Understanding and Measuring esports Spectator Motivations: Preliminary Development of a Conceptual Framework

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esports, also known as electronic sports, competitive gaming, cyber sports, or organized video game competition, have recently received international recognition as major sport entertainment activities from both scholars and professionals (Adler, 2016; Casselman, 2015; Funk, Pizzo, & Baker, 2017). Researchers have specifically looked into the theoretical parameters of esports and initiated a scholarly discourse by eliciting a set of attributes that are fundamental for its identity and function (Funk et al., 2017; Hallman & Giel, 2017; Heere, 2017). While esports resemble many core facets of traditional sports, such as players, coaches, events and tournaments, and sponsorships, they are not equivalent to traditional sports, especially when considering the distinct characteristics of its consumers and consumption patterns. Of esports enthusiasts, 39% do not watch the most popular sports and more than 75% have replaced their time for traditional sports by playing and watching esports (Kwilinski, 2016; Newzoo, 2017). With a growing number of millennials aged between 18 and 34 turning to competitive gaming (Deloitte, 2017; Newzoo, 2016), esports are becoming what traditional sports are desperate to become: young, global, and ethnically diverse. Even within the esports industry, there are severe competitions in obtaining new customers and retaining existing ones among various types of esports games.

To provide products and services that continuously meet the needs and wants of consumers, it is necessary for esports marketers and managers to understand consumer motivations. A number of researchers indicate that esports consumers are dynamic, multifaceted, and can be considered both spectators and participants who are actively involved in different esports consumption activities, typically including gameplay, spectating, use of traditional and social media, and consumption of both virtual goods and physical commodities. The inter-connectedness between esports and traditional sports warrants the examination of sport consumer motivation literature to help determine the motives of esports consumer (Funk et al., 2017; Hallmann & Giel, 2017; Heere, 2017; Witkowski, 2012). In addition, as a popular cultural practice stemming from digital gaming (e.g., Seo, Buchanan-Oliver, & Fam, 2015; Wagner, 2007), to ignore the innate relationship between esports and video gaming is tantamount to claim that all esports consumers are motivated by the exact same reasons as sport consumers, which has been already repudiated by previous research (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017). Thus, the motives for esports consumers to embark on consumption activities can take references from motivation studies in sport spectator settings, sport and leisure participation settings, video game consumption settings, sport online consumption settings, and fantasy sport settings. Even so, although the voluminous literature pertaining to traditional sport consumers and gamers have provided a solid theoretical foundation to study esports motives and the associated psychological and behavioral outcomes, the unique marketing and environmental contexts associated with competitive gaming consumption, which are of comparatively younger and more tech-savvy consumers, virtual item consumption, and high synergy between playing and spectating, may require specific considerations when assessing esports motivations. For instance, unlike a majority of traditional sports with rules and procedures that are generally intuitive, most of esports games require certain prior gaming knowledge and technical competencies in playing in order to fully understand the mechanism and appreciate the performance – which provide an explanation on why a majority of esports spectators are currently or used to be players themselves (Seo & Jung, 2016). The hybridity of watching and playing acts a vital role in esports consumption; whereas, traditional sport participation and spectatorship are often separate consumption practices. This unique phenomenon creates the need for more definitive research that describes the nature and scope of esports and critically integrates the accumulated research evidences to advance the understanding of esports motivations.

Through conducting a comprehensive review of literature as the main research method, the purpose of this study was to form a conceptual framework on a preliminary basis to guide the development of a scale to assess socio-
motivation for esports consumers. The review of literature revealed a total 109 pertinent motives, specifically, 44 for sport spectatorship, 7 for sport participation, 15 for fantasy sport participation, 15 for sport online consumption, 25 for video game consumption, and 3 new identified motives for esports consumption. Items under a total of preliminary 22 factors, including competition, escape, entertainment, diversion, eustress, socialization, achievement, group affiliation, aesthetics, drama, pass time, relaxation, fantasy, challenge, catharsis, immersion, knowledge application, information seeking, wholesome environment, convenience, revitalization, and social recognition are derived from existing scales and included in the initial item pool (e.g., Bernthal, Koesters, Ballouli, & Brown, 2015; Casper & Menefee, 2010; Dwyer & Kim, 2011; Funk et al., 2012; Funk et al., 2001; Kim, Byon, Yu, Zhang, & Kim, 2013; Kim & Trail, 2010; Lee, Seo, & Green, 2013; McDonald, Milne, & Hong, 2002; Trail & James, 2001; Sherry et al., 2006; Zhang, Lam, & Connaughton, 2003). These items are modified and tailored to maintain consistency in the context of esports consumption, which are included in the preliminary Motivation Scale for esports Consumer (MSEC). Further empirical investigations are needed to examine the viability and feasibility of this conceptual framework and a valid measure resulted from its application in an effort to explain, assess, and analyze the discrete facets of socio-motivations among esports consumers. These procedures should include at least the following: (a) examination of linguistic correctness and elimination of item redundancy for items in the preliminary MSEC by a panel of linguistic specialists, (b) test of content validity by a panel of experts, (c) conduct of exploratory factor analyses to identify the dimensionality of socio-motivations of esports consumers and achieve a simple factor structure, (d) conduct of confirmatory factor analyses to further validate parameter indices for the developed scale; (e) examination of convergent and discriminant validities of the scale, (f) calculations of reliability coefficients, and (g) conduct of structural equation model analyses to examine the predictability of the MSEC factors to esports consumption variables. Cross-validation studies across various esports settings are also necessary as follow-up procedures. The conceptual model and the resulted scale can be utilized to test theories and examine relationships.