Impacts of Perceived Value on Purchasing Virtual Sport Branded Merchandise

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Sport consumers’ purchase decisions and brand value perceptions have been studied through the lens of television viewership, physical merchandise, sport services consumption, and their influence on attendance or participation (Funk, Mahony, & Havitz, 2003). A largely under-researched form of sport consumption is that of the consumption of virtual merchandise. Virtual goods, defined as a product traded in non-physical online communities and games (Investopedia, 2012), have become an important target of online consumption (Hamari & Keronen, 2016). No more prevalent are digital goods than in video games, which has become the fastest-growing form of human recreation (Ryan, Rigby, & Przybylski, 2006). As many have discussed the inclusion of esports in the definition of sport (e.g., Wagner, 2006; Jenny, Manning, Keiper, & Olrich, 2017), there is a need to explore the consumption pattern within this new frontier for sports.

Thus, the purpose of the current study was to develop and test a working model of consumers’ perceived values of sport branded virtual merchandise and their impact on purchase decisions. Utilizing the theories of: consumption values (Sheth, Newman, & Gross, 1991); functional attitude (Katz 1960; Shavitt 1989; Smith, Bruner, & White 1956), self-identification (Tajfel, 1979); the authors developed the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the important perceived value dimensions in predicting the consumption of virtual merchandise.

RQ2: What are the roles of Team Identification and Involvement in the relationship between perceived values and purchase intention.

To test these hypotheses, multiple scales, measures, and constructs were defined and measured by using existing literature from sport, virtual merchandising, and consumer behavior (Asada, & Ko, 2016; Kim, Gupta, & Koh, 2011; Domina, Lee, & MacGillivray, 2012; Petrick, 2002). Titles such as Riot Games’ League of Legends and Blizzard Entertainment’s Overwatch have millions of players each month (Riot Games), as such these titles provide a large sample pool for subjects having awareness of, purchased, and have experience with sport branded items.

The study was conducted recruiting two groups of subjects through Amazon mTurk (n=132, 305) targeting past purchasers of virtual sport branded merchandise across multiple outlets. Responses of Group 1 were analyzed in an Exploratory Factor Analysis of the measurement items concluded the measures load on the 7 measurement factors (CFI =.95, SRMR =.02) without cross-loadings or multiple factor loadings. Responses from Group 2 were analyzed utilizing Confirmatory Factor Analysis indicated the proposed measurement model provided adequate fit (χ²/df=837/260, RMSEA=.06, CFI=.95, SRMR=.05) and confirmed involvement’s direct impact on purchase intention (β = .38, p < .001), and team identification’s mediating role in the value-purchase intention relationship (β = .19, p < .06).

The results of the current study contribute to the existing knowledge by testing theoretical linkages between carefully selected research constructs, thereby adding to the general knowledge of consumer behavior and virtual merchandise consumption in sport and broader contexts. Practical implications of the study suggest eSport (and traditional sport) teams should monitor the monetization and consumption of virtual products and be sensitive to how consumers make purchasing decisions of sport branded virtual items. The authors will share the detailed results of the empirical data in the presentation.