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Understanding and Measuring Esports Online Spectator Motivation: Development of a Scale

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The esports industry has found itself at a critical stage in the quest for continuous growth and sustainable development, facing both tremendous opportunities and challenges. For achieving enhanced revenue generation and consumer retention, understanding esports as a spectator entertainment is essential for the inchoate yet burgeoning industry, especially in an online environment through which a majority of fans follow the competitive scene of esports. In this investigation, two studies were conducted to understand the dimensions and develop a measure of esports online spectator motivation. Integrating Sloan’s sport motivation theories (Sloan, 1989; Zhang et al., 2003) and the uses and gratification theory (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017; Ruggiero, 2000) into the conceptual framework, study 1 was performed to qualitatively explore the motives associated with esports online spectatorship. Eleven preliminary motives were identified, among which skill improvement, vicarious sensation, and nostalgic sentiment were found to be unique in the esports context. Substantial new perspectives were revealed on five of the motivational dimensions, i.e., skill appreciation, dramatic nature, friends bonding, socialization opportunity, and game knowledge. It is necessary to highlight that as expected, three motives including competition excitement, entertaining nature, and competitive nature displayed similar properties as observed in the previous studies on traditional sport spectatorship.

To verify the motive dimensions identified in study 1, study 2 employed a quantitative design to develop the Motivation Scale for Esports Spectatorship (MSES) with EFA (n = 671), CFA (n = 638), and SEM analysis. 60 items representing 11 proposed factors were developed from insight-stimulating incidents and examples procured from study 1 to reflect the uniqueness of esports online spectatorship. Consistently, 11 factors with 54 items emerged, explaining a total of 78.47% variance among the variables. A CFA with ML estimation was employed for the second data set (n = 638). After removing two items with low loadings, GOF measures revealed that the 11-factor model fit the data reasonably well. The normed chi-square (χ2/df = 2.21), the RMSEA value (RMSEA = .044), and the CFI value (CFI = .950) all exceeded the cut-off values. Also, the convergent validity and discriminant validity indices were all beyond the threshold values. Findings indicated that the MSES factors predicted a total of 49.8% of the variance in online spectators’ commitment to their favorite esports game and a total of 48.9% of the variance in WOM intentions (χ2 = 2712.854, p < .001, χ2/df = 2.085, CFI = .947, RMSEA = .041).

The research findings helped clarify specific perspectives for esports marketers to address the needs of esports consumers when developing promotional campaigns. The developed MSES scale can be adopted for future studies on esports consumer motivation. This study made an initial attempt to provide guidance for scholars and practitioners to decipher the needs, preferences, and behaviors of the growing esports online spectator population. Given esports industry and relevant academic works are still at a preliminary stage, the present study illuminates several other directions that are needed for future research.