

## Learning from eSports: A review, comparison, and research agenda

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### ABSTRACT

Competitive video gaming, presently defined and widely known as eSports, has been rising rapidly in popularity. Accordingly, research in eSports has gained interest for scholars to study the eSport industry in greater depth. However, much research has assumed eSports as the minority compared to traditional sport and rarely has explored the implications that can apply to the established traditional sport industry and marketing practices. In fact, eSport viewership is now similar to or higher than traditional sports, such as Major League Baseball (MLB). Thus, the eSport industry has now advanced to the point where their unique characteristics can significantly impact the overall sport industry. As eSports has grown rapidly enough to be considered as the mainstream industry, identifying the unique but positive aspects of eSports and considering applying eSports' strengths to traditional sports is necessary. This research is one of the first attempts to provide the unique characteristics of eSports by presenting an in-depth comparison with traditional sports and a comprehensive literature review. This study's contribution will be to broaden research opportunities in eSports and marketing literature. Ideas for future research and directions will also be discussed.

**Keywords:** *eSports, sport marketing, consumer behavior, digital marketing, value co-creation*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

eSports have rapidly grown to become a mainstream sport and entertainment industry (Cunningham et al., 2018; Heere, 2018). Moreover, eSports have successfully become a substitute during the COVID-19 pandemic, gaining more awareness and spectators (Hall, 2020; Heinrich, 2020). Acknowledging the fast-changing consumer tastes and other unpredictable market volatilities, it is essential to extend our understanding of the qualities that eSport possesses and how its associated technology can offer sport consumers. However, research in eSport is still in its infancy. For instance, most of prior research assumed a position for eSports in a minority position compared to traditional sports and merely debated whether eSports could fall under the categorization of actual “sports” and what the future holds for eSports in that respect (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017; Jenny et al., 2016; Jonasson, 2016). Although the studies have provided initial guidance from traditional sports to eSports and imply learning from the established sports industry (e.g., Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017; Pizzo et al., 2018; Qian et al., 2020a), recommendations or suggestions from eSports to traditional sports have not been explored yet. Stated differently, more research is needed that identifies why the eSport phenomenon is gaining popularity and discovers the potential factors that traditional sports can learn from eSports. As such, the focus of this current research is to provide a comprehensive comparison between traditional sports and eSports and identify the unique strengths of the eSport industry. Specifically, this research provides following novel insights.

First, this research provides a flip on the lens when viewing eSports as this competitive gaming industry is the harbinger of the current digital and technological trends. By identifying the strengths of eSports and the unique characteristics the fast-growing digital market holds, this study first explores the unexplored research areas, which should guide the eSport research and advance the future of traditional sports and marketing research. Second, this study provides a comprehensive comparison between traditional sports and eSports from consumer points of view and thus better identifies the unique strengths of the eSport industry. Understanding the consumer perspectives on eSports will provide higher chances of predicting behavioral and attitudinal outcomes such as attendance (Fink, Trail, & Anderson, 2002), which will allow traditional sport marketing practitioners to approach eSports as a point of opportunity. Although similarities between traditional sports and eSports have been largely discussed (Hallmann & Giel, 2018), differences rarely been of interest, especially when looking at eSports as the mainstream industry. Moreover, answering the many calls for more need of eSport research (Cunningham et al., 2018), based on our assessment, both empirical and conceptual ideas for future research will be discussed in the current research, based on the convergent trends, adding to the literature in eSport marketing management and creating a new field in applying eSport characteristics to traditional sports. Lastly, the findings of the current research benefit practitioners in the sport industry by providing a deep understanding of the importance of research in eSports and suggesting insights they can make from the existing eSport market.

## 2. BACKGROUND

### 2.1 The Rise of eSports

Electronic games, including video console games, PC games, and arcade games, were traditionally the fundamentals of eSports. However, eSport differs from casual gaming, as competition is the key in eSports. As the eSport industry is rising rapidly, acknowledging its

growth and identifying eSports' unique characteristics is crucial. Peter Warman, the CEO of Newzoo, emphasized that eSports have been “the biggest thing to hit the game market since the launch of the iPhone in 2007” (Young, 2016, para. 7).

The first game tournaments are known to have begun during the 1980s. Space Invaders Tournament was held by a game console creating company, Atari. More than ten thousand participants were attracted to this event in the 1980s. Further, in the 1990s, Nintendo and Blockbuster began to sponsor the World Championships of Space Invaders. These tournaments successfully activated competitive gaming in different forms (Kim, 2017).

However, when it comes to naming the first for eSport events, the answer is questionable. Some insist that Quake, a First-Person Shooter (FPS), was the first eSport due to the Red Annihilation Quake Tournament, held at the 1997 Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3) in Atlanta, Georgia. This event was sponsored by Microsoft (Edwards, 2013) and the winner, Dennis “Thresh” Fong, received a used red Ferrari 328GTS convertible and \$5,000 as the winning prize (Baker, 2016).

More agree that the rise of eSport cannot be explained without StarCraft, released in 1998. Created by Blizzard Entertainment, StarCraft was created for the PC platform, and the highly sophisticated strategy playing format created a significant volume of interest. The Battle Net platform, which allowed online matching, enabled gamers to compete with strangers online, creating a greater incentive for casual gamers to try StarCraft. As StarCraft increasingly gained popularity, a division between serious and recreational players developed, and fans began observing a new group of professional players (Kim, 2017). This phenomenon was the basic formation of professional players and teams. StarCraft became popular in the late 1990s and gained more popularity throughout the new millennium. StarCraft offered infinite strategies when gameplaying, and thus, it became a significant driving force in the eSports world (Edwards, 2013).

Now, League of Legends, a Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) game created by Riot Games, is considered the most popular type of eSport. MOBA, which has been recognized as one of the most enjoyable genres of all gaming formats, has been a popular market in games (Erzberger, 2016). According to NewZoo (2016), the most popular eSport games based on the viewership hours on Twitch are League of Legends (81.5M hours), followed by DOTA 2 (56.6 million hours). According to Riot Games, the 2019 League of Legends World Championships attracted an average of 21.8 million viewers, where the peak concurrent viewers went up to 44 million viewers (Webb, 2019). By 2023, the eSport market is expected to grow even more, where the total viewership is growing from 454 million (2019) to 646 million (2023) with an estimated amount of \$1.5 billion of revenue (NewZoo, 2018).

## **2.2 Definition and Critiques of eSports**

Electronic sports, or the competitive playing of video games (Foye, 2017), commonly referred to as eSports, can be interpreted and defined differently. However, the general term is now getting fixed to eSports, but it still does not have a generally accepted spelling of eSports (e.g., esports, e-sports, Esports) (Jonasson & Thiborg, 2010).

The games under the MOBA genre have been identified to be most interesting to watch, and spectatorship of these games has similar attributes to spectatorship of traditional sports, such as team sports (e.g., basketball, soccer). Given the factors that align with traditional sports' entertainment elements, among eSports, MOBA games have the most significant chance to be acknowledged as a sport (Kim, 2017). However, the traditional definition of the word "sports" may be a barrier for electronic games being acknowledged as sports, as the term "sports" defines games

that require the use of physical skills to do things with objects “such as balls and hoops, game boards, board game pieces, and playing cards for games of strategy, and dice, used in games of chance” (Chick, 2015). Guttman (2012) also defines sports as “nonutilitarian contests which include an important measure of physical as well as intellectual skill” (p. 7).

Accordingly, critics of eSports have been opposed to acknowledging eSports as “sports.” Conservative sports fans insist that eSports cannot be considered a sport because of its lack of physical attributes. However, if this is the standard for sports, many exceptions can be seen to exist. For example, golf, which was included in the 2016 Rio Summer Olympic Games, requires mental attributes and accuracy more than physical features. Archery also can be cited as a sport that is not reliant on physical attributes. Archery is a matter of concentration and familiarizing oneself with different weather conditions and venues. Of course, both archery and golf require basic physical attributes. Strength can help golfers to increase their carry, and the same applies to archery.

Nevertheless, more than the physical attributes, mental attributes such as concentration and determination are essential. Also, the amount of practice is crucial to these particular sports, which applies to every sport. Similarly, we can effortlessly identify less athletic figures in archery and golf. Thus, there is a lack of correlation between physical attributes and performance in these sports.

Comparing with traditional sports, the most similar form with eSports can be car racing (NASCAR, Formula 1). Physical attributes are less required, and the racers practice in their cars, rather than physical contact. Most importantly, their performance relies on twitch muscles in specific places rather than their whole bodies. The body parts used to excel in car racing are minimal, and the mental attributes such as determination and decision-making are crucial for success. The only physical factor that can be compared with eSports is that the injuries will be physical damage. However, even though it does not seem very severe, professional eSports players have chronic hand, back, and wrist injuries. It is not valid to consider eSports as a sport for its physical factor as the traditional sports stated above should never have been considered sports.

In his study, Jonasson (2016) mentions that sports can be seen as a narrow or broad concept. Broadening the frame of our traditions and thoughts, we may expect to see different sports types, and then eSports are accepted as sports. For example, we anticipate an eSport league for the 2K series, owned by the existing National Basketball Association (NBA) teams (Wolf, 2017). This movement by the NBA and 2K Sports is changing the paradigm of sports. Soon enough, there will be a high possibility that basketball fans identify with NBA-2K teams as much as they identify with a typical NBA professional team.

Studies regarding definitions of sport are introduced in various studies (Guttman, 2012; Seybert, 2008; Suits, 2007; Wagner, 2006). To better understand eSports' qualification as a sport, Jenny et al. (2017) identify how eSports fits in, and eSports qualify in everything aspect they provide except two factors: the inclusion of physical skills and body usage. The other is institutional stability, where social institutions have rules which regulate them. Also, the activity itself, due to its competitive nature, and the sportified actions can allow eSports to be a sport (Jonasson & Thiborg, 2010). To accommodate the requirements of being a sport, eSports need some time to earn acceptance so that the definition can broaden and earn time to be institutionalized. However, eSport is getting closer to the traditional definition of sports (Guttman, 2012). Whatever the future norm will define eSports, more exploration should be made to examine the unexplored dimensions of eSport and the consumers of eSport.

The next section will cover more about incorporating eSports insights and creating options for traditional sports to adapt. Ultimately, this paper will find similarities and differences between

traditional sports and eSports, leading to reasons why academics in sport management and sport practitioners should take a new look at eSports' strengths.

### 3. INCORPORATING INSIGHTS FROM ESPORTS TO TRADITIONAL SPORTS

Previous research involving both eSports and traditional sports have mainly considered the debate of eSports being categorized as a type of sport (e.g., Jonasson & Thiborg, 2010) and its future. Those who did find eSport as a sportified activity only concentrated on how marketing strategies can be adopted from the existing research in traditional sports. Of course, eSports share many common features with the traditional sport. However, eSports is developing along with digital marketing and social influencers' rise, leading to unique qualities that traditional sports lack. It is essential to understand the unique characteristics of eSport as a new and unique context that provides insights for the existing sport industry.

For example, the primary audience for eSports is the younger audience, such as teenagers. The eSport consumer population falls under Generation Z, or broadly, Millennials (NewZoo, 2018; Nielsen, 2019). However, much of the existing research categorizes eSport as a sport and applies the scales used in traditional sports to gauge eSport consumer behavior (Qian et al., 2020b).

As of now, the eSport fan's value may not be necessary for traditional sport marketers. However, the growth of popularity and viewership in eSports is rapid. Using eSports may be an important opportunity to approach the younger generation, who will be the actual money spenders shortly.

Sports have various forms. All sports types are different, and based on culture, popularity is also different (Guttman, 2012). Specifically, eSport has a unique characteristic, which most traditional sports lack, which is the digital and virtual aspects. This uniqueness is one reason many oppose eSport as a sport and an excellent opportunity for future audiences acquainted with the digital environment. Thus, the benefits of incorporating eSports into traditional sports can be learning from what eSports is doing well compared to traditional sports, and more in-depth comparisons between traditional sports and eSports are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Comparisons of Traditional Sports and eSports**

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Traditional Sports</i>	<i>eSports</i>	<i>Difference / Similarities</i>
<b>Definition</b>	Nonutilitarian contests which include an essential measure of physical as well as intellectual skill" (Guttman, 2012, p. 7).	The competitive playing of games within a professional setting (Welch, 2002)	The main difference is the physical skill factor, as competition and contest remain as the common attribute.
<b>Participants</b>	Professionals: Face to Face (Direct contact)  Casual Players: Need to meet at a venue; Face to Face (Physical) Mode: Human vs. Human	Professionals: Face to Face (Indirect Virtual Contact)  Casual Players: Can meet physically; Usually meets online Mode: Human vs. Human, Human vs. Computers (AI) (Griffith, Davies, & Chappell, 2003)	Traditional sports for professionals tend to have physical contact in the same venue. For eSports, the competition is held in the same venue, but the individuals sit on a computer while playing over the computer, leading to indirect contact. For casual players, eSports can play at home with friends via the internet, while to play traditional sports, an individual has to meet others in-person to create a team and play. For single playing, eSports provides options to play with or against the computer (AI). To play casually in

			traditional sports, one must have a real opponent.
<b>Spectators</b>	Venue (Direct Spectating); Media (Television, Mobile, Streaming); Age: All ages	Venue (Direct Spectating); Streaming Media (Twitch, YouTube); Age: 75% are millennials (18 to 34); 84% are Men	The methods of spectating for both eSports and traditional sports are the same. However, the concentration for eSports is streaming, where traditional sports are concentrated on general broadcasting mediums. Compared to traditional sports, spectating at the eSports venue needs improvement, as the industry is still growing. As eSports is a new form of sports, the age range is restricted to a younger generation, but this age span is expected to change as eSports develop in the next few decades.
<b>Sports</b>	Soccer; Basketball; Baseball, Football; Golf, etc.	League of Legends; Dota 2; Madden NFL; Overwatch; Street Fighter V; Counter-Strike: Global Offensive; Among Us; Fortnite	Compared to traditional sports, eSports have a higher potential to have more games to be played as a competitive gaming tournament. However, limitations exist, as games may never be successful eternally.
<b>Participant Characteristics</b>	Venue: Public Fields, Outdoors, Equipment: Balls, Safety Kits	Venue: Private Homes Equipment: Personal Computers	Non-professional athletes in traditional sports and eSports can play with others, but the online connection enables individuals to play with others without needing to meet directly for eSports. However, an individual or group needs to meet at a venue and directly interact for traditional sports
<b>Sporting Qualities</b>	Physical Attributes; Strategy; Teamwork	Twitch muscles, reaction speed, spatial relations, mental strength, Mental Strategy (Timing, Positioning) (Schubert et al., 2016)	Most are similar, but the concentration of qualities are different in eSports. Concentration on the ability to focus and rapid judgment skills are emphasized in eSports, where strength, agility are essential in traditional sports
<b>Motivations</b>	Vicarious Achievement, Acquisition of Knowledge, Aesthetics, Drama/eustress, Escape. Physical attractiveness of the athletes, Physical Skills of the participants, Social Interaction (Trail & James, 2001)	Unique motives for eSport spectators are (Qian et al., 2020b); Various motives such as aesthetics, escape, acquisition of knowledge, novelty, and enjoyment of aggression for eSport media consumption (Hamari & Sjöblom,2017).  Skill improvement and vicarious sensation (Qian et al. 2020b)	The most significant difference between eSports and traditional sports is that the objective of gaining physical health and maintaining well-being is missing from eSports. Specific motivations also differ, including vicarious achievement, excitement, physical attractiveness, and family bonding (Pizzo et al., 2018). Thus, applying existing scales from traditional sports to eSports may be limiting and may fail to capture the specific differences between eSports and traditional sport (Pizzo et al., 2018; Qian et al., 2020b).

<b>Target Market</b>	Family entertainment, fans with high team identification, general fans	Gaming enthusiasts, Millennials (Mehta, 2016)	As eSports have not spread to the whole range of population, family entertainment cannot be applied. The target market for eSports is to be the Millennials, who are aged between 18 to 34.
<b>Major Events</b>	Olympic Games FIFA World Cup World Baseball Classic	League of Legend World Championship	eSports are less recognized as a global event competing between nations. However, the viewership is exceeding or getting close to the existing global mega-events on traditional sports.
<b>Media Sponsors</b>	Television Broadcasting , mobile accessible (NFL RedZone)  Media: ESPN, FOX, CCTV, BBC, etc.  Sponsors: Nike; Adidas; Coca-Cola	Internet Protocol TV (IPTV) (Xiao et al., 2007), Twitch.tv, YouTube, mobile accessible  Media: OGN, SPOTV (Korea) GIGA Television (Germany) XLEAGUE.TV(UK) Twitch(Online) ESPN2  Sponsors: Samsung; Microsoft; Coca-Cola; Pepsi; Bud-Light; Arby's;	At first, eSports were not expected to air on sport channels such as ESPN. There are different channels for eSports, but now traditional sport channels are also airing major eSports competitions such as the League of Legends World Championships. More technology companies sponsor eSports, while major athletic brands support traditional sports. However, other major brands (e.g., Coca-Cola) are sponsoring eSports as well as traditional sports.
<b>Viewership Pricing</b>	Actual Attendance: For physical attendance, the pricing of tickets usually differs by the level of play and scarcity of the tickets. An average ticket price for the FIFA World Cup in 2018 ran from 105 USD to 1100 USD, depending on the seats' location and the importance of the match (i.e., group matches vs. finals) (Sanwal, 2018).  Online Viewership (Streaming): Traditional sports and its media to spectate is relatively expensive. To watch live sports via internet streaming methods is usually over \$59.99 a month (e.g., ESPN +) without a traditional cable subscription (Roston, 2020).	Actual Attendance: 2018 League of Legends World Championships, the price was around \$9 to \$55) (McMath, 2018).  Online Viewership (Streaming): Many streaming media channels (e.g., YouTube, Twitch) provide free viewership.	Broadcasting for traditional sports are improving in its accessibility, but the pricing is expensive. As of now, eSports is cheaper and easier to spectate.
<b>Career Length and Prime Career</b>	NFL: 3.5 years; NBA: 4.8 years; MLB: 5.6 years; NHL:5.5 years (Sandler, 2012)	4 to 5 years; retire in the mid-20s (Shanley, 2019)	It depends on the specific sport, but generally, the age of a professional gamer starts younger, and life as an athlete is also much shorter than traditional sports (Shanley, 2019).
<b>Contracts &amp; Salary &amp; Means of Earnings</b>	NBA: \$4.5M Salary; Advertisement Contracts (Endorsements); Prize money (for individual sports) Player Contracts: Short to Long	Salary; Individual Sponsor; Twitch (broadcasting); Prize Money: Dota 2: 20 million (Valve, 2016) League of Legends: Player Contracts: Usually Short (1 to 2 years)	It depends on what sport and how prestigious the league is, but traditional sports generally have higher salaries. However, salaries for eSports are proliferating. Because of the well-set environment of individual broadcasting for professional eSports players, they tend to earn extra money from

			individual broadcasts via Twitch or YouTube. Both traditional sports and eSports offer prize money if they win, and they differ depending on what the sport and game are. Also, for contracts, because of eSports professional athletes' short lifespan, the span of a contract is short, which leads to bandwagoning.
<b>Potential Injuries &amp; Protection Methods</b>	Football: Concussion Soccer, Basketball: Sprains and Bone Fractures	Repetitive Stress injuries; hand issues (wrist), injuries due to sitting too long	More mental and posture injuries for eSports, while physical injuries for traditional sports in general. eSports are focused on the hands and fingers, while traditional sports are focused on the whole body.
<b>General Issues during a game</b>	Protection: Headband, Shin Guards, teeth protector Racism, Sexism, Fan Behavior; Flopping, Homophobia; Need Fair Play (e.g., Wakefield & Wann, 2006)	Protection: Hot Packs(hand); Wrist Protector Racism, Sexism, Aborting the game (Kim, 2017; Ruvalcaba, Shulze, Kim, Berzenski, & Otten, 2018)	General problems are more extant in traditional sports, but eSports also have the potential to have all the problems that traditional sports had and may exponentially grow.
<b>Professional Teams</b>	Location: Teams are mostly based on regions: Buffalo Bills; Los Angeles Lakers; Arizona Diamondbacks; Houston Dynamo.  Ownership: Team: Individuals- Acts like a firm  Sport: No individual owner: Organizations such as NBA, FIFA, and others	Location: Some teams do not have specific local regions to represent, but they can change. The teams are usually named after their sponsors: T1 Comcast; JD Gaming; Hanwha Life  Ownership: Team: Corporates; Influence from the creators of the game  Sport: The creators of the games: Blizzard (StarCraft), Riot Games (League of Legends), Valve (CounterStrike)	Some eSport teams do not have a region for their teams, and the team name includes the corporate sponsor in some areas (e.g., Korea, China). However, as investments have been made from traditional sport teams, some teams, such as the Houston Rockets, own an eSport team. The eSport teams are not identified in a region, but shortly, there is a possibility that it will change. Sponsors of eSports usually have the naming rights, but eSports owners are now getting diverse, as sport teams are buying and investing in eSport teams. The sport does not have a single owner, but an eSport has an owner, the creator of the game.
<b>Theories in Skill/ Sports Analytic Methods</b>	Scha-den-freu-de (Ortony, Clore, & Collins, 1988; Ouwerkerk, J. W., & Van Dijk, W. W., 2014) Team Identification (Wann & Branscombe, 1993); Psychological Continuum Model (Funk & James, 2001)	Encounter-based Analysis (Schubert et al., 2016)	eSports are focused on spatial relationships, while traditional sports focus on physical and psychological attributes. Traditional sports have a longer history, with sociological and psychological basis, leading to more theories specific to sports. eSports require more context-specific theories.
<b>Phase</b>	Long History	Short history; First coined in the 1990s.	Compared to traditional sports, eSports has a short history, as the theme developed parallel to the rise of technology.

Furthermore, it is vital to explore both eSports and traditional sports' qualities on an equal basis and seek to discover suggestions that will benefit both eSports and traditional sports. As mentioned previously, some traditional sports in North America are in a crisis, where the viewership and participation in the most popular sport, football, is drastically declining. Every sport has its reasons, but the excessive physical contact that football or other sport gives leads to unhealthy futures. According to a recent study, “99% of former National Football League (NFL)

players (110 of 111), and 87% of football players of all ages were diagnosed with Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE) post-mortem,” which is likely to be from repeated blows to the head when the players were competing back in the days (Mez et al., 2017). “In a sense, the NFL will become a poor man’s game at some point in the future” (Panacy, 2017, para. 15), and follow the MLB’s slow demise from the glory years. It is time for both marketers and academicians to examine why and how eSport is rising and extract possibilities of stopping traditional sports wane. Thus, the specific areas where eSports exhibit advantages will be discussed in the next paragraphs.

### 3.1 Media

The media of eSports have evolved differently compared to those of traditional sports. Initially, media companies that covered the gaming sector developed an infrastructure through internet protocol television (IPTV). In contrast, traditional sports still held on to classical broadcasting methods (Xiao et al., 2007).

Nowadays, eSports are developing along with online media platforms, or digital content sharing platforms (e.g., YouTube, Twitch) (Sjöblom et al., 2019). The streaming of eSports has become a form of new media (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017). These new digital content sharing platforms allow spectators to participate simultaneously while the live game is occurring. Using these platforms, eSport spectators can directly share their emotions and generate buzz on social media, creating new content added to gaining spectatorship for eSports. By utilizing these digital media formats, eSports are easily watchable worldwide and are accessible to fan interactions before, during, and after the match. The media profits are generated through commercials, and for the spectators, the games are free to watch.

Moreover, IPTV allows the eSport consumers to access the games with their online-connected computers and mobile compatibility, which means that the games are reachable ubiquitously (Scholz, 2011). Due to the global approach that these digital media platforms share, eSport has spread throughout the world.

Furthermore, these platforms are not limited to spectating live matches and communicating with other fans but offer broader aspects. For example, by utilizing these digital media platforms, eSport professional players broadcast themselves and communicate with the followers or fans. These players can show followers how to play games or chat about their personal lives, which provides closeness to their followers. The broadcasting is not limited to the professional players, but the game casters that professionally broadcast the eSport matches can have an individual channel. These channels provide a more in-depth analysis of past games and express individual opinions, usually forbidden in official broadcasting. Nowadays, many professional eSport teams sign a contract with these digital media platforms, where they sponsor the team in return for the player’s broadcasts. This can be a burden for the players. However, on the positive side, the players and the team can be paid and further provide online communication with the fan, creating attachment toward the players and the team, leading to team identification. Spectators and eSport fans utilize the digital media platform and follow the team or specific players to watch their favorite players play or learn more about their everyday lives outside of professional gaming. This has been a powerful promotion method for a specific player, team, and the entire eSport industry.

Nowadays, media that air traditional sports provide access to mobile and digital streaming. However, traditional sports' profit structure is different from eSports, which means that streaming traditional sports cannot be free. An individual must have purchased a cable television plan or have to purchase streaming memberships. As of 2020, the pricing of these memberships varies per company, and to watch live sports via internet streaming methods, it is usually over \$59.99 a month

(e.g., ESPN +) without traditional cable subscriptions (Roston, 2020). However, even if you decide to pay for streaming plans, there are other restrictions, such as the blackout policies. If the game is nationally televised, or the team is in an individual's residing region, the consumer needs to watch it on broadcasted television.

That is, traditional sports and its media to spectate is relatively expensive. Moreover, there are many restrictions if you even pay for online streaming platforms. However, it is easier to spectate for eSports, as many streaming media channels (e.g., YouTube, Twitch) provide free viewership. Media for traditional sports need to find a better strategy to target those exposed to the convenience of eSport broadcasting. From the many digital media platforms, Twitch and YouTube outstandingly created a platform where eSport players and causal gamers can also broadcast their channels, leading the market for eSports. While traditional channels designated for eSports has been created (e.g., ESPN, TBS), marketers of traditional sports should be creating plans to follow the tactics that can be learned from the success of eSports with Twitch/YouTube (Nguyen, 2018) and understand how closeness between the professional players and the fans affect consumer behavior.

### **3.2 Skills, Motivation, and Target Market**

As mentioned previously, the primary reason that eSports face undesirable images as a sport is due to the lack of physical attributes. However, broadening the spectrum, if physical abilities were the primary factor of sports, many traditional sports may not meet the criterion. Rather than focusing on the categorization, what is more important is to explore the uniqueness of eSports' essential qualities and find the ideal target consumer segments. Whatever criteria eSports may fall in, every eSport game will have its qualities and necessary skills to excel in it. Further, different segments will be based on demographics, or individual (internal) and environmental (external) factors.

For example, the changing demographics will influence consumers' target market and motivations to consumer traditional sports, or eSports. According to the demographic and housing estimates for the year 2016 provided by the US Census Bureau (2018), the United States population by ethnicity is 75.5% White, 14% Black or African American, 6.5% Asian, and 17.8% Hispanic. It is crucial to explore the ethnic diversity of the United States, and it is essential to accept that we live in a multicultural society. Compared to a few decades ago, the United States has become globalized due to technology's advancement, enabling people and products to travel freely. Nations around the world are also facing similar circumstances. It is essential to understand the sport industry's changes and conduct market research in terms of new demographics involved in eSports and traditional sports.

The digital media, including eSports, social influencers, and content marketing, are more useful for younger generations (e.g., Generation Z, Millennials). As of now, the more significant percentage of eSport fans and spectators are the younger generation. However, this generation will move on and socialize the younger generation, creating a bigger eSport audience. The younger generation will soon have spending power, and to understand the rapidly growing pattern in consuming sports, marketers must understand the younger consumer segments.

Thus, changes in demographics will change the culture and perceptions that people have of each other. It is essential to understand that globalization and change of demographics will influence sport spectator consumption patterns. Future marketing efforts should focus on the rapidly growing digital markets and analyze trends in digital consumption.

### 3.3 Sponsorships and eSport Product

Sponsorships are different in many ways for eSports and traditional sports. In the case of League of Legends professional eSport teams, the players' uniforms to identify themselves as a team member are unique. Compared to traditional team sports apparel, eSports jerseys tend not to have a fixed pattern for all teams in a specific sport. For example, the NBA teams tend to wear a sleeveless jersey. The team's sponsors will attach their corporate logos and add the team's unique colors, images, and fonts. While some teams simply design their apparel similar to traditional sports, some eSports apparel shares creative designs. For example, Jin Air Greenwings, a Korean League of Legends professional team, wears an outfit that resembles a pilot's uniform. Jin Air is a local Korean low-cost airline company that recently retired their eSport team, but this outfit is a great way to market the primary sponsor's corporate image.

Some can argue that the inconsistent designs can interrupt the game's concentration or that the outfits' uniformity is vital to identify the professional league as a sport. Athletic apparel for eSport teams usually does not have numbers on the back or front. Numbers create an identity, but jerseys have numbers on the uniforms to distinguish each other as they are actively playing. However, the jerseys' uniformity and having the same design for every team in the league is a convention that traditional sports have framed and does not have to be applied to eSports. Esports do not have much movement during the games, and wearing creative uniforms can promote eSports' strengths better to the public. As MLB teams create customized jerseys for special events such as Veterans Day or Breast Cancer Awareness Day, all traditional sports may be able to create a jersey with a theme that they may want to promote. This will help the sponsors and create a positive boom for the spectator and fans, where they may feel attached to the team's theme. This may also catalyze the urge to spectate the game at the venue and buy special edition uniforms. As long as the uniforms do not harm the sport's nature, creative designs for uniforms may be a factor that traditional sport fans will enjoy.

Also, professional gamers in eSports are seldom called by their names. Instead, they have a game name or a Gamertag, which also provides a glimpse of a player's characteristics. Microsoft explains Gamertags as an individuals' alter ego. For example, Sang-Hyeok Lee, a League of Legends player, goes by "Faker." This tradition comes because every gamer used to play recreationally online before they have entered the professional level. As most online games use an identification name, which real names are never used, eSports' culture allows this specific characteristic. Moreover, the Gamertag allows the individual professional player to create their brand image, which is an excellent opportunity for both the player and the game itself.

It is debatable whether "Gamertags" can be applied to traditional sports, but it can be utilized as it can be a great strategy to provide closeness to the players and the fans. The strategies that eSports have created may not be applied entirely to traditional sports, but studies should be made to find what can be used, as not much research focuses on trying to learn from eSports. Table 1 explains all the features similar or different between traditional sports and eSports (see Table 1).

## 4. DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND LIMITATIONS

This conceptual paper was to outline the debate on the inclusion of eSports in traditional sports and expand opportunities on how traditional sports can integrate the new strategies eSports have discovered. As the eSport industry is still maturing, plenty of theoretical and managerial implications can be recommended, in addition to ideas for more future studies. Putting together

the comparisons discussed above, this section will provide theoretical/managerial insights and some ideas for future research.

#### **4.1 Findings of the Study**

Current studies in eSports have just started to focus on fans and consumers. They have focused on conceptualizing eSports or discussing eSports' legitimization categorized as a sport (e.g., Jonasson & Thiborg, 2010). Accordingly, studies that delve into psychology, sociology, and marketing in the context of eSports are necessary. Especially, many eSport studies have used the methods and scales constructed for the traditional sport context. To gain significant outcomes that can add to traditional sport research, comparison studies between traditional sports and eSports' unique factors with a correspondence analysis can spawn more understanding. The current research has created some dimensions that emphasize eSport's characteristics. To highlight the detailed findings, we have constructed a table with dimensions (see Table 1), clarifying vague similarities and differences between traditional sports and eSports. Practitioners in traditional sport and eSport fields should carefully examine them, which will help develop further ideas and concepts, leading to appropriate marketing strategies.

From the comparisons between traditional sports and eSports in the previous section, we were able to identify the differences between eSports and traditional sports in many areas as well as identifying many similarities, which can point to the direction that eSports is indeed a sportified activity and can be categorized as a sport. However, there also are unique differences that eSport has, which can be considered opportunities for further exploration. The general differences that can be identified from the review of literature are that the difference in media, skills to succeed, and the eSport product and sponsorships, which can be explained by understanding the connection with social and digital media, and the enhanced features which help the instructiveness between eSport players/organizations, and fans, based on the unique digitalized content. For traditional sports to learn from eSports, eSports' interactive characteristics must be considered in detail for the practitioners and researchers in the traditional sport area.

However, the findings are not limited to traditional sport marketers and those in the eSport field, where both can utilize the theoretical and managerial findings from the review of current literature. Accordingly, we will discuss the specific implications in the next sections.

#### **4.2 Theoretical Implications**

For academicians, more empirical and longitudinal studies are necessary to strengthen the ideas that have been suggested in previous research regarding eSports. Consumer behavior in eSports and traditional sports are expected to be different. While many have strived to understand consumer behavior in the traditional sport context, the eSport context is relatively new. Traditional sports are related to physical movement, teamwork, and health. Simultaneously, eSports has teamwork, escapism to virtual reality, and great strategy in values, but do not have physical aspects or health-related benefits. Accordingly, we have evidence to believe that the target market is different. However, more empirical studies are needed to verify these propositions.

Also, the diverse demographics that can serve as antecedents to consumer behavior needs to be explored. For example, research such as figuring out why eSport participation and traditional sports participation differ regarding gender, race, and age will be an exciting topic. Especially, eSports is popular in East Asia compared to other regions, and there may be cultural differences based on the residents' innate characteristics (Hofstede, 2001). Moreover, eSports and gender inequality are a big issue, which can also be found in the context of traditional sports. Many female

gamers are underrepresented, while the viewership is increasing (NewZoo, 2018). Understanding the gender issues in both contexts may provide answers to work both contexts, adding and finding ways to improve gender equality for participation and fandom in sport.

Sport management scholars and marketers should be aware of this new research and find ways to approach them to the traditional sport area theoretically. Once again, eSport is another sportified activity, but digitalized, which can serve as a new context within the realm of sports. Understanding the tactics from theories based on digital marketing and digitalized behavior from social media will help researchers understand the phenomenon originating from eSports. The suggested research topics will create concepts that traditional sports can take and adapt from eSports and generate thoughts for the new but rapidly rising eSport industry, requiring more trial and error in the marketplace.

### **4.3 Managerial Implications**

Based on the findings, eSport practitioners, who have been focusing on applying the findings that the traditional sport industry has created, should try to segment the eSport market and understand their unique differences. Traditional sport practitioners should also understand eSport consumers to find any relatability they can make from the existing eSport market. For example, a report by NewZoo found correlations of general eSport enthusiasts, where 42% of eSport fans own an iPhone, and 65% actively use Instagram (NewZoo, 2018). Most importantly, eSport fans are also fans of traditional sports, such as football, handball, basketball (Nielsen, 2019). Thus, further research and development to better understand these differences will provide a more exact segmentation of potential consumers. As personalization and targeted messaging are among the most effective marketing tactics in consumer behavior, all sport practitioners, including eSports, should observe the eSport consumer characteristics.

The rise in mobile gaming can also provide opportunities for the internet and mobile provider companies (Westcott et al., 2019). The unrecognized congruence between these companies and eSports may provide revenues and appeal to younger generations by incentivizing gamers. Also, advertisements can be created to target gamers, which require fast and stable internet, which eSport professionals can be used as endorsers. There will be numerous opportunities for companies that share a fit with eSports. These companies will be able to enhance presence and awareness to all consumers, especially the younger generation (Westcott et al., 2019).

Also, practitioners in traditional sport media can benefit from the findings of this research. As mentioned previously, the broadcasting methods that eSports offer can be integrated into traditional sports viewership. Traditional sports can also think about incorporating the media tactics that eSports have established. Few sport websites, such as NBA League Pass, provide different venue views during game time. However, the degree of freedom on viewership options for spectators is limited for traditional sport fans than eSports.

Likewise, incorporating individual broadcasting methods to stars in traditional sports is necessary. Suppose the individual broadcasting culture can spread out to the traditional sports framework. In that case, there will be many more resources for the firms and media that are related to traditional sports that can be utilized. For example, a golf star such as Tiger Woods can record his practice, and the viewers can take a look at his posture, practice ritual, and other factors that the viewers can apply to their well-being. For basketball, Shaquille O'Neal can continue to Shaqtin a Fool and analyze the mistakes that the players are making and provide a lesson on a separate video clip. Value co-creation is a new theory in marketing, where the practitioners in traditional sports can also incorporate the opportunities that advanced technology is providing.

Finally, the marketing techniques can be studied, as eSports incorporate internet marketing tactics for their advertisements and sponsorships. For example, for traditional sports, the advertisements are located at the venue. They are physical, which means that there are limitations to the number of sponsors and the method of exposing them to the public. However, since everything is virtual for eSports, advertisements can change in form or even be inside the gaming environment, which is a unique aspect that traditional sports cannot imitate. Further research on these differences in online marketing techniques for eSports and traditional sports will create a better engagement with the fans.

In conclusion, understanding the fan behavior of eSport activities is essential for practitioners who are responsible for the development of their brand and for establishing the best communication strategy within the fast-growing market of eSports. The academic studies have also concluded with implications for fan behavior, based on the theoretical models created for traditional sports. Managerial implications from studies and measures created solely for eSports may provide clearer marketing strategies for the certain target markets (Lee & Schoenstedt, 2012), which will help understand fan behavior such as motivations, identification, and general consumer behavior. However, the most critical factor for practitioners is understanding the fast-moving developments in this digital world and applying the most recent trends to their marketing strategies, which can only be done by consistently assessing the product and market.

#### **4.4 Future Study Directions**

Based on the theoretical and managerial findings, we intend to present some future research paths, which can provide an avenue of new findings in the traditional sport area and lead to a better understanding of eSports. Future research should generally focus on exploring the uniqueness of eSport fan behavior and further examining the interrelatedness of traditional sports and eSports to gain suggestions for both contexts.

As mentioned previously, the mobile platforms should be considered not only for eSports but also for traditional sports. The rise of eSports started with gaming platforms such as PC gaming or console gaming (i.e., Nintendo, PlayStation). Current market reports indicate the rise of mobile gaming (i.e., smartphones), and viewership statistics support this phenomenon (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2020). According to a report from Influencer Marketing Hub, the PUBG Mobile World League 2020 had a total viewership of 33,179,000 hours watched (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2020). Since the advent of smartphones, people are more dependent on their handheld devices, and their social interactions also primarily involve mobile devices. Many use their smartphones to create/modify their health habits and measure physical movements, motivating people to exercise (e.g., Lin et al., 2006; Tsai et al., 2021). Studying which mobile devices and which media platforms attract sport fan segments are essential and should be discovered in more depth.

According to Foye's analysis in eSports (2017), virtual reality (VR) technology will influence the eSports market. It is too soon to predict what will happen, but it is expected that new categories and types of games will be created. Even though eSports' actual venue can be confined and restricted, the VR technology may provide an option for sports with physical movement as Nintendo Wii / Switch had. Whatever the games will be like, there will be a higher chance of threatening the existing eSport games and traditional sports. To bridge the gap between the given technology, traditional sports should prepare for this big wave and provide VR technology in traditional sports. As VR is considered a personal experience (Foye, 2017), it can serve as an excellent means of viewership both in eSports and traditional sports. Future research can be conducted in examining the future of VR technology in traditional sports and eSports, which will

provide managerial implications for sport marketers and broadcasting companies. Thus, research studying how teams can make streaming traditional sports cost-friendly for spectators and profitable for the sport industry may be crucial.

We have mentioned streamers or influencers that are co-creating eSport content parallel to the eSport matches and professionals. Previous studies have mentioned the importance of these streamers and how online platforms can affect fan interactions with an interactive experience (Qian et al., 2020a). Understanding the congruence between the high-profile gaming personalities and their influence on the consumption patterns of eSport consumers will be fruitful to the existing endorsement literature and the influencer marketing field. From these findings, traditional sports can also understand what influencers can do to enhance the interactivity with the younger generations with a particular sport. More research on the spectators and how endorsers can affect the experience or awareness is vital to increase viewership intentions leading to satisfaction. When a consensus is made for different broadcasting methods, traditional sports can adopt some former eSports broadcasting methods.

Also, more attention should be provided toward the physical attendance in eSport events. The pricing of tickets usually differs by the level of play and scarcity of the tickets. When we think of a popular traditional sport, and eSport's most high-level tournaments, we can think of the FIFA World Cup and League of Legend World Championship. An average ticket price for the FIFA World Cup in 2018 ran from 105 USD to 1100 USD, depending on the seats' location and the importance of the match (i.e., group matches vs. finals) (Sanwal, 2018). However, for a ticket for the 2018 League of Legends World Championships, the price was around \$9 to \$55 (McMath, 2018). The ticket pricing and the cost for viewership are much cheaper for eSports, but considering the shorter history and the narrower range of fans may be the reason. More examination and research in terms of the differences in fan behavior related to the pricing of viewership is needed. Practitioners should pay close attention when they consider/decide to create paid-viewership options in the future, as fans may react negatively.

Finally, the research in leadership and coaching is disregarded in eSports. Soon, eSport coaching will be a different research sector because the training sessions and formats will differ from those of traditional sports. As an example, some coaches in League of Legends have a background in diverse areas. Current head coach Woo-beom Choi for the Fredit BRION, which is a Korean League of Legends professional team, was a Korean StarCraft professional gamer. He had no background in League of Legends before becoming a coach, but now he is currently a head coach, with a successful career in other League of Legend teams. Comparing this situation to traditional sports, Michael Jordan became the head coach of the New England Patriots. As sport leadership research has been done, future research should discuss the differences and similarities between coaching and how coaches can share celebrity status, appealing to the players and the fans.

#### **4.5 Limitations**

The current research proposes that rather than focusing on eSports trying to be included in the institutionalized form of traditional sport, it is essential to think about what aspects eSports can possess to add to traditional sports. Of course, the eSport context's research is still moving forward from its infancy. The eSport industry is still 'underdeveloped.' Accordingly, not many research or managerial strategies have not been identified, which means that more academic exploration and theories are in need. Academic research in eSports has started to identify many unique

characteristics of the eSport industry. Sport management and marketing academics should increase their attention to eSports' strengths, as eSports is developing rapidly parallel to the quick increase of technology. Whether eSport is a sport or not, the potential of future research and understanding based on the digital/virtual characteristics of eSports should be incorporated to increase the prospects of traditional sports and fully understand the sport consumers' general consumer behavior.

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