Utilizing the Motivation, Opportunity, and Ability Theory to Study Esports Consumer Behavior: Development of Research Framework

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Electronic sports (esports), also known as competitive video gaming, has enjoyed global recognition and popularity in recent years and undeniably become one of the most rapidly growing forms of new media, popular entertainment, and sport consumption outlets. The business of esports is now a $460 million industry and projected to exceed $1.0 billion of revenue in 2019 (Newzoo, 2016). Of particular note, modeled after traditional sports such as football, basketball, baseball, and hockey (Schmidt & Shreffler, 2015; Shaw, 2013), esports has also transformed itself into a popular spectator phenomenon given that the number of audience watching esports was up from 58 million in 2012 to 200 million worldwide in 2016, ranging from occasional viewers to esports enthusiasts (Newzoo, 2016; SuperData, 2015). The burgeoning esports viewership is largely fueled by live streaming video platforms; Twitch, for example, has more than 1.5 million broadcasters and 100 million visitors per month with a majority of them being esports fans (Needleman, 2015). Most importantly, more than three quarters of esports enthusiasts report that the time they have spent on watching traditional sports is replaced by the time they spend watching esports (Kwilinski, 2016). With a growing number of millennials between 18 and 34 years old turning to esports (Newzoo, 2016; SuperData, 2015), a young, male demographic that traditional sport properties have long relied upon, esports viewership is ripe with new prospects for sport marketing research and practice.

As with many embryonic research streams, esports shares conceptual territories with related concepts and it is critical to recognize the endogenous link between esports and traditional sports, as well as between esports and video gaming. Although previous research findings on sport and video game consumptions do not fully address esports media consumption, they can surely shed some light on factors that influence a variety of esports consumer behaviors, such as factors related to socio-motivations for sport consumption. Even so, when applying these concepts to the esports context, prior research has generally lagged in three respects. First, previous research on sport consumer behavior has mainly focused on consumer traits and motivations (e.g., Bernthal, Koesters, Ballouli, & Brown, 2015; Trail & James, 2001; Trail, Fink, & Anderson, 2003; Zhang, Pease, Hui, & Michaud, 1995), which predominantly stemmed from motivational theories. Second, in the limited esports literature, esports research has primarily addressed internal motivational driving forces (e.g., Cianfrone, 2007; Müller-Lietzkow, 2006; Martončík, 2015; Shaw, 2013; Schmidt & Shreffler, 2015; Teng and Chen, 2014), yet overlooks the external conditions that could also impact esports consumption. Third, there is a lack of integrative theoretical framework for esports research. With a few exceptions (e.g., Buchanan-Oliver & Seo, 2012; Seo, 2013, 2015; Seo & Jung, 2014), a majority of previous studies are descriptive and conceptual in nature, and demanding for further empirical evidence generated from quantitative inquiries.

In an effort to fill the research void, this study conducts a comprehensive review of literature as the primary methodology of research inquiry and consequently postulates the adoption of the Motivation, Opportunity, and Ability (MOA) theory, which has been employed extensively in the mainstream business consumer behavior studies and proved useful in determining how distinct circumstances might affect consumer perceptions and behaviors in B2B, B2C, and C2C contexts by taking both internal and external factors into account (e.g., Batra & Ray, 1986; Bigné, Ruiz, Andreu, & Hernandez, 2015; Heer & Poiesz, 1998; MacInnis, Moorman, & Jaworski, 1991; Gruen, Osmonbekov, & Czaplewski, 2005). The MOA model has the potential of helping examine a more comprehensive spectrum of characteristics and circumstances that affect the dynamic esports viewership. MacInnis and Jaworski (1989) proposed that information processing is contingent on underlying motivation, existing opportunity, and ability. The degree to which an individual engages in information processing would be influenced by the magnitude on the MOA continuum (MacInnis et al., 1991). As the MOA theory offers valuable insights in terms of understanding different types of information processing approaches in varying settings, it appears logical to assume
its capacity to analyze how information processing procedures would influence one’s decision to engage in esports viewership. When combining the application of the MOA theory in the esports context with research findings derived from investigations into traditional sport consumer behaviors, it can be proposed that esports viewership is likely influenced by three core concepts: (a) motivation, defined as one’s willingness, readiness, interest, and desire to engage in esports viewership, including escapism/diversion, social interaction, drama/eustress, knowledge, aesthetics, and entertainment (Bernthal et al., 2015; Cianfrone, 2007; Trail & James, 2001); (b) opportunity, denoted as situational factors that are instrumental for an individual to engage in esports viewership, as well as constraints and impediments that complicate or hinder esports viewership (Kim & Trail, 2010; Bigné et al., 2015; Gruen et al., 2005); and (c) ability, referred as perceived judgment of one’s own capacity to engage in esports viewership, including past experiences and subjective knowledge (Bigné et al., 2015; Fazio & Zanna, 1981; Flynn & Goldsmith, 1999; Gruen et al., 2005). Using ability as an example, individuals with a high level of esports competence would be more knowledgeable and capable in terms of engaging in esports viewership; on the other hand, without the necessary skills or proficiencies, even a motivated viewer is not likely to watch esports. A moderating effect of ability on the relationship between motivation and esports viewership and between opportunity and esports viewership can subsequently be posited. Although the precise directions of all causal relationships among MOA elements can be difficult to briefly describe (Blumberg and Pringle, 1982; Siemsen, Roth, & Balasubramanian, 2008), motivation, opportunity, and ability are conceptualized as correlated but distinct concepts in the framework. To select criterion variables, the proposed framework incorporates measures on behavioral intentions, actual esports consumptions, and eWOM (i.e., word of mouth) of esports viewers, particularly signifying the importance of the online social behavior associated with willingness to recommend the esports content they are watching (Bigné et al., 2015; Mao & Zhang, 2013; Vargo & Lusch, 2004).

In brief, it would be instrumental for scholars and practitioners to identify the key determinants that facilitate and inhibit esports consumption and develop effective marketing strategies to appeal to current and potential esports consumers. The present study represents an initial effort to explore the mechanism behind the esports viewership, an emerging yet much understudied phenomenon. The derived research framework in this study provides viable directions for conducting empirical investigations into esports consumer behaviors. From a holistic MOA perspective, the framework can be adopted to conduct empirical studies to identify, measure, and study those variables that drive and restrict people to consume esports in related media outlets and across different esports titles, particularly through various online platforms.