “snowball effect”, whereby several participants who agreed to take part subsequently recommended other relevant profiles. This enabled a broader diversity of perspectives and allowed for a deeper exploration of the subject (Noy, 2008).

The interviews were conducted online, mainly via Google Meet to facilitate recording, but also on Discord according to the preferences of some interviewees. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour 30 minutes, depending on the richness of the discussion and the availability of the participants.

## 3.4. Construction and conduct of the interview guide

### 3.4.1. Designing the questions

The interview guide was constructed so as to combine:

- Open questions on the definition of the term “ultra” and whether or not it is claimed,
- Questions on group structure and internal organisation (hierarchy, rules, communication tools, etc.),
- Questions on differentiation from other fan groups, rivalries and conflict management,
- Questions about distinctive practices (chants, visuals, acts of support, signs of belonging, and so on),
- Analysis of the sociology of members (age, gender, involvement, development, etc.),

- Exploration of values, claims, expectations, and the relationship with the club and the esports ecosystem.

This approach was designed to allow for the expression of a wide range of viewpoints and to capture the diversity of experiences, from the “institutional” vision of leaders to the more spontaneous perspectives of ordinary members.

### 3.4.2. Flexibility and depth

The semi-open format of the questions allows for a balance between rigour, ensured by the coherence of the guide, and flexibility, through adaptation to the specificities of each individual trajectory. This approach leaves room for the emergence of new dimensions, such as the role of women, the issue of activism, conflict management and rivalries, the use of digital tools and online community organisation, as well as creativity and participatory engagement through digital content. It also enables exploration of the evolving relationship with clubs and organisers, the hybridisation of supporter identities, generational change within groups and the sense of belonging within these communities. Moreover, the format encourages spontaneous comparisons with other models, such as traditional versus esports supporter culture. (OpenAi, 2023)

The semi-structured interview guide used for the interviews is available in the appendix (Appendix 2). I kept an order in the succession of questions to make it more fluid. However, the order of the questions varied every interview, depending on the interviewee’s response

### 3.4.3 Conduct of the interviews

Before each interview, I briefly introduced my dissertation and my approach. My aim was to demystify the term “ultra” within the esports world and to gain a better understanding of the identity and experiences of those involved. I always made it clear to each participant that they were free to answer or not answer any question, or to skip a question if they wished, without needing to justify themselves. This respect for the interviewee’s pace and comfort helped to establish a climate of trust and encouraged the sincerity of their responses. (OpenAi, 2023)

### 3.5. Data analysis

#### 3.5.1. Hybrid thematic approach

The analysis of the interviews conducted in this study is based on a hybrid thematic approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The main analytical axes (identity, values, functioning, expectations, etc.) are initially inspired by the literature on ultra groups in traditional sports, providing a comparative framework for the phenomenon. However, these themes are not applied rigidly. The aim is precisely to observe whether they emerge in the context of esports, to see how they are transformed, and to identify new categories specific to digital supporter culture when the data reveal them.

This methodological stance thus combines a strong theoretical grounding with inductive openness. The analysis operates through a constant back-and-forth between the existing conceptual framework and the empirical material, so as not to limit exploration to what is already known and to remain attentive to the distinctive dynamics of the esports context.

#### 3.5.2. Validation and limitations

The analysis was compared with the existing literature, discussed with my dissertation supervisor, and at times submitted for peer review in order to ensure interpretive coherence (Mucchielli, 2005). The main limitations are related to the sample size, the risk of self-selection bias (with the most motivated individuals being the most likely to participate), and the subjectivity inherent in qualitative analysis.

### 3.6. Ethical considerations

Confidentiality, anonymity and informed consent guided the entire research process (Kaiser, 2009). Each participant was informed of the purpose of the study, their right to withdraw, and the secure handling of all collected data.

### 3.7. Conclusion to the methodology section

In summary, the adoption of a qualitative approach, centred on semi-structured interviews with leaders of ultra groups in esports, enabled me to explore the diversity of experiences and perspectives, adapting to a rapidly changing field that remains largely unexplored by research. Thematic analysis provided a rich and nuanced

account anchored in the lived realities of the actors, while acknowledging the limitations inherent in this kind of exploratory research. (OpenAi, 2023)

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Definition and Perception of the Term “Ultra” in Esports

In the worlds of electronic sport, the term “ultra” doesn’t have a fixed meaning. Its definition changes constantly, both in what it represents and the image it conveys. Several key figures from leading supporter groups highlight this ambiguity and the plurality of interpretations. (OpenAI, 2023)

#### **A Commitment Beyond Classic Support**

For most interviewees, being an “ultra” is first and foremost about a level of commitment that goes far beyond that of an ordinary supporter. This intensity is often reflected in personal involvement, showing up in person, and mobilizing for the group:

For instance, Ambrxyage from The Green Suits (TGS), member of the Board of Directors, describes:

"For me, an ultra is really someone who travels, who puts in money, even if not everyone can do that, of course, everyone does what they can, but for me, it's someone who gives their voice, who supports the players, who travels, whether in France or abroad." (Ambrxyage, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 39)

This idea of putting the group and movement first is echoed by Sly Sloork, president of Royals 212, though he notes the difference in frequency and scale compared to football:

"To me, an ultra is the person who always travels, who gives everything for the club, who basically lives for the club. In traditional sports, with home stadiums and matches every two weeks, ultras travel a lot. For us, if someone travels four or five times a year, we can already start to call them that." (Sloork, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 1)

#### **Heritage from Traditional Sports, but Not a Simple Copy**

Almost all interviewees acknowledge that the concept of “ultra” in esports is strongly inspired by football, but everyone agrees it needs adapting.

Kateh, president of The Blue Wall, sums it up:

"We really take the codes of ultras as they exist in sports, that means commitment, making tifos, flags, flares, moving together, this idea of rivalry with other clubs... having structured chants... really putting the club as the top priority, right after your family, that's what the ultra mentality is." (Kateh, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 96)

However, not everyone claims the label. Some prefer not to use it out of respect, or to avoid confusion and negative associations.

Nicolas Gronier, president of Golden Hornets, is particularly clear:

"In our association, we don't call ourselves ultras. Some members consider themselves ultras, because for me, an ultra is someone who truly dedicates their life and all their time, even time they should be working, to the association's life."

(Gronier, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 142)

He adds:

"We wanted to step away from that word, even though we're inspired by a lot of what ultras do... but in the ultra world, there's a lot that's close to hooliganism, and that's something we really want to avoid." (Gronier, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 143)

This caution also appears with Gh Koala, member of Golden Hornets:

"We used to call ourselves ultras, from 2018 to 2020, 2021. But then we kind of stopped, because it's seen a bit too negatively by people. They have this image, right or wrong, of ultras in traditional sports... they're afraid we're violent, or too extreme." (Gh Koala, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 162)

### **Plurality and Subjectivity in Definition**

Many interviewees stress that the notion of "ultra" is subjective, even within a single group.

Ninouu, member of the Board of Directors of The Blue Wall, remarks:

"Everyone has their own definition, in my opinion, even within the Blue Wall, you'll find different definitions of the word, among members and among staff." (Ninouu, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 124)

Sly Utopya, treasurer of Royals 212, agrees:

"There's no universal idea; it depends on the person." (Utopya, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 24)

### **A Collective, Evolving, and Inclusive Engagement**

The meaning of "ultra" is not fixed, it evolves with the group's practices and the personal situations of members. For OveR, member of TGS, it's mostly about following the team as closely as possible and being "all in", but he recognizes that intensity can change with life circumstances:

"We're not going to say, 'Oh, he's less active now, he's not a real ultra anymore.'" (OveR, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 64)

For Shun, member of TGS, being an ultra is mainly a matter of time and personal investment in organizing and animating events:

"The word ultra, for me, is for those who are always, or at least very often, at events, who get involved with their time. Those who help organize events, who try to animate the stands, all kinds of things like that... that's what makes someone an ultra, kind of like in football, it's quite similar." (Shun, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 83)

### **Connotation and Perception of the Word**

The external perception of "ultra" is seen as ambiguous. Many mention confusion with violence or radicalism inherited from football:

Ambrxyage (TGS) describes it well:

"Usually, it's negative because of football. When you say 'ultra,' people immediately think of flares in the stands, or even fighting. And so, I have to explain, 'No, it's not that, it's not like that, it's not negative.'" (Ambrxyage, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 39)

But in esports, some find the term less loaded with negativity, at least initially. As Sly Sloork (Royals 212) notes:

"In esports, you don't really find the negative connotation, at least not at the start. The supporters, the organisations, everyone will say 'we're with the Solary ultras, with the KC ultras.' There isn't this negativity you find in football, where people immediately think of violence, which we simply don't have." (Sloork, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 2)

Some groups, like Royals 212, fully embrace the "ultra" label, while stressing the absence of violence and the emphasis on inclusion:

"Yes, we are ultras in esports. I make a distinction between ultras in sports and in esports, but in our context, I consider us to be ultras." (Utopya, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 23)

### **A Demanding but Humble Identity**

A common thread runs through all the interviews: being "ultra" is not a status to be claimed lightly, nor does it mean feeling superior to other fans.

Ninouu (The Blue Wall) emphasizes:

"We're ultras, but we don't compare ourselves to other fans, we don't think we're better than them. It's just about us and our relationship with the club, not about rivalry or looking down on others." (Ninouu, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 128)

Several interviewees insist that the term “ultra” should not be watered down or given to just anyone, out of respect for the original movement:

As Nicolas Gronier (Golden Hornets) explains:

"The word 'ultra', well, not everyone is truly an ultra. We didn't want to force people into that box, out of respect for the ultras we admire in football. If a group, in football or esports, calls themselves ultras but only does things halfway or isn't as committed as real ultras, that kind of dilutes the movement, and for me, that's not giving it the respect it deserves." (Gronier, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 142)

### **Conclusion:**

The definition and perception of “ultra” in esports lies somewhere between a legacy from traditional sports, a form of collective intensity and adaptation to the digital context, and a caution regarding the negative connotations from elsewhere. All interviewees agree on the need for high standards, commitment, and respect for the term, a word that remains both an identity marker and a space for experimentation. (OpenAI, 2023)

## **4.2 Engagement of Esports Ultras**

When it comes to esports ultras, engagement can mean a lot of things. For some, it's spending money or traveling; for others, it's just being present online and supporting the club every day. In the end, each person finds their own way to show they belong to the group. (OpenAI, 2023)

### **Personal and Financial Investment**

For most esports' ultras, engagement begins with a significant investment, both personal and financial, often dictated by their means and circumstances. As Kateh notes,

*"If I make my annual budget to support Karmine, it's high. It's not just about financial investment, it's also about time, because I take days off from work, sometimes a full week for an event. You invest your holidays and your money in it, and for me that's part of the ultra's life, you put your life for the club's support. And it's a pleasure, otherwise I wouldn't do it, but it's a non-negligible investment."* (Kateh, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 104)

Sly Sloork echoes the diversity of financial commitment:

*"We have members who join just to support the association, even if they know they can't attend events. Some say, 'I've been a member for three years and haven't been to a single event, but what you do is great, and we're on the same wavelength, so I give you my money.' Others attend every event; they're there three, four, five times a year, fully invested. Then, there are others who know they'll only do one or two events a year, because financially, going to five events across France is tough." (Sly Sloork, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 7)*

OveR and Shun highlight that for some, esports events become the main focus of their time and budget, replacing other hobbies or holidays:

*"I'm lucky enough to have a good job, to lack nothing, and to be able to go to several events a year. But in return, I don't go on vacation; my holidays are with the association and the club." (OveR, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 62)*

*"There are people who literally give everything to attend every event. There are also people who are living comfortably and can afford it. There's no single social class; there are all kinds." (Shun, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 85)*

### **Physical Presence**

Physical presence is widely seen as a central pillar of ultra engagement, but its importance can change according to personal circumstances and group philosophy. For many, the "ultra" label is reserved for those who travel and animate the stands, as Sly Sloork explains:

*"For me, an ultra is someone who always travels, who lives for the club. Those who do four or five trips a year can be called ultras." (Sly Sloork, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 7)*

Shun reinforces this by linking the ultra identity to visible, collective action:

*"The term ultra applies to people who are very often at events, who invest time, and who are part of organizing the events, trying to create lots of animations and chants, just like in football." (Shun, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 83)*

Gh Koala notes that, even if some members never attend in person, the group tries to make them feel included:

*"When you join, you can be in China and never attend an event, just participate online with likes, RTs, etc. That's fine. Even if you don't participate much in real life, just being there for key Discord meetings is enough." (Gh Koala, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 169)*

## **Online Engagement and Content Creation**

If the "E" in "esport" represents anything, it's the importance of online interaction. Here, being present and active online, often on a daily basis, is far more important than simply showing up to support your club. This duality is explained by Sly Utopya: *«In esports, engagement can also mean being active on social networks, making visuals, sharing, supporting the team online, showing your engagement however you can.»* (Sly Utopya, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 23)

Ninouu explains that digital participation is just as valued as physical: *"For me, being an ultra also means participating in the associative life on Discord, giving your opinion, getting involved, not just at events but also online. Even just talking on Discord, giving feedback, that's important."* (Ninouu, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 132)

For Ambrxyage, social media is key to rallying support and showing the players they are encouraged:

*"Generally, all the support for the team happens on social networks. It'll be on Twitter, we create excitement to support the players."* (Ambrxyage, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 43)

Discord, Twitter (now X), and other platforms serve as the foundation for organizing, communicating, and maintaining ties, both with members and with the wider fanbase.

## **Daily and Ongoing Commitment**

Commitment levels and frequency differ greatly within and between groups. There is usually a core group of "hardcore" members, but there are also more casual but still loyal members. Kateh breaks it down:

*"There are very few people who are really engaged; the majority of our members are more consumers than active participants in the association. I'd say out of 1,200 paying members, only about a hundred are truly involved as ultras. But that's not criticism, it's just very demanding, especially when you're a volunteer."* (Kateh, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 97)

Ambrxyage highlights the time investment:

*"In my department, it takes over 10 hours a week to work on our projects, and the same goes for devs and other poles. Of course, there are some staff roles that take less time, but some require a lot. Regular members are very active, both on Discord*

*and on social networks, but you can't really count the hours, it's more about habit, being there."* (Ambrxyage, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 46)

Sly Sloork notes the natural turnover due to life changes:

*"Some people finish their studies and start working, so they have less time. Others start a family. But for us, involvement is mainly seen in relation to the club's results. When the team isn't doing well, some people lose motivation."* (Sly Sloork, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 7)

Most groups agree that the core of ultras changes over time, with new faces emerging as others step back.

### **Digital Role and "Hybridization"**

Esports ultras are shaped by their digital-native environment. For many, the "ultra" label is flexible enough to include both the hyper-engaged physical supporter and the online-only superfan.

As OveR puts it:

*"There are web ultras and web+event ultras, but they share the same values. There are people who can travel and others who can't, but the love for the team isn't different. Someone who follows the matches online but can't go is just as much a fan."* (OveR, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 80)

Sly Utopya describes the digital environment as both an opportunity and a challenge:

*"Since most matches are online, we have the chance to get together physically and support the players, and that makes us want to show up even more. But just staying digital can't always strengthen your love for the club; it's getting out to events that really amplifies your commitment."* (Sly Utopya, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 37)

Gh Koala believes that true engagement is hybrid by nature:

*"If you're a complete, passionate supporter, you have to have both. You can't be only digital or only physical, there's always a little of both. But for many, digital takes precedence, because it's easier to support from home on your computer or phone than to travel to an event. It's more accessible."* (Gh Koala, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 178)

Finally, most agree that the community and bonds formed online can be as strong as those built at events. For many, Discord and social media have allowed them to connect, build friendships, and find a sense of belonging, sometimes even more so than in traditional sports groups.

## Conclusion

Esports ultras are defined by a mix of passionate investment, a willingness to put club life at the centre, and a unique balance of physical and digital presence. The “ultra” identity adapts to the realities of esports: distances, rare physical events, and digital-first community building. Commitment is expressed in many ways, through money, time, organisation, online activism, and group solidarity, creating a rich, hybrid culture of engagement that both borrows from and reinvents the codes of traditional sports ultras. (OpenAI, 2023)

### 4.3 Relations between Esports Ultras Associations

The landscape of French esports ultras associations is marked by diversity in culture, values, and identity, but is overall characterized by respect, good-natured rivalry, and strong mechanisms for dialogue and collaboration. While group identities may differ, ranging from fierce clubism to broad inclusivity, what emerges from all interviews is a shared commitment to keeping rivalries playful, avoiding physical conflict, and fostering a positive environment for all fans. (OpenAi, 2023)

#### Playful Rivalry and “Good Banter”

Across all interviews, the notion of rivalry is repeatedly framed in terms of “banter” rather than hostility. Most respondents describe the competitive spirit as energetic but deliberately contained within healthy limits.

Shun (TGS) sums up the mood: *“There’s always rivalry, but it’s much healthier, I think, than in football... It stops at chanting in the stands. Then we all go to the bar together after the game”* (Shun, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 84).

Ambrxyage (TGS) provides a vivid example of this spirit: *“We managed to turn that little conflict, even rivalry, into banter, but good banter. For example, for the LFL, we created banter stickers against Karmine Corp, and the goal was to stick as many as possible on people wearing Karmine jerseys... In the end, everyone loved it”* (Ambrxyage, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 42).

OveR (TGS) emphasizes the distinction between competition and animosity: *“We trash-talk in the arena, but once we’re at the bar, everyone’s friends... People like that we get loud in the arena, but outside, it’s all good vibes”* (OveR, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 58).

Even in cases where rivalries are intense, most associations make it a point to keep things “bon enfant,” using chants, playful challenges, and jokes to fuel the atmosphere, without crossing into aggression.

### **Distinction and Identity**

Differentiation is central to the identity of every group, but the way each association distinguishes itself varies greatly. For some, it’s about strong clubism and exclusivity; for others, it’s about openness and community-building.

Kateh (Blue Wall) describes a fiercely focused approach: *“We’re very focused on ourselves. That might sound condescending, but it’s just that, honestly, we don’t care much about the others... We have a very strong clubism. For us, it’s Karmine and nothing else”* (Kateh, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 100). This can sometimes cause friction: *“We’ve had conflicts with Royals212, for example, because we sang during our opponents’ interviews, and some people criticized us for being too intense. But there’s always a reason behind our actions”* (Kateh, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 99 and 112).

By contrast, Royals 212 highlights inclusion as a core value. Sly Utopya explains, *“Royals 212, for example, is built around inclusion... We want to bring people together, to spend time together. Our Discord is open to all Solary fans, and we regularly organize online activities to bring people together”* (Sly Utopya, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 24).

OveR (TGS) also emphasizes this ethos: *“We try to have our own design and approach, to be fresh and inclusive. The association is open to absolutely everyone... As long as the person is respectful, we have no problem with it”* (OveR, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 59).

In this way, the distinctiveness of each group is not just a matter of visual identity or chants, but a reflection of the values and social environment they choose to create within their own ranks.

### **Conflict Management and De-escalation**

Despite differences, all associations appear to share a commitment to non-violence and pragmatic conflict resolution. Internal codes of conduct are enforced, especially at physical events.

Ninouu (Blue Wall) is explicit: *“If at a physical event, someone from our section gets into a fight, our association rules apply... There’s a code of conduct to be respected, and the board will listen to everyone involved and decide on a sanction if necessary. But generally, we haven’t had any trouble”* (Ninouu, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 131).

Nicolas Gronier (Golden Hornets) reinforces this approach: *“If anyone in our group wanted to fight or act out, not only would we be the first to stop it, but that person would be out of the association almost immediately”* (Nicolas Gronier, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 147).

Most respondents also point out that tensions are rare in real life, and that online disputes (especially on Twitter) tend to be more toxic but rarely spill over into events: *“Most conflicts happen on Twitter... but any real issues are usually settled privately between the people involved”* (Sly Utopya, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 25).

Occasionally, when boundaries are crossed, as in the rare but notorious DVM incident, the community responds as one. Shun (TGS) recalls, *“There was a problem with a new group, DVM... The whole esports community stood up against it, because it’s exactly what we don’t want. They crossed the line into insults and fighting, things we’d never had before, and they were immediately excluded”* (Shun, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 84).

### **Cooperation and mutual support**

Beyond rivalry and internal management, there is also real collaboration and solidarity between associations, especially at the leadership level. Kateh (Blue Wall) describes the *“Skull” Discord, a private server for LFL ultra leaders: “We have a Discord called the Skull, for LFL ultra club leaders, set up precisely to create a bridge between the different association leaders... It’s very useful for sharing our vision and also organizing collective actions, like boycotts or coordinated protests”* (Kateh, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 107).

Kateh also notes similar coordination at the international level: *“We have a Twitter group for presidents of international clubs to discuss our demands, especially with Riot”* (Kateh, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 107).

Sly Sloork (Royals212) highlights the value of direct communication: *“If there’s a problem, we go see each other, and conversely, when things go well, we see each other too... It always ends with a handshake”* (Sly Sloork, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 4).

Ambrxyage (TGS) is proud of the evolving reputation of ultras: “*People have told us we’re changing the image of ultras in esports through what we’re putting in place*” (Ambrxyage, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 41).

## **Conclusion**

Across all interviews, a clear opinion emerges; while playful rivalry and the assertion of group identity remain central, the relationships between esports ultras associations are overwhelmingly defined by respect, communication, and an opposition to the violence or extreme animosity that has sometimes characterized traditional sports ultras. The unique context of esports, with its strong online dimension and flexible communities, seems to cultivate a culture where competition coexists with dialogue, inclusion, and a collective desire to keep things “*bon enfant*.” (OpenAi, 2023)

### **4.4 Internal Organisation and Hierarchy of Esports Ultras Associations**

Within the French esports ultras landscape, internal organisation is both structured and highly adaptive, reflecting the diversity of group sizes, histories and philosophies. A majority of associations adopt a classic non-profit model (“*loi 1901*”), but with significant digital adaptation and a strong emphasis on horizontal governance and the value of volunteer work. (OpenAI, 2023)

#### **Governing bodies and classic hierarchy**

Most groups structure themselves around a *board of directors* (conseil d’administration, CA) and an executive committee, with clearly defined roles such as president, vice-president, treasurer, and secretary. As Sly Sloork (Royals212) puts it: “We have a president, a vice-president, a secretary, a treasurer, and then we adapt depending on needs... decisions are taken within this main board of five or six people” (Sly Sloork, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 2).

The same structure is echoed by Golden Hornets: “We have a board, a bureau, we are four in the bureau with the treasurer, secretary, an assistant vice-president, and then every board member is also responsible for a department: supporter pole, communication, event management, etc.” (Nicolas Gronier, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 145).

However, there is often a will to break away from excessive verticality. The Green Suits recently decided to “remove the president role... because we didn’t want this

idea that one person is really above the others,” replacing it with “heads of” each department: “head of event, head of merch, head of communication” (M8 Ambrxyage, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 40). This model is meant to promote collective ownership and horizontal collaboration.

### **The importance of dedicated departments (pôles)**

Every association, regardless of size, emphasizes the need for functional “poles” or committees. These cover communication (managing Twitter, Discord, making visual assets), events (organizing trips and in-person gatherings), merchandising (scarves, banners, etc.), and sometimes more technical aspects (website, logistics, legal). As KC Ninouu (The Blue Wall) sums it up: “We’re about sixty, all volunteers, each one assigned to a department according to their skills or interests... communication and media, merchandising, tech (for the website and tickets), supporter pole, logistics, legal, accounting...” (KC Ninouu, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 128).

This approach is found in both large and small associations, with some, like The Blue Wall, explicitly describing themselves as “a mini-SME” (KC Ninouu, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 128), reflecting a quasi-professional internal functioning.

The full organisational chart of The Blue Wall can be found in Annex 2 (see Blue Wall, 2025).

### **Decision-making and the role of the board**

In all cases, key decisions are made at the board/CA level, but most groups insist on the importance of listening to members and consulting volunteers. For example: “The CA is at the top of the pyramid... but we always seek the consent of our members, depending on the topic” (KC Ninouu, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 123).

Among The Green Suits, the CA is responsible for enforcing internal regulations, including sanctions if a member breaches group rules: “Any act or word can have consequences... the CA can terminate a membership if necessary” (M8 Over, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 66).

### **Digital tools**

All associations use Discord as the main platform for internal communication, organisation, and even for staff meetings:

“Everything is on Discord. The entire organisation of the association is centralized on a staff Discord... there’s a public Discord and a staff Discord” (KC Kateh, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 98).

Channels are separated by roles: “Access is separated on Discord, there are things that only staff see” (M8 Ambrxyage, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 40).

Alongside Discord, most groups use X/Twitter for public communication and emails for important announcements.

### **Volunteer work and flexibility**

A major point of convergence is the emphasis on volunteerism and flexibility. All groups note the high turnover and the need for understanding. As one participant mentioned previously: “We’re all volunteers, everyone has their own life. The idea is to be present when possible, but there’s no pressure... We’re not going to say ‘you’re not active anymore, you’re not a real ultra’” (M8 Over, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 64).

Leadership renewal is actively encouraged: “Every year there are new elections for the CA... not just a president choosing his team, the whole list is elected” (KC Kateh, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 98).

Stepping down from leadership is considered a normal and even healthy process within these associations. As Nicolas Gronier (Golden Hornets) puts it, “I’ve already announced I’ll stop being president at the end of the year...” (Nicolas Gronier, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 148), highlighting how common it is for responsibilities to shift as life circumstances change. KC Kateh (The Blue Wall) further emphasizes the importance of renewal for the association’s progress: “For me, I see it as the end of a cycle. Even before being president, I was on the board since 2022, so I’ve spent three years as part of the association’s leadership. I feel like I’ve given all I can, and I think it’s good to leave space, because someone else will be able to bring new ideas, make the association progress. It’s important for me, renewal, and I think I’ve reached the end of my cycle” (KC Kateh, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 104).

### **Local ambassadors**

Some associations, particularly the larger ones, also function with local “referents” or ambassadors for each city, tasked with organizing watch parties and fostering local communities (KC Ninouu, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 127; KC Kateh, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 102).

## **Conclusion**

In summary, esports ultra associations combine the structure of classic non-profits, board, departments, statutes—with the agility and horizontality required by volunteerism and digital life. Discord is the heart of organisation, decision-making remains collective, and leadership is regularly renewed. This enables each group to adapt to its own size, ambitions and community dynamics. (OpenAI, 2023)

### **4.5 The Profile of Esports Ultras**

When examining the profiles of esports ultras, a mosaic emerges: the movement is both surprisingly diverse and marked by a handful of strong trends. Most interviewees agree on the importance of youth, masculine dominance, social heterogeneity, and a common will for belonging. (OpenAI, 2023)

#### **Age: A Movement Driven by Youth, but Not Only**

The majority of interviewees emphasize the youthfulness of the movement. Across nearly all groups, the core of members is “between 20 and 30 years old” (M8 Ambrxyage, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 44), often even younger. For example, at The Blue Wall, “the average age is 21 to 22, and even if you take the median, it would probably be lower” (KC Kateh, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 103). Golden Hornets’ profiles are similar, “between 18 and 25, maximum 30. Young professionals or students, most of them in their early twenties” (Gh Koala, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 169; Nicolas Gronier, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 147). Sly Sloork also notes that “for most of the community, it’s between 23 and 30-31, so yes, between 20 and 30 years old” (Sly Sloork, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 6).

However, several interviewees insist that the age range is actually wider than stereotypes suggest. “In the group we had a guy who was 52, I’m 23. There was a twenty-year difference, and the guy was one of the most committed members” (M8 Shun, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 85). Most associations also count a handful of older members: “We have people who are 40, who are fathers, mothers” (Gh Koala, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 168). Sly Utopya mentions the existence of “communities linked to certain games [that] might be a little older... like Hearthstone, around thirty” (Sly Utopya, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 27).

#### **Gender: Persistent Male Dominance, Slow Inclusion**

The overwhelming majority of interviewees report a significant male overrepresentation. “It’s a big male domination. We have very, very few women in

our ranks” (KC Kateh, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 105). Numbers generally hover around “70% men, 30% women, maybe a bit more men” (Gh Koala, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 169; M8 Shun, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 85). Sly Utopya estimates “maybe 10% of women in the association” (Sly Utopya, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 27). Some clubs have taken concrete steps: “We have a section reserved for girls so they feel safe. We also have conversations just for women, and I know that reassures some, because unfortunately esports is still a very sexist environment” (M8 Ambrxyage, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 43). Golden Hornets also have “a safe place for women to talk amongst themselves, and in events, we make sure there’s a women’s hotel room if requested” (Nicolas Gronier, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 147).

Despite the male dominance, inclusion is seen as a core value by many. “There are people of all types in our group, including transgender people. That’s the beauty of Blue Wall in my opinion” (KC Ninouu, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 133). Most interviewees reject any gender-based difference: “There’s no judgment. A man or a woman, it’s just their passion and what they want to do that determines their place” (Gh Koala, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 171; M8 Shun, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 86).

### **Social Background: Heterogeneous and Accessible**

Almost everyone interviewed rejects the idea of a single social background. “There’s everything. People who really push themselves financially to go to every event... and people who live well and can afford it. There isn’t a social pattern that repeats” (M8 Shun, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 85). “We have people from all walks of life” (M8 Ambrxyage, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 44; Nicolas Gronier, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 148; Sly Sloork, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 6). The one limitation that emerges concerns the financial cost of following events. “To be able to travel, you need either a stable job or enough means... some would like to join events but can’t afford it, but they remain ultras from home” (KC Kateh, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 103; M8 Over, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 62).

### **Geographic Origin: French Roots, Francophone Opening**

Most groups remain rooted in France and the French-speaking world. “We’re mainly French, but we also have Belgians and some Swiss, and even a few Canadians and an American” (Gh Koala, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 168; M8 Over, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 66; M8 Shun, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 87; Nicolas Gronier, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 147; Sly Sloork, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 10). Associations are proud to have “all those who support Solary, whatever their nationality” (Sly Utopya, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 29). The

internationalization of clubs is progressing but still marginal. As Kateh puts it, “the barrier is mostly the language. Our own culture... but we’re proud to have a few foreign supporters and hope there’ll be more in the future” (KC Kateh, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 112).

### **Motivations for Joining: A Need for Belonging and Social Connection**

If there is one point where all interviews converge, it is the power of the collective and the need for social belonging. The primary motivation is “to join a community, with people who already understand you... the feeling of belonging to a group plays a big part” (M8 Ambrxyage, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 48). For many, it’s a way to make friends, escape isolation, or find a social circle organized around a shared passion: “It allowed me to meet new people, to become more comfortable, to gain self-confidence” (Sly Utopya, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 31). “For many, they’re alone in their corner, they don’t know anyone, and they’re afraid to take the first step... but once they do, they discover the vibe, the community, and then say: ‘Wow, that was great, I want to see everyone again’” (Sly Sloork, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 11).

Some are motivated by the perks and practical advantages, such as “discounts on events, an official scarf, or access to special activities” (M8 Shun, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 89; Sly Sloork, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 11), but all stress that the real engine is social. “You discover that your friends who don’t share the same passion won’t understand... so it’s cool to be able to exchange with others, meet up at viewing parties. That’s the main reason fans join our group” (KC Ninouu, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 136).

### **Individual Growth and Diversity of Experience**

Finally, for many, the group is a space for personal growth. “I used to be more reserved... joining the association helped me become more outgoing. At university, I’m much more withdrawn, but when it comes to the association or things I love, I break down those barriers” (M8 Ambrxyage, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 49). Others find their involvement shapes their relationship to the game, the team, and even their daily routine.

### **Conclusion**

To sum up, the profile of esports ultras in France is mostly young, male, and French-speaking, which goes without saying, since they are following and supporting French

teams. Nevertheless, the movement is open and evolving. Social backgrounds are mixed, and everyone agrees that the essential driver is the need to belong and share a passion. While the dominance of men and youth remains, concrete efforts are made for inclusion and diversity, and each group is marked by a desire for openness and community spirit. (OpenAI, 2023)

#### 4.6 Relationships and Expectations toward Esports Clubs and Institutions

The ties between the French esports ultras groups and their clubs are always tense, often playing out in uneasy proximity but also independence, recognition but also autonomy. Throughout all interviews, members emphasize that openness of communication with clubs is important, yet at the same time they demand to have their own space and to have a voice, especially when they challenge issues. (OpenAI, 2023)

##### **A Shared Desire for Recognition, but Not at Any Cost**

Most associations agree that some form of recognition by the club is essential for their legitimacy and growth. As Sly Utopya puts it, “I think yes, obviously, it’s positive. It can only be beneficial. In my opinion, a supporters’ association needs legitimacy in its existence. And that legitimacy inevitably comes from the club itself” (Sly Utopya, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 35). This feeling is shared by Ambrxyage, who emphasizes how visibility and acknowledgment from the club help build the association’s credibility and expand its reach: “For me, it’s important already for giving credibility to the association... and to help as many people as possible know about us. I think it’s important for the development of the community” (M8 Ambrxyage, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 53).

Nicolas Gronier, president of Golden Hornets, echoes this, linking recognition to the ability to grow: “I think it can be complicated if the club does not respect or recognize you. Even in terms of credibility, to grow your association, you have to work twice as hard if you’re not at least helped or recognized” (Nicolas Gronier, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 155).

But this need for legitimacy is never a blank check, ultras unanimously insist on their independence. As Kateh from the Blue Wall puts it, “The association is totally independent from the club. We’re our own entity, we’re absolutely not attached to Karmine. The only thing linking us to Karmine is our love for the club and the fact that we support the players” (KC Kateh, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 109). OveR, from TGS, is even

more categorical: “We are really two completely separate entities, but with the same goal. They have their side, we have ours, and we manage our side as best we can... We’re not going to them asking, “can we do this?”” (M8 OveR, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 72).

### **Everyday Collaboration, Not Merger**

On a day-to-day basis, these associations interact with clubs on a variety of topics, from event logistics to joint communication efforts. Sly Sloork describes this closeness: “Our relationship with Solary is one of the closest between fans and a structure... I talk almost daily with people at Solary. Whether it’s us asking for advice or them asking us for help with organisation, it goes both ways” (Sly Sloork, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 14). For Ambrxyage, this means practical involvement in club projects: “They’ve often called on us for things like Fashion Week, or to find a hundred members for an event... We’re often delegated tasks, which is great for us because we need that collaboration to create what we want” (M8 Ambrxyage, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 50).

But while the channels are open, boundaries remain. Sly Sloork explains, “I don’t have access to internal discussions at Solary, and they don’t have access to our internal talks. We just have a shared channel where we can bring up issues or ideas” (Sly Sloork, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 15). This independence is also fiercely protected when it comes to public positions or disagreements: “If something needs a public statement, we’ll do it without hesitation... If the club does something against our core values, we won’t hesitate to make it public” (M8 Ambrxyage, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 52).

### **A Channel for Dialogue and Disagreement**

All associations value having a real dialogue with their club, including the possibility to voice disagreements and expect to be heard. As Nicolas Gronier says, “We also have the right, and we do it from time to time, to push back, to publish statements when Vitality does something we don’t like. Our opinions matter for them, and sometimes they make compromises. When we want to be heard, we are heard” (Nicolas Gronier, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 154).

For Blue Wall, Kateh underlines the same balance: “We have an impact for sure because we have strength in numbers... but on purely club management decisions, that’s not our role. We express opinions, question club choices, and bring debates” (KC Kateh, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 110).

This right to speak up sometimes leads to tension, as with Blue Wall and Karmine Corp: “They aren’t always happy, it shakes things up a bit, gives them a few headaches... We’ve done things the club would have preferred us not to do, but we make it clear that we’re independent and will act as we see fit” (KC Kateh, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 110).

### **Recognition, but Without Losing Independence**

For the rank-and-file member, as Koala (Golden Hornets) explains, recognition is nice to have, but not a necessity: “For me personally, it doesn’t matter. As long as they don’t block us or deliberately stop us from doing things, it’s fine. It’s a plus to be recognized by the structure... but if tomorrow Vitality ignored us, it wouldn’t really change much for me” (GH Koala, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 174).

However, for association leaders, club support is more consequential: “For the four leaders, it’s different, because for them it’s a mini business. The more they’re in the spotlight, the more likely there’ll be new members, more income, etc.” (GH Koala, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 174).

### **The Limits of Institutional Collaboration**

Many associations regret that direct relationships with event organizers or leagues are still rare. Kateh notes: “Today, organizers only want to talk to the club; they absolutely refuse to talk to associations. There’s one exception, Webedia, but otherwise all the major event organizers refuse direct contact with us. Every time, it’s the club playing intermediary” (KC Kateh, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 110). Ninouu (Blue Wall) shares this frustration: “Our biggest issue is that we’re not close to the organizers, everything goes through Karmine. Sometimes this non-proximity creates a real obstacle for Blue Wall, even for small things like using tifo poles at events. We’re never in direct contact, and that creates a gap” (KC Ninouu, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 139).

### **Collaboration**

If most associations support joint projects, like viewing parties, co-branded merchandise, or joint communication, they remain vigilant about not becoming a mere extension of the club or its sponsors. As Ambrxyage puts it: “Right now, we prefer to keep our independence, so we can say and do what we want, as long as it

doesn't damage the club's image. We're not limited by the club's sponsors, and that freedom is essential for us" (M8 Ambrxyage, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 54).

Kateh goes further, highlighting the ability of the group to take public stands, even when that runs counter to the club's business interests: "We're not the club's shadow. We have our own vision, which can sometimes be more outspoken than the club's, because as a business, there are things they can't do contractually... We, on the other hand, are freer" (KC Kateh, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 113-114).

### **A Common Ethic: Independence, Respect, and Constructive Critique**

In sum, all associations insist on their right to exist independently, to collaborate constructively, to be recognized as legitimate supporters, and to be critical when necessary. OverR sums up this sentiment: "I think we do very well without needing help from the club... It would be unhealthy if the club were too involved in the association. The most important recognition is from the fans themselves, not the official club" (M8 OverR, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 73).

For all, the ideal relationship with the club and institutions is one of mutual respect, regular communication, open disagreement when needed, and, above all, preserving the independence and authenticity of the supporters' voice.

### **Conclusion**

These interviews make it clear: for ultras, true recognition from clubs is meaningful, but never at the expense of independence. They value real collaboration and being heard, but they also want the freedom to disagree and stay authentic. This balance, respect, partnership, and autonomy, is what gives their support real value and keeps the community vibrant. (OpenAI, 2023)

### **4.7 General Comparison: Esports Ultras vs. Traditional Ultras**

The comparison between esports ultras and their traditional sports counterparts is a recurrent and sometimes contentious topic among interviewees. While most agree that there are many points of convergence, particularly in codes, rituals, and the logic of passionate support, nearly all insist that the notion of "ultra" requires significant adaptation to the digital and decentralized context of esports. (OpenAI, 2023)

### **Shared DNA and Rituals**

Nearly all interviewees highlight the strong similarities in the ways of supporting a team, the use of chants, banners, tifos, and collective organisation. “In common, I would say it’s the way of acting, in quotes, in the away end. As I said, esports ultras take inspiration from what is done in sports, whether it’s chants, flags, or tifos, etc. It’s almost a copy-paste” (Sly Utopya, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 36). Several note that leadership structures, such as the presence of capos and event-specific preparations, mirror what exists in football (GH Koala, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 162; KC Kateh, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 96). The desire to make noise, animate the crowd, and display unwavering loyalty to the club is described as a direct legacy of the ultra’s tradition (KC Ninouu, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 124; M8 Shun, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 83).

The sense of belonging and “living the match together” transcends the discipline. “For me, it’s pretty much the same people. The typical profile is between 18 and 25, maybe up to 30. Mostly students or young professionals, often into both football and esports” (GH Koala, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 169).

### **Major Differences and Specificities**

However, all agree that certain differences remain fundamental. The territorial and generational anchoring of football ultras does not exist, or is much weaker, in esports. “In sports, there is also a notion of locality which is quite important and which isn’t present in esports. We have fans all over France, but also in other francophone countries. That’s a real difference” (Sly Utopya, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 36). Several participants insist that the absence of a home stadium or regular in-person matches shapes a distinct type of engagement, less tied to geography and routine than in traditional sports (KC Kateh, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 103; Nicolas Gronier, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 156).

A key element that almost everyone brings up is the absence, or explicit refusal, of violence in the esports scene. “There are lots of differences, especially things that are more negative in football... We really try not to have troublemakers or people who come just to stir things up. That’s something we’re vigilant about” (M8 Shun, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 92).

The relationship to rivalry is also different. While “clubism” and rivalries exist and are even gaining ground, especially in France, the notion of hatred or physical confrontation is strongly rejected. “Even the fiercest rivalries don’t really cross the line into hate; it’s playful, it’s banter, it doesn’t go further” (M8 OverR, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 78; Sly Sloork, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 18).

### **Digital Environment and Hybrid Support**

One of the main adaptations concerns the hybrid, digital-native nature of esports support. The entire model is permeated by online communities, Discord servers, and social networks, which change not only the forms of engagement, but also its rhythm and intensity. “The biggest difference is that esports is ultra-connected on social networks, much more than conventional sport. The way esports fans communicate is much more present than in traditional sport” (KC Kateh, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 97). For many, digital engagement is as valuable as physical presence, if not more accessible: “For me, it’s the same, because we all have internet, it’s fast access to everything, so for me it’s about the same. There are people who aren’t on site, but the enthusiasm is online, and that’s what makes esports live” (M8 Ambrxyage, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 56). Yet, most still view attending events and showing up in person as a “plus” or a natural continuation of online engagement (M8 Over, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 80; M8 Shun, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 93).

### **Adaptation and Evolution of the “Ultra” Concept**

A recurring idea is that the “ultra” model cannot be totally transplanted to esports. Several insist on humility and a sense of ongoing construction. “Are we really ultras, like in conventional sports? I don’t think so, we’re still far from it. But that’s also because it’s very recent, it’ll take years to catch up with what football or other sports have built over decades. We have to remain humble about it” (KC Kateh, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 96). Nicolas Gronier is even more radical: “Out of respect for the “ultra” movement, and for what I consider an ultra, we don’t call ourselves an association of ultra... It’s really a different world” (Nicolas Gronier, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 142).

This humility is not a weakness but a strength, as groups try to transmit the values and rules of traditional ultras while inventing new forms adapted to esports. The symbolic importance of banners, the desire for well-structured chants, and the sense of rivalry are reinterpreted, often without reproducing the more problematic aspects. “We don’t at all advocate violence or any of the excesses of hooliganism, which the media unfortunately associate with ultras” (KC Kateh, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 96). Instead, values of respect, openness and inclusion are emphasized—sometimes as a conscious way to “do better” than the world of football (M8 Over, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 59; M8 Shun, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 91).

### **A Movement Still in the Making**

All agree that esports ultras are a young, growing phenomenon. “It’s still marginal, yes, because we don’t have many associations. But there are more and more. It’s developing all the time” (KC Ninouu, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 141). Some see in the current situation a parallel with football in the 1980s-90s: “We’re a bit in the early days of esports, whatever people say. I think we’re a bit in the situation of football in the 80s-90s... but more and more people will join, and it could become the new football or basketball” (GH Koala, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 177).

For most, this is just the beginning: “I think it’s already evolving. Ultras today are not the same as the first ones in France, or the T1 ultras in Korea. The concept will evolve. The scene will evolve. So, it will only grow” (M8 Shun, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 94). The real test, several note, will come with the multiplication of “home stadiums” and regular physical events, which may further anchor and transform the model (Nicolas Gronier, 2025, Annexe 1 p. 160).

### **Conclusion**

The concept of “ultra” in esports is in full transformation: it draws on the codes and spirit of traditional sports ultras, but adapts them to a digital, more open, and less violent world. The main points of convergence, passion, organisation, and ritual, remain, while differences in locality, rivalry, and exclusivity are being redefined for the new era. Above all, there is a shared awareness that the esports scene must invent its own path, learning from the best (and avoiding the worst) of the traditional ultra movement. (OpenAI, 2023)

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 introduction

This section aims to discuss and interpret the main findings of this research by focusing on the central question: ***Who are the ultras in the world of esports, what defines them and how to approach them?*** Thus, we will ultimately compare what we found regarding their identity to that of traditional sports ultras. Beyond this, a key focus will be placed on understanding where the boundary lies between a “classic” esports fan and an “ultra”, what sets ultras apart, in terms of identity, engagement, and practices.

Drawing on interviews with leading members of esports ultra associations, this discussion explores both the resemblances and differences between the emerging communities in esport and the well-established models of traditional sports ultras. It examines which aspects of classic ultra culture and folklore have been adopted, reinvented, or rejected within esports, and how the digital, participatory context has reshaped what it means to be an “ultra.”

By doing so, this section seeks to offer a nuanced understanding of how ultra identity is defined, where it diverges from standard fandom, and how it is continually negotiated within the evolving landscape of esports.

### 5.2 summary of principal results

The analysis of interviews conducted with members and leaders of esports ultra associations reveals several major themes

#### 5.2.1. Defining the “Ultra” in Esports

For most interviews, an ultra is a fan who give full commitment to his team, both in terms of time and personal investment. Contrary to classic fans, ultras are willing to travel, organize events when they have the capacity and prioritize the collective over individual interests.

#### 5.2.2. Forms and Levels of Engagement

The level of engagement from an ultra vary widely. Some will attend every event and will not be stingy when it comes to spending money for their club and others who can only support online, through animation, content creation, community management or even showing their support to their club via social networks such as Twitter(X) or

Discord. To sum up, both forms of engagement, physical and digital are valued, given the hybrid nature of esports.

### 5.2.3. Internal Organisation and Group Dynamics

Ultra groups are generally structured as non-profit associations, with clearly defined leadership roles but a strong emphasis on collective governance and volunteerism. Digital platforms, especially Discord, play a central role in organizing activities and sustaining group cohesion.

### 5.2.4. Relationships with Clubs and Other Institutions

Most associations highlight the importance of being recognized by the club, because it has an impact on both visibility and, most importantly, their legitimacy, which help them gain new members. However, they insist on maintaining their independence and autonomy. They will also often negotiate boundaries to avoid excessive interference from club management. Daily interactions with clubs are frequent, can go from event logistics to collaborative communication, but ultras remain ready to emit criticism or contest decisions that go against their values. Relationships with other institutions, such as leagues or event organizers, are generally practical oriented and will mostly focus on shared interests like fan experience or the safety of events. But some cases can be marked by tension when policies in the arenas are perceived as out of touch with supporter realities and impact the smooth running of events.

### 5.2.5. Relationships Between Ultra Associations

The esports ultra group exhibits a blend of friendly rivalry, mutual respect and cooperation. Associations prioritize communication and conflict resolution, all this accompanied by playful competition and banter. They all have a strong desire to avoid the excesses that can sometimes be seen in traditional sports. Finally, collaboration on collective actions and joint stances on specific community issues completely illustrate their strong bonds

### 5.2.6. Sociological Profile and Motivations

Esports ultras are predominantly young and male, but the community is evolving towards greater diversity. While the search for belonging, collective identity, and the opportunity to live out a shared passion remain the main motivations for joining an ultra group, the interviews revealed a marked heterogeneity in profiles and experiences. Beyond these broad trends, it proved difficult to establish a precise typology or identify a dominant demographic pattern. The diversity of individual backgrounds and values makes generalisation challenging, suggesting that future research with a larger and more varied sample could help to refine our understanding of the sociological composition and internal dynamics of esports ultra associations. (OpenAi, 2023)

### 5.2.7. Boundary Between Classic Fans and Ultras in esport

The dividing line between classic fans and ultras lies in the intensity of engagement, the sense of responsibility towards the group, and the adoption of rituals or codes that go beyond casual support. Being an ultra is as much about identity and values as it is about visible commitment.

## 5.3 crossed discussion with literature

### 5.3.1. Identity and Definition of Ultras

Through the interview, we could define that esports ultras define themselves through a strong sense of community, self-sacrifice and some sort of loyalty to both team and the group, depending on if the team they support is active or not on a specific game. This aligns with much of the literature on traditional ultras, where values such as belonging, loyalty and resistance are core values (Louis, 2018; Testa and Armstrong, 2010). However, while football ultras often attach importance to territorial identity and local custom and roots (Ginhoux, 2015; Podaliri and Balestri, 1998), esports ultras tend to build their identity round digital spaces, with less emphasis on geography and more on shared digital culture and collective action. This transition echoes recent work on online fan communities, which highlights the importance of participatory culture and flexibility of group boundaries (Kim and al., 2022; Taylor, 2018).

Furthermore, the nonexistence of violence and the high attention placed on inclusivity and positive representation in esports is mentioned by several interviewees which contrast with the historical reputation of some traditional ultras

for aggressive or discriminatory behaviour (Spaij, 2006). Regarding this topic, ultras in esports appear to be adapting the ultra model to fit expectations and values of a younger and more digitally native generation.

### 5.3.2. Forms of Engagement

Both the interviews and the literature emphasize that engagement for ultras is multi-dimensional. In traditional sports, physical presence, tifo-making and vocal support at games are often mentioned (Cleland and al., 2018). In esports, although physical events are becoming more and more important, digital engagement remains the central form of involvement. Key forms of engagement include creating content, online campaigns, being active and present on social platforms such as Discord and Twitter and most importantly, showing support to their team on those platforms. Those are the primary ways for fans to connect with their clubs.

However, the border between online and offline engagement is more flexible in esports. Commitment can be shown in multiple areas. This hybridity is less present and pronounced in traditional settings, making the esports ultra model more flexible and therefore more complex to define.

### 5.3.3. Internal Organisation and Group Dynamics

The collected data shows that most esports ultra groups adopt a non-profit structure, inspired by football models (“loi 1901”) but with a greater emphasis on horizontal governance and digital tools. This aligns partly with the literature on football ultras, where informal hierarchies and codes of solidarity are strong (Doidge, 2015; Kennedy, 2013), but the use of digital tools for daily organisation such as Discord and others is specific to the esports context.

Another notable difference is the strong rejection of toxicity and the focus on positive, inclusive leadership, which reflects the broader norms in esports communities and contrasts with some more closed, exclusive traditional ultra groups (Kim and al., 2022; Pitti, 2018).

### 5.3.4. Relationship with Clubs and Institutions

As highlighted in both interviews and literature, the relationship between ultra groups and clubs is marked by a desire for autonomy and recognition. Both ultras in

esport and traditional sports value their independence and are cautious of being instrumentalized by the club management (Kennedy, 2013; Louis, 2018).

However, esports ultra and associations are more willing to engage in constructive dialogue with their club and there is often a sense of co-construction such as organizing events together, giving feedback, participating in club communication, taking part on clubs marketing on some occasion, while still maintaining a “critical distance”. The absence of deep-rooted local rivalries in esports and the digital-first context seem to reduce some of the historical antagonism seen in football (Choluj and al., 2020; Hourcade, 2004).

Relations with broader institutions (leagues, event organizers) are also more pragmatic for both ultras, often focused on fan experience and logistical cooperation. But can also be a source of frustration if supporters feel excluded from decision-making or misunderstood by institutional actors.

### 5.3.5. Boundaries: From Classic Fans to Ultras

The distinction between a classic fan and an ultra is clearer in football, where rituals and hierarchies are strongly codified. This boundary is more flexible in esports. As highlighted by interviewees, the difference is mainly found in the intensity of involvement, their desire to and willingness to take on the responsibilities and commitments associated with being an ultra and adherence to group rituals, many of which are digital or hybrid in nature.

Existing literature on esports does not separate “fans” from “ultras”, it does highlight the existence of scale of engagement, ranging from casual supporters to highly involved community members (Hamari and Sjöblom, 2017; Taylor, 2018). Within this range, ultra distinguish themselves through ongoing collective action, creative engagement and high participation in community. Therefore, becoming an ultra represents a step beyond standard fandom: not only it is marked by visible support but also by a deeper sense of responsibility and belonging.

## 5.4 interpretation

The findings from this research highlight the ways in which the “ultra” phenomenon is being reinvented within the unique environment of esports. Esports ultras do not simply replicate the traditional model found in football. Instead, they are actively reshaping what it means to be an ultra through their deep commitment. Their identity is constructed around physical presence and, most importantly, digital

engagement, creative participation, and the ability to build community in both online and offline spaces.

The boundaries of “fan” identity are more flexible and dynamic in esports than in traditional sports, according to theoretical contributions. Thanks to the insights of interviewees, this flexible boundary is also applicable to the concept of “ultra” in esports. While classic studies of ultras highlight local belonging, codified rituals, and often a sense of opposition (Louis, 2018; Testa and Armstrong, 2010), this study shows that esports ultras draw on digital cultures to create new forms of ritual and solidarity, while also preserving and adapting physical practices from traditional supporter culture. Although physical activities remain less frequent, these groups still use chants, banners, scarves, and other visible symbols to express their support for their teams. To compensate for the lack of regular physical competition, they organize viewing parties, which allow their communities to gather and recreate a stadium-like atmosphere. In these ways, esports ultras combine the innovations of digital participation with the traditions of in-person support. This creates a hybrid model of engagement that is unique to their environment. (OpenAi, 2023)

From a practical perspective, these results suggest that esports clubs and organizers should recognize the value of ultra groups not only as fervent fans, but also as active partners and stakeholders in building atmosphere, creating digital content, and sustaining community engagement. Cultivating a dialogue with ultras and providing channels for their involvement in club activities, both online and offline, could help strengthen loyalty, improve the fan experience, and prevent potential tensions. At the same time, the strong sense of autonomy and group values shows that any attempts to instrumentalize or control ultras risk being counterproductive, echoing lessons learned from traditional sports (Louis, 2018).

However, unresolved tensions remain around the evolving relationship between ultras associations and institutional actors, especially as esports continues to professionalize and attract commercial interests, such as new sponsors or investors, that can stand in opposition to the values of ultras.

Additionally, the digital world offers new tools for solidarity and creativity, but it also comes with challenges related to governance and inclusivity. For example, it raises the question of how to include ultras from around the world. Nevertheless, the growing diversity within ultra groups leads to new dynamics around identity and the negotiation of norms. The meaning of “ultra” can change from person to person, and so too do the norms and values they share.

From my perspective, these tensions are not only theoretical; they are played out frequently and very visibly, especially on social media platforms such as Twitter. I have repeatedly observed that ultras, or so-called ultras, from different teams do not hesitate to criticize decisions made by other clubs, especially when those choices go against what ultras consider to be fundamental and core values.

For example, a notable case involved the French club Vitality, which came under fire from Karmine Corp supporters. Vitality positions itself as the “leading French esports club” on social media. However, the club’s majority shareholder is neither French nor European. For Karmine Corp fans, this was perceived as dishonest and as a betrayal of the club’s identity.

A second, even more heated and recent controversy broke out when Vitality signed a sponsorship deal with the gambling website Stake. The backlash was immediate, not just from their own fans and ultras, but from ultras all across the French esports community. For many, this felt like a line had been crossed. Betting companies, in their eyes, go completely against the core values that unite these groups. Looking out for each other, building a safe community, and protecting young fans from things that can do real harm are seen as essential. And it is not just an abstract fear; everyone knows how dangerous gambling can be, leading some people down a path of addiction and serious personal difficulties. For supporters who have fought to keep those influences away from their scene, the sense of betrayal was real and very public.

It is important to note that the partnership between Vitality and the betting platform Stake was specifically tied to their Counter-Strike roster. Within this particular esports scene, collaborations with betting sites have been historically more common and are generally more socially accepted. As such, some Vitality fans who are familiar with the norms of the Counter-Strike community did not view this partnership as problematic. On the other hand, the strongest criticisms came from members of other ultra associations whose clubs do not have teams competing in Counter-Strike. In fact, Vitality is currently the only French organisation with an active roster in this game, which creates a divergence in perception. This situation highlights a form of value fragmentation within the broader ultra movement in esports. Shared norms and expectations can vary significantly depending on the game in question, adding yet another layer of complexity to the construction of a collective identity. Consequently, even within the same ultra association, differences of opinion may arise depending on the scene they follow, the cultural practices associated with it, and the perceived legitimacy of certain commercial partnerships. (OpenAI, 2023)

These examples reveal how complicated things are for esports clubs. On one hand, they need to find sponsors and new ways to make money because running a competitive team is expensive. The costs can increase even further depending on the number of rosters they have, and they must pay the bills like any other company. On the other hand, they need to consider their fans and ultras because if they go against their values, their whole business can fall apart. It is the ultras and fans that keep the club alive. In the end, this ongoing tension between economic imperatives and community values remains one of the most significant challenges for the future of esports.

In summary, this research has put this new phenomenon within esports under the spotlight and also opens the door to broader questions about the future of fan cultures in digital environments. The ongoing negotiations between economic realities and community values, illustrated by recent controversies, highlight the importance of understanding how ultra identities are being redefined today. For researchers, practitioners, and all stakeholders interested in the evolving dynamics of community, belonging, and collective action in contemporary sport, including esports, grasping these changes is essential for anticipating how fan cultures will continue to evolve in the future. (OpenAi, 2023)

## 6.conclusion

### 6.1. approach

In this thesis, I set out to explore the emergence and role of ultra groups within the French esports' ecosystem. The main research question was:

***Ultras in esports: Who are they, what defines them, and how should clubs and organisations engage with them?***

To answer this question, I chose to combine a review of the literature on traditional sport, primarily football, and esports fan with a qualitative approach based on semi-structured interviews with key members of French esports ultra associations.

The main objectives were:

- To identify core valuers and motivation of esports ultras
- To compare their practices and identities with those of traditional sport ultras
- to understand their expectations and tensions in relation to clubs and esport institutions

Throughout the research process, I found that esports ultras draw significant inspiration from football supporter culture, emphasizing personal investment but no necessarily physical presence, which reflect the predominance of digital environment in esports. However, they reject every sort of violence, exceeding my initial expectation, and make a clear effort to distinguish themselves from traditional ultra on this subject, even while adopting other traditions such as chants and tifos.

At the same time, they are inventing new forms of digital engagement, community building, and activism that are unique to the esports environment. My findings show that, contrary to some initial assumptions, the boundaries between “ultra” and “fan” identity in esports are not fixed and more fluid. This allows everyone to enjoy their passion their own way, ranging from heavy physical attendance at events to predominantly digital support through social media and content creation. Regarding financial and time investments, they are considerable, echoing traditional ultra patterns but adapted to the rhythms and realities of esports.

Finally, their expectations towards clubs remain high, emphasizing recognition, respect, dialogue and autonomy, which were surprising for some part. Ultra expect genuine collaboration with clubs while maintaining their independence, seeking to influence club decisions without being instrumentalised. Lastly, these groups are as highly sensitive to social issues and inclusion as to issues such as club management

decisions and ethical alignment (for example, sponsors or any decision that could be nonethical).

## 6.2 limitation

Despite the responses provided, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample for qualitative approach is relatively small, focused on French esports ultra associations, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Their approaches may not represent the complete diversity of experiences across Europe or the global esports scene.

Second, the study relied on self-reported data, which can be biased. The participant may have presented their group or their own actions in a more presentable way than the reality, downplaying conflicts or challenges they encounter. Additionally, most interviews were done with group leaders or very active members, meaning that they could have potentially overlooked the perspectives of more peripheral or less engaged supporters.

Finally, both esports and ultra supporter culture are rapidly evolving which means that practices, identities and group dynamics may change quickly. As such, the findings should be seen as a snapshot of a particular moment in time and not a definitive or permanent description of the phenomenon. (OpenAi, 2023)

## 6.3 perspectives

This research was a first step in understanding the dynamic of ultra groups in the worlds of esports but there is still much to be explored. Future exploration could broaden the scope to include ultra association from other countries or regions or focus on ultras of specific games. It would also be interesting to compare the current state and future composition of ultra groups sociology with a more quantitative approach and take it even further, by analysing the roles of gender, age and socio-economic background in shaping the experience and organisation of ultras, as well as the specific challenges faced by minorities or marginalized groups within communities.

Given that ultras engagement mainly depends on digital tools and platforms, it will be important to study how technological innovations will transform the ways ultra engage, organize and create a sense of belonging. The growing trend of physical venues for esports teams, such as Karmine Corp acquiring a “home stadium”, also

raises new questions about the future of supporter culture and its relationship to peace and identity.

For stakeholders, clubs, and tournament organizers, making ultras part of the decision-making process and engaging with them in meaningful dialogue could be the key to building stronger, more resilient communities. Encouraging diversity, safeguarding against harmful influences like gambling sponsorships, and promoting positive values will remain ongoing challenges as esports continues to professionalize.

Ultimately, understanding how these passionate communities evolve, and how they influence the broader ecosystem, will be crucial for anyone interested in the future of esports and fan cultures more generally.

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## Glossary

Supporterism : The behaviour of supporters of a team, especially when excessive or fanatical

