eSports Viewership Analyses

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Millions of people tuned into the Overwatch League (OWL) in 2019, and the 2020 viewership is predicted to be record-breaking (Forbes, 2019). Given this continuous growth, it has become necessary to understand the determinants of eSport viewership to identify consumer behaviors. This study, therefore, aims to extend previous literature by empirically examining such determinants—particularly by using OWL viewership logs to investigate which determinant factors have driven viewers to watch eSports.

Previous studies have identified five factors of sport demand (Borland & Mcdonald, 2003), including consumer preferences (e.g., consumer habits or popularity among consumers), viewing quality (e.g., the quality of stadium or environmental conditions), economics (e.g., ticket prices), the sporting contest (e.g., success of competing, quality of a match), and supply capacity (e.g., stadium size). Based on these components, sport and media researchers have extended the borders of study to TV sports viewership (Alavy & Ga\(skell, 2010\)). Several studies seeking appropriate factors for TV viewership have been conducted, all of which have shown that consumer preferences and the sporting contest mainly influence attendance (Tainsky & McEvoy, 2012; Tainsky, 2010; Paul & Weinbach, 2007).

While eSports leagues have adopted similar structures to North American professional sports, they are mainly broadcasted on live-streaming platforms, such as Twitch.tv or YouTube. This prevents the variables in traditional viewership studies from being adopted to consider eSports. Therefore, the present research has developed replacement variables specifically designed for the eSports context. For instance, kill/death ratios and players’ average ratings within a game represent players’ scores and performance (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017), and the number of social networking service (SNS) likes and followers represents customer preference in the form of players’ popularity (Forbes, 2019). The number of viewers watching the 2019 OWL, as well as the accumulative winning percentages, game results, and average player ratings, were also collected by the chosen statistics portal—TwitchTracker, Winston’s Lab.

To address its purpose, this research applied first stage generalized method of moments (GMM) estimates for a dynamic linear model (Arellano & Bond, 1991). The number of viewers was regressed by the average ratings of players, the kills/deaths/assists (KDA) statistics, and the number of followers. A total of 672 observations was collected in the model, and the results showed that the viewership indicated autocorrelation in the first period and that the ratings for the “home team” positively impacted viewership \(\beta = .113, p=.022\). The number of followers was not related to viewership, but team-specific factors showed a significant relationship to viewership numbers.

From an academic perspective, this study advances sport management scholarship by considering viewership demand, which is unique to eSports. The results also provide practitioners with valuable information and important insights for increasing viewing quality, which, in turn, will increase viewership numbers and revenue for the eSports industry.