

Identifying and Conceptualizing Push and Pull Factors Associated with e-Sports Spectatorship: A Qualitative Inquiry

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**25-minute oral presentation
(including questions)**

Esports, also known as competitive gaming or organized video game competition, have widely received international recognitions and generated enormous attentions from the sport, event, and entertainment industries (Cunningham et al., 2018; Funk, Pizzo, & Baker, 2018). With prize money soaring to millions of dollars that enable top players earning big-time incomes and attract zealous crowds, esports tournaments have often filled up large-capacity sport arenas for traditional form of sport competitions, such as the Madison Square Garden in New York City and the Staples Center in Los Angeles, for the League of Legends World Championship events in recent years. Even so, the impressive live attendance is comparatively dwarfed by the online spectatorship as evidenced by the 2015 event that attracted a 334 million audience who followed the action over the course of 73 games on streaming platforms (e.g., Twitch, Facebook Live, and YouTube Live), with an average concurrent viewership of over 4.2 million (Magus, 2015). The online media viewership is the sign of success that mirrors or even surpasses the achievement of some major sport leagues and conferences.

Despite the increasing resemblance between esports spectatorship and traditional sport spectatorship in a number of measures, they are essentially two distinctive phenomena that should be examined both separately and comparatively. It appears that there is a significant crossover between esports spectatorship and participation markets as most esports viewers are also active players; yet, little is known regarding esports spectatorship that is integral to the esports industry and limited research efforts have been devoted to understanding why people watch esports and what would people expect from an esports watching experience. The relatively young and tech-savvy esports fans as opposed to their traditional sport counterparts might warrant special considerations. The variety of esports genres that form distinct sports-like competitions should also be examined with heed. While push and pull factors may have been well articulated for traditional sport games and events, these are not the case in the esports context. To this end, the purpose of this study was to explore the underlying push and pull factors associated with esports spectatorship from both 'push' (i.e., socio-psychological motivations) and 'pull' (i.e., consumer demand of esports game event features) perspectives. More specifically, the current study strived to address two research questions: (a) what were the push and pull factors that evoked esports spectatorship and (b) how would push and pull factors influence esports consumption behaviors? This study was unique in identifying a host of discrete push and pull factors that explained the attractiveness of esports spectatorship.

As no previous study had identified push and pull factors associated with esports spectatorship, an inductive inquiry was carried in this study through a comprehensive review of literature, semi-structured interviews, and online open-ended surveys to explore and conceptualize the push and pull factors for esports spectatorship. Data were collected and analyzed inductively without preconceived themes or categories. The constant comparative method was utilized to perform the analysis with coding occurring at three levels: (a) initial/open coding, (b) focused coding, and (c) theoretical coding (Charmaz, 2014). Consistent with previous conceptualizations of fan motivations and consumer demand (e.g., Cianfrone & Zhang, 2013; Funk, Ridinger, & Moorman, 2003; Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017; Trail & James, 2001; Wann, 1995; Zhang, Lam, & Connaughton, 2003), the newly discovered push factors stemmed from the intrinsic needs and desires of esports fans; whereas, the pull factors emanated from consumer expectations and evaluations of what an esports watching experience (i.e., the product attributes) should offer.

The following push factors emerged in the study, including skill improvement, skill appreciation, vicarious sensation, excitement environment, socialization desire, friendship bonding, drama seeking, nostalgia feeling, entertainment attraction, game competition, and esports knowledge. Some of the push factors identified seemed to be unique in

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esports spectatorship context, such as skill improvement, which is a demonstration of esports fans' desire to become a better player, learn new tricks, skills, and strategies, and imitate good practices from veteran players through their engagement in esports spectatorship. Fan portrayal of skill improvement was emphasized by such a statement as reciprocity between watching and playing. While other push factors such as socialization desire, excitement environment, and drama seeking had been revealed to be important socio-psychological concepts extensively in traditional sport spectatorship settings, they presented new perspectives on the specific needs, wants, and causes for watching esports games that differed from traditional sport contexts. The pull factors to emerge in the data were highly reflective of the expectations esports fans had towards the elements that determined their decisions, experiences, and appraisals related to esports competition or stream attributes. Event accessibility, broadcasting commentary, chat board, stream quality, event operation, and player attribute were the themes and concepts reflected repetitively in the process of data analyses. Similar to the identified push factors, several pull factors turned out to be only existent in esports, such as chat board, which is defined as an essential communication tool that enhances social experience among esports community members and facilitate interactions with other spectators or streamers. Even though player attributes and event operation seemed to be familiar concepts attributable to traditional sport spectatorship, they were in fact representative of different expectations in an esports setting. Taking player attributes factor as an example, it was indicated that players' personalities were an important contributor to esports spectatorship. Based on these concepts and sub-concepts emerged in the study and their potential influence, a preliminary framework is established for studying the impact of push and pull factors associated with esports spectatorship on consumer behavior.

The qualitative data demonstrated that esports fans were impacted by both push and pull factors as they either fulfilled esports fans' deprived socio-psychological needs or responded to their expectations towards core product features that were critical to esports spectatorship. Utilizing the findings generated from this study, further empirical investigations should be performed to develop an instrument to quantitatively evaluate the push and pull factors associated with esports spectatorship, assess its measurement properties, and test the effects of the identified factors on esports spectatorship and other relevant consumption behaviors.