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# How Digital Content Marketing Affects Viewership and Engagement of Multiplayer Online Battle Arena Esport Events: An Examination of League of Legends

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**How Digital Content Marketing Affects Viewership and Engagement of Multiplayer Online Battle Arena Esport Events: An Examination of League of Legends**

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in the *Department of Marketing.*

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ABSTRACT

Recently esports, specifically Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) esports has grown to where esports pull upwards of 150 million hours watched per specific major event. Despite this, esports and specifically Multiplayer Online Battle Arena esports have extraordinarily little literature on what factors affect viewership. This Honors thesis attempts to illustrate how the Digital Content Marketing (DCM) of esports affect the event's viewership and engagement of viewers during and after the event using data from esports charts and social media. This study has theoretical implications for digital content marketing and expands the literature of esports and looks to spark future discussion on the factors that influence the viewership and engagement of digital events. For marketing managers it is important to determine the approximate number of views a marketing effort will get before agreeing to the price, this study provides a forecast of views and engagements of the event.

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# How Digital Content Marketing Affects Viewership and Engagement of Multiplayer Online Battle Arena Esport Events: An Examination of League of Legends

## Introduction

Esports, pragmatically defined as "competitive (pro and amateur) video gaming that is often coordinated by different leagues, ladders, and tournaments, and where players customarily belong to teams or other "sporting" organizations which are sponsored by various business organizations," has origins that first picked up popularity in the 1970's where Stanford University notably hosted a video game competition for their students (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2016; Hiltscher, 2015). Since then, more formal formats developed; venues began to get larger as more people began to admire the best players at the games they loved; and these events began to be broadcasted to gain viewers from more widespread locations. In 2013, the League of Legends Season 3 World Championship brings in 32 million unique online viewers (CDW Corporation, 2021). Since then, esports have continued to develop gaining more viewers, more ways to broadcast, and more popular games. One of these popular games is League of Legends, a game made by Riot Games, which was able to sell out the Staples Center in Los Angeles for the third world championship in 2013. The game has continued to grow, and in 2021 the esports event with the highest number of hours watched was the League of Legends World Championship with over 174 million hours watched (Borisov, 2021).

Recently, traditional sporting leagues have had issues with maintaining similar viewership numbers compared to past seasons (Dodd, 2022; Finn, 2021). Meanwhile, esports viewership has grown to upwards of 700 million cumulative hours watched for the ten most viewed esports events of 2021 (Ong, 2021). These trends were emphasized

by the pandemic. More specifically, the inability of major sports to play as the pandemic began while esports organizers were still able to organize their normal events and one company who was able to get their broadcast shown on ESPN. This illustrates how esports was able to continue growth in uncertain times (Ocal, 2020). Reports now predict esports viewership to reach 519 million people by 2024 (Sinclair, 2021), however, despite the growth it has received there is little academic research on what attracts viewers to watch esports events. Some researchers have discussed what entices people to begin playing specific esports (Johnson et al., 2015) and what aspects of esports events they enjoy watching (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2016), however research on the effects of an esport event organizers' marketing efforts of viewership is incredibly limited. In this study, the research evaluates the impact of digital content marketing efforts on the viewership and engagement of esports events.

This study seeks to fill a gap in current theories regarding digital content marketing by determining the effectiveness of marketing tactics previously researched on a currently under researched market—esports events. Ang et al. (2018)—who evaluated the effectiveness of content marketing strategies for the cellphone market—states in their limitations that future research should attempt to determine whether these strategies would hold true if the offering was not a utilitarian product. This study—using esports events as the focus—will be assessing if the results found in that paper—specifically the influence of social viewing on consumers—holds up with hedonic services—services that provide value through pleasure rather than utility—such as esports events. Furthermore, it is hoped that this study sparks further discussion in the topics of Multiplayer Online Battle Arena esports and marketing, as well as the relationship between the two in order

to better understand why it is that this form of entertainment has and still is able to grow at such a fast rate.

In 2021, esports teams partnered with brands such as: Alienware, Intel, DC Comics, Ralph Lauren, and ASOS (Nordland, 2021). This does not include company sponsorships and partnerships with specific esport leagues which ranges from Red Bull to Bud Light, from Grubhub to State Farm, and from Mastercard to Lamborghini (LCS, 2021). Given this, it is essential that marketers understand what factors impact viewership of these digital events. This allows marketing managers to accurately compare data through metrics commonly used such as Cost per Mille (CPM) and engagement rate to ensure the best possible return on sponsors' investment. In one study, however, it would be difficult to attain an accurate representation of the entire esports ecosystem. Therefore, this study looks to focus on the specific esport—League of Legends—which accrued the most hours watched out of all esport events in 2021, (Ong,2021). League of Legends is a MOBA esport with 125 million active players (Marusic, 2022). Despite being released over 12 years ago in 2009, it is still one of the most popular video games in the world (Marusic, 2022). In summary of the theoretical and managerial importance of this study, the research will seek to establish marketing factors that impact esport events and spark further discussion on the topic so that more extensive research is developed, which leads to the first research question.

> RQ1: How does Digital Content Marketing (DCM) affect the viewership of MOBA esport events and how does that relate to the engagement of social media posts during and directly after the event?

The events of League of Legends esports are most commonly grouped by competitions organized by geographic area. This study looks primarily at the League of Legends European Championship (LEC) and the League of Legends World Championship 2022. Given that different geographic areas have different marketing environments (Cateora et al., 2020), each region should behave differently. Therefore, this study also compares the social media results from the LEC with a sample from the League of Legends Champions Korea (LCK) and the League of Legends World Championship 2022 which leads to the second research question.

RQ2: In what ways do the interactions between viewers and the esports region differ when looking at social media posts?

Many acronyms and terms specific to marketing or esports will be used throughout my proposal, Table 1 has been provided to give the acronym, its expansion, and a definition or description.

## Literature Review

### *Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) Esports*

As stated in Table 1, esports is pragmatically defined as, “competitive (pro and amateur) video gaming that is often coordinated by different leagues, ladders, and tournaments, and where players customarily belong to teams or other “sporting” organizations which are sponsored by various business organizations” (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2016). This is further supported by Julkunen et al. (2021) with the development of a model describing the structure of the esports business environment that goes from core key actors to key actors at the outer edge explaining how much each segment can

impact the ecosystem of the esports environment. This model puts leagues, players, and teams at the core key actor level; platforms, sponsors, and viewers at intermediate levels; and other organizations such as sports governing bodies as key actors at the outer edge. Hamari and Sjöblom (2016) also describe the trend of the esports industry to be segmented along genres of game. Some of these genres include first person shooters (in which players aim and shoot at a target where speed and accuracy are favored), Racing esports (which is generally quite similar to normal racing sports), and—the genre this study will focus on—Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) esports (Dahl et al. 2021; Stevens, 2018).

As stated in Table 1, Mora-Cantallops and Sicilia's definition of MOBA games is as follows:

> a subgenre of real-time strategy games in which two teams, typically consisting of five players each, compete against each other with each player controlling a single character. Contrary to real-time strategy games, there is no unit or building construction in a MOBA game, so "much of the strategy revolves around individual character development and cooperative team play in combat" (2018).

Another thing that sets MOBA games apart from other games is that players must maintain awareness about the metagame—defined as external elements that impact how the in-game strategy develops differently whether game to game or over time—as well as the actual plays occurring during game (Donaldson, 2017; Zimmerman & Salen Tekinbas, 2003). The metagame changes how the game is played as different players take on different roles based on many different factors including what players can offer their team, what happens before a game, and even factors during the game (Donaldson, 2017;

Zimmerman, 2003). One major factor in the metagame are the updates MOBA games typically undergo. These updates—generally referred to as patches—can shift the way people perceive the Most Effective Tactic Available (META). When players believe the META has changed, they often change the way in which they play in order to give their team an advantage through using the best strategy at the time and often teams are more competitive in MOBA events if they adapt to the META. An example of a game update changing the way the game is played can be seen through the popularity of Aurelion Sol (one of the characters you can play as in the game) after his Comprehensive Gameplay Update. According to League of Graphs (a website that tracks various statistics of different playable characters) the popularity of Aurelion Sol was generally below 5%, however around the time the update came out the champion's popularity grew to a peak of nearly 25% on February 12, 2023 (League of Graphs, 2023). Overall, the metagame can change what roles different players take on in a team to create an overall team composition that has a clear tactic to win the game (Donaldson, 2017).

### *Livestreaming*

The concept of digital events is based on the concept of social impact theory which was introduced by Latané in 1981 and states that people viewing things together impacts the way viewers interact with content and the overall experience the group experiences. This theory originally was mostly used to discuss co-viewing broadcasts on television, however recently Ang et al. (2018) brought social impact theory to livestreaming. Ang et al. state that as the digital landscape expands, social viewing of electronic content should be considered as an extension of social impact theory and found in their research social impact theory was applicable to livestreaming content (2018).

Livestream events also have many similarities to in-person events such as: from fear of missing out (for livestreaming you could either miss the feeling of experiencing it with thousands of others or completely miss the content of the stream if the stream is not uploaded or saved after the event) to having a venue (for livestreaming this would be considered the platform you are livestreaming on) to having producers that maintain a schedule for the event and create great moments with effects. Furthermore, as more in-person events are either streamed for people around the world to enjoy or recorded for streaming platforms to use as exclusive content, the similarities between the two become more apparent. From a marketing perspective, livestreaming as a social viewing strategy, "utilizes live video content for marketing purposes. This allows for real-time shared viewership and interaction among consumers through live chats and instant messages" (Ang et al., 2018). This definition, however, must be slightly edited to fit the means of this paper as this study will be viewing esports events as a hedonic service, specifically a digital event that provides viewers with entertainment value. Therefore, for the purposes of this paper livestreaming as a social viewing strategy utilizes live video content (sometimes alongside pre-recorded content in order to transition from one part of an event to another) in order to give the audience a unique and engaging experience and allows for a shared viewership experience similar to in-person events through live chats and instant messages.

### *Digital Content Marketing (DCM)*

Digital Content Marketing has been defined by Hollebeek and Macky (2019), as "the creation and dissemination of relevant, valuable, and brand-related content to current or prospective customers on digital platforms to develop their favourable brand

engagement, trust, and relationships (vs directly persuading customers to purchase)." Jacob and Johnson further developed this theory by conceptualizing how companies gain higher brand engagement through DCM into the three following fundamental propositions: content being "valuable, relevant, reliable, consistent, interactive, and entertaining;" posting to the proper platform creates more brand engagement than uploading all posts on to all platforms possible; and appropriate, gratifying content leads to positive target audience engagement (2021). Ang et al. also found that livestreaming DCM is a better strategy for marketers on multiple metrics including search intention, subscribe intention, and authentic consumer viewing experience (2018). This study also showed a general increase to purchase intention based on the search intention and purchase intention. This leads to my hypothesis.

> H1: Valuable, relevant, reliable, consistent, interactive, and entertaining DCM that consumers find appropriate and gratifying will increase viewership and engagement of MOBA esport events.

Another factor to consider is how different cultures interact with the internet and social media. One important study for this research was done in 2002 where a group of researchers found that the population in Hong Kong had a higher propensity to use the internet as a social communication tool where in the United States people tended to use the internet more for informational purposes (Chau et al.). In 2011, Kim, Sohn, and Choi tested how Koreans and Americans interacted with Facebook and found that Americans grew much larger networks despite spending a similar amount of time on social media. Furthermore they found that the entertainment motivation for using social media was much higher in Americans than it was for Koreans—who ranked higher in motivations of

seeking information and social support. Pentina, Basmanova, and Zhang continued this research comparing motivations of using Twitter in the United States and Ukraine and found that news and content sharing was the most valued motivation in Ukraine and in the U.S. social interaction and exchange was most valued (2016). These studies show a trend where more individualist cultures are more likely to seek out entertainment and social interactions with others on social media while in more collectivist cultures the focus is more on getting the information you need or using social media to communicate with people you already know and have a connection with. Therefore, with less emphasis on entertainment and interactions with new people, it would be expected that people of more collectivistic cultures would be less likely to comment on the post of a brand (like the LCK) than collectivist cultures. This leads to the second hypothesis.

> H2: The comments of regions containing more collectivist cultures will on average have less engagements than regions containing more individualist cultures.

### *Research Design*

The schedule of events of the LEC Summer Season had games played on Saturdays, Sundays, and occasionally Fridays. For the purposes of this study the Saturdays, Sundays, and Fridays—when applicable—will be grouped together into weeks. The schedule of the World Championship's events include week by week analysis which is broken down into Play-ins Stage, Groups Week 1, Groups Week 2, Quarterfinals, Semifinals, and Finals. After each of these sections there was at least one day without games before the next section.

Given different geographic areas have different marketing environments, each region should behave differently (Cateora et al., 2020). Therefore, this study compares the social media results from the LEC with a sample from the League of Legends Champions Korea (LCK) and the League of Legends World Championship 2022

In order to answer the research question, this study adopts a nonexperimental cross-sectional predictive secondary data collection in order to acquire viewership and engagement data for esports events. The website, esports charts (escharts.com), is used in order to gain viewership data (specifically average viewers and hours watched) for esport events from the LEC and LCK over the Summer Split (a tournament that occurs over the summer months that start with games played between all teams after which the best records go on to the summer playoffs). Furthermore, this study collected the DCM and engagement data directly from the main social media accounts (YouTube, Twitter, and TikTok) found in each region.

To analyze the data to show whether different regions have different amounts of engagements, first, outliers were determined in comments, retweets and likes using the 1.5 x IQR rule and turning all outliers into missing data points. Then an ANOVA independent samples t-test was used, sorted by region, on each of the three variables to see which, if any, types of engagement have a statistically significant difference.

The main variables used for DCM are the number of posts done before the event and the average engagements and total engagements of each platform (YouTube, Twitter, and TikTok). The data used to evaluate how engagement is affected is the number of

engagements (such as likes, comments, and shares) given to social media posts from the region's official social media page during and up to one hour after the event.

### *Funding*

The funding that was required for this study totaled 299 US dollars used for the purposes of gaining access to Escharts Pro for one year. All funding has been provided by the Honors College at Georgia Southern University.

## Results and Discussion

The results of correlation analysis on the LEC Summer 2022 Split data between views and engagements of social media posts before the event and viewership metrics are seen in Table 2. Of the 32 correlation values between social media post metrics and event viewership metrics only eight values were positive. Of the eight values that were positively correlated, average Twitter views and total Twitter engagements had a positive relationship on both average event views and hours watched. Therefore, this sample only supports H1 for total Twitter engagements and average Twitter views. Twitter holding the most positive correlations between engagement and viewership seems to show evidence that the viewers of League of Legends esports are most influenced by Twitter posts. This is also supported by the fact that most social media posts made by regions are on Twitter.

The results of correlation analysis on the LEC Summer 2022 Summer Split data between viewership metrics and views and engagements of posts made during and directly after the event are seen in Table 3. Though there were still many negative

correlation values there were more positive correlations and the positive correlations are stronger (For example the relationship between Total Twitter Engagement and Average Views was 0.0369 for posts before the event and 0.8212 for posts during and after the event). Therefore, engagement on social media posts during and directly after the event is tied more strongly to average viewers and hours watched than the posts before the event are. Logically, this is due to the fact that viewers are already online to watch the event and just have to go to a different website during the break to engage with social media posts posted at this time. Furthermore, the posts during and directly after the event are responsive to what happens during the course of the event. If something unexpected happens during the event a Twitter post about the unexpected occurrence can easily capitalize on viewers who are already excited and engaged by the stream.

The means of the samples of LEC and LCK social media posts were $\bar{x} = 38.17$ and $\bar{x} = 5.74$ respectively shown in Table 4. After removing all outliers using the 1.5 times Interquartile Range Rule, the ANOVA different means test for the LEC and LCK regions' social media posts returned a statistically significant value ($p < .001$) for comments, likes, and retweets shown in Table 5. The research shows that there are potential factors influencing the way people interact with different regions' social media content. The results support H2 as the region for South Korea—which according to Hofstede-insights.com South Korea has a rank of 18 on individualism—has lower interactions than the European League—of which many of the countries involved rank higher than South Korea in individualism—for example Denmark, France, and Germany score 74, 71, and 67 respectively compared to South Korea which has a rating of 18 (Hofstede Insights, 2022).

This study is not experimental and therefore other factors could also be contributing to the difference in the samples. Shared viewership between the two regions is one of these other important factors. It would be expected for shared viewers to act the same on both regions' social media accounts based solely on culture. However, people may act differently on social media at different times. Specifically for European viewers of the LCK streams, which start at 9 a.m. Central European Time, where many people will be working and so anyone who could watch the stream while working would probably be less likely to respond on social media to posts compared to the LEC stream that starts at 5:30 p.m. Central European Time. Therefore, to quantify the effect certain factors have on the engagements on social media posts by different regions more research on the topic would be required.

## Conclusion and Future Research

This thesis has discussed how DCM should impact MOBA esport events based on research, data collection, and data analysis. The findings support that more collectivist cultures are less likely to engage with an esports region's posts as hypothesized. The findings show support for Twitter posts with more engagement having a positive relationship with viewership of the esports event, however other social media platforms did not show the same positive relationship. The engagements of other platforms were shown as having a negative relationship based on this study.

Future studies on the impact of DCM on esport events could expand the data of this study by looking more long term or including more regions and/or esports in the

study. Researchers could also look at what other factors influence esports viewership and how to quantify these factors.

**Table 1**

*Definitions of Specific Terms or Acronyms*

| Term | Expansion | Definition/Description |
|---|---|---|
| Esports | N/A | "Competitive (pro and amateur) video gaming that is often coordinated by different leagues, ladders, and tournaments, and where players customarily belong to teams or other "sporting" organizations which are sponsored by various business organizations" (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2016) |
| MOBA | Multiplayer Online Battle Arena | a subgenre of real-time strategy games in which two teams, typically consisting of five players each, compete against each other with each player controlling a single character. Contrary to real-time strategy games, there is no unit or building construction in a MOBA game, so "much of the strategy revolves around individual character development and cooperative team play in combat" (Mora-Cantallops & Sicilia, 2018) |
| DCM | Digital Content Marketing | "The creation and dissemination of relevant, valuable, and brand-related content to current or prospective customers on digital platforms to develop their favourable brand engagement, trust, and relationships (vs directly |

Table 1 (Continued)

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | | persuading customers to purchase)" (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019) |
| LCS | League of Legends Championship Series | The League of Legends Professional League of North America |
| LEC | League of Legends European Championship | The League of Legends Professional League of Europe |
| LPL | League of Legends Pro League | The League of Legends Professional League of China |
| LCK | League of Legends Champions Korea | The League of Legends Professional League of South Korea |

**Table 2**

*Correlation Table Between Before Event Social Media Posts and Event Metrics*

| | *Average Views* | *Hours Watched* |
|---|---|---|
| *Average Twitter Views* | 0.0217 | 0.1563 |
| *Average Twitter Engagements* | -0.0711 | 0.0067 |
| *Average YouTube views* | -0.3150 | -0.3975 |
| *Average YouTube engagements* | -0.0724 | 0.0783 |
| *Average TikTok Views* | -0.2609 | -0.4421 |
| *Average TikTok Engagements* | -0.2440 | -0.4400 |
| *Average Cross-Platform Views* | -0.3402 | -0.4746 |
| *Average Cross-Platform Engagement* | -0.2832 | -0.4109 |
| *Total Video Views Twitter* | -0.0662 | 0.0864 |
| *Total Twitter Engagements* | 0.0369 | 0.2768 |
| *Total YouTube views* | -0.5343 | -0.2894 |
| *Total YouTube engagements* | -0.2044 | 0.1636 |
| *Total TikTok views* | -0.4056 | -0.5514 |
| *Total TikTok engagements* | -0.3523 | -0.5182 |
| *Total Cross-Platform Views* | -0.4577 | -0.5336 |
| *Total Cross-Platform Engagements* | -0.3149 | -0.3564 |
| *Average Views* | 1 | 0.8799 |
| *Hours Watched* | | 1 |

**Table 3**

*Correlation Table Between Event Metrics and Event Social Media Engagement*

| | *Average Views* | *Hours Watched* |
|---|---|---|
| *Average Views* | 1 | |
| *Hours Watched* | 0.8799 | 1 |
| *Average Twitter Views* | -0.6279 | -0.6410 |
| *Average Twitter Engagements* | 0.6769 | 0.5412 |
| *Average YouTube views* | -0.0755 | -0.1735 |
| *Average YouTube engagements* | -0.4540 | -0.6646 |
| *Average TikTok Views* | 0.3322 | 0.3283 |
| *Average TikTok Engagements* | -0.1366 | -0.1345 |
| *Average Cross-Platform Views* | -0.4654 | -0.5770 |
| *Average Cross-Platform Engagement* | 0.6252 | 0.5089 |
| *Total Video Views Twitter* | 0.0615 | -0.1168 |
| *Total Twitter Engagements* | 0.8212 | 0.9645 |
| *Total YouTube views* | 0.2476 | 0.0225 |
| *Total YouTube engagements* | -0.0655 | -0.3552 |
| *Total TikTok views* | 0.3615 | 0.5564 |
| *Total TikTok engagements* | 0.0501 | 0.2692 |
| *Total Cross-Platform Views* | 0.1472 | -0.0115 |
| *Total Cross-Platform Engagements* | 0.8248 | 0.9662 |

**Table 4**

*Means of Twitter Comments, Likes, and Shares of LCK and LEC*

| Variables | | | Statistic | Std. Error |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Comments | LCK | Mean | 5.74 | .951 |
| | | Variance | 328.103 | |
| | | Std. Deviation | 18.114 | |
| | | Minimum | 0 | |
| | | Maximum | 287 | |
| | | Range | 287 | |
| | | Interquartile Range | 4 | |
| | LEC | Mean | 38.17 | 3.974 |
| | | Variance | 8828.236 | |
| | | Std. Deviation | 93.959 | |
| | | Minimum | 0 | |
| | | Maximum | 1800 | |
| | | Range | 1800 | |
| | | Interquartile Range | 30 | |
| Retweets | LCK | Mean | 101.80 | 8.852 |
| | | Variance | 28440.793 | |
| | | Std. Deviation | 168.644 | |
| | | Minimum | 0 | |
| | | Maximum | 1424 | |
| | | Range | 1424 | |
| | | Interquartile Range | 101 | |
| | LEC | Mean | 52.94 | 3.925 |

Table 4 (Continued)

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Variance | 8611.128 | |
| | | Std. Deviation | 92.796 | |
| | | Minimum | 0 | |
| | | Maximum | 1255 | |
| | | Range | 1255 | |
| | | Interquartile Range | 46 | |
| Likes | LCK | Mean | 586.58 | 53.039 |
| | | Variance | 1021172.282 | |
| | | Std. Deviation | 1010.531 | |
| | | Minimum | 12 | |
| | | Maximum | 11200 | |
| | | Range | 11188 | |
| | | Interquartile Range | 478 | |
| | LEC | Mean | 1581.03 | 72.493 |
| | | Variance | 2937703.386 | |
| | | Std. Deviation | 1713.973 | |
| | | Minimum | 72 | |
| | | Maximum | 15500 | |
| | | Range | 15428 | |
| | | Interquartile Range | 1527 | |

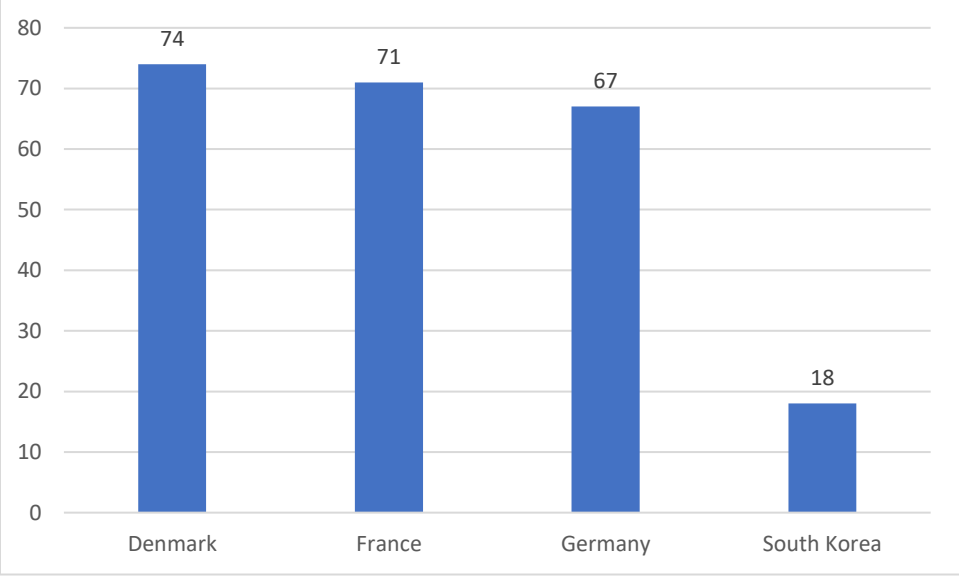
**Table 5**

*ANOVA Test for LCK and LEC Likes Comments and Shares*

| | | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | Sig |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Comments** | Between Groups | 69556.091 | 1 | 69556.091 | 305.836 | 0.000 |
| | Within Groups | 191040.580 | 840 | 227.429 | | |
| | Total | 260596.671 | 841 | | | |
| **Retweets** | Between Groups | 222964.855 | 1 | 222964.855 | 115.505 | 0.000 |
| | Within Groups | 1615695.732 | 837 | 1930.341 | | |
| | Total | 1838660.586 | 838 | | | |
| **Likes** | Between Groups | 143753471.7 | 1 | 143753471.7 | 243.872 | 0.000 |
| | Within Groups | 496327026.4 | 842 | 589462.027 | | |
| | Total | 640080498.1 | 843 | | | |

**Figure 6**

*Visualization of Individualism Index Results of South Korea and European Countries*



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