Online Esports Engagement:
Motivational Antecedents and Marketing Outcomes

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Esport is becoming one of the fastest-growing sports branches and providing remarkable advertising and sponsorship opportunities for brands. This research aims to understand what motivates online esports spectators to engage in esports and the way that motivations and engagement influence their purchase intention toward advertised and sponsored products during esports events. The proposed model was tested using structural equation modeling with 436 esports spectators. The results imply that esports engagement has mainly been driven by parasocial interaction between online esports spectators and players. Various motivations were found to act upon the emersion of different esports engagement dimensions, among which a hierarchy of effects existed. Affective and behavioral esports engagement positively influenced advertising sponsorship effectiveness during esports events. Along with providing a definition of esports engagement, this research creates a theoretical linkage between uses and gratifications theory, sports consumption motivations, and esports engagement; and explores how esports engagement leads to the willingness to buy products advertised during esports events and/or products of official esports sponsors.

Keywords: *esports, motivation, sponsorship, uses and gratifications, parasocial interaction*

Introduction

Esports have become a major industry with leagues, teams, professional players, cups, awards, and millions of followers and fans. The market revenue is predicted to exceed \$1.6 billion with an audience of 577 million esports spectators in 2024 (Newzoo 2021a, 2021b). The increased stress and anxiety due to the COVID-19 pandemic and limitations on outdoor activities also caused a dramatic increase in esports and online gaming industry demand. For instance, Twitch (online gaming platform) reached its highest audience engagement in the first quarter of 2021, with 6.34 billion hours being watched (Streamlabs 2021). Initiatives such as #PlayApartTogether promoted socializing through online gaming and provided a way to cope with the negative psychological impacts of the pandemic. These esports communities are expected to continue in the post-COVID-19 era and to grow (Cranmer et al. 2021). Meanwhile, brands are also increasingly drawn

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to the market; Mastercard, Red Bull, Mercedes-Benz, and Foot Locker have already engaged as sponsors and partners in leagues, events, or teams.

Academic research on esports, on the other hand, is still in its infancy and needs more exploration (Ji and Hanna 2020, Scholz 2019, Qian et al. 2020). This study aims to contribute to the existing literature by understanding online esports spectator motivations to engage in online esports and how such motivations and engagement levels influence the purchase intention toward products advertised during esports events and/or products of official esports sponsors. Scholz (2019) asserted that audiences (spectators/eSports consumers) should be placed at the core of esports stakeholder relationships by suggesting that practitioners and researchers must place more emphasis on spectators and their preferences, motivations, and behavior in esports management decisions. This need is primarily because of the large size and composition of esports spectators that show huge marketing potential (Ji and Hanna 2020). Even though watching other people play games is a passive process (Xiao 2020), esports spectators can actively engage with esports and the esports community during, before, and after games (Cheung and Huang 2011). Research by Ji and Hanna (2020) showed that heavily engaged online esports spectators are more willing to watch ads, click on sponsored links during games, and buy esports merchandise than less engaged consumers are. Therefore, a better understanding of what motivates esports engagement is timely and necessary to develop the right esports experience for consumers, similar to traditional sports media, and to reap the media and marketing communication benefits afterward.

This study is significant in several ways. First, it attempts to define the concept of esports engagement and considers its motivational antecedents as well as its consequences from an esports sponsorship or advertising perspective. Thus, the findings of the study add to esports, engagement, and sports sponsorship literature. The study extends the Motivation Scale for Sports Consumption (MSSC) by Trail and James (2001) by including parasocial interaction and coolness from new media engagement literature to provide a renewed and optimal measurement of online esports spectator motivations. An initial attempt to develop an instrument for esports online viewership motivation was made by (Qian et al. 2020). However, this study differentiates from Qian et al. (2020)'s study by drawing new media gratifications and focusing on online esports engagement rather than spectatorship. The study expands the boundaries of the engagement concept, a pivotal marketing metric in the digital era (Hollebeek et al. 2014, Kumar and Pansari 2016, Verhoef et al. 2010), to the esports platform and adds to this array of research. This study also tests the hierarchy of effects model (Lavidge and Steiner 1961) - the think-feel-act sequence - on online esports engagement, tries to understand the interrelationships between the dimensions of engagement and finds support for cognitive- affective-behavioral engagement sequence in esports. Finally, it provides insight to esports marketing professionals in terms of understanding how consumer motivations may be imperative to the success of esports media management and business model development for better offerings, consistent engagement, and interest in advertised or sponsored products during games as an outcome.

Literature Review

Defining Online Esports Engagement

Engagement is defined as "a psychological state that occurs by virtue of interactive, co-creative customer experiences with a brand" (Brodie et al. 2011, p. 262). Commonly accepted definitions of engagement consider it a multidimensional concept with (1) cognitive, (2) emotional, and (3) behavioral states (Brodie et al. 2013, Hollebeek et al. 2014). The cognitive dimension refers to the consumer's level of brand-related thought processing and elaboration. The emotional dimension, on the other hand, refers to a consumer's level of positive brand-related affect. Finally, the behavioral or conative dimension refers to a consumer's level of energy, effort, and time spent on using a brand (Hollebeek et al. 2014). Although there is a considerable amount of literature on the engagement subject in various disciplines (Kumar and Pansari 2016), it is limited in the esports literature. Abbasi et al. (2017, 2019, 2020) conceptualized consumer video game engagement as "a psychological state that triggers due to two-way interactions between the consumer and videogame product, which generates a different level of consumer engagement states (cognitive, affective and behavioral)" (p. 4). Wiebe et al. (2014) also measured engagement in video game-based environments and came up with four factors—focused attention, perceived usability, aesthetics, and satisfaction—as dimensions of user engagement in video games. Similarly, Hilvert-Bruce et al. (2018) attempted to understand livestream (Twitch) viewer engagement from a socio-motivational perspective. The concept was measured by four factors—emotional connectedness, time spent watching livestreams, financial donations, and subscriptions. Ji and Hanna (2020) also measured gaming engagement in their study and defined it as participation in gaming and spectatorship. Some other work on esports and game streaming also examined spectating frequency (Hamari and Sjöblom 2017), watching and gaming intention (Macey et al. 2020), passion for esports (Choi 2019), and what relates to esports engagement. In accordance with the extant literature, this study defines esports engagement as a higher-order construct that includes cognitive, emotional, and behavioral states:

> The process of intensive connection, communication, and participation in the esports environment driven by cognitive, emotional, and behavioral states.

In line with the aim of the research, the concept is studied from the perspective of online esports spectators (viewers watching streamers' esports live gameplay and/or viewers watching broadcasts of professional esports players'/teams' competitions in institutionalized tournaments). The cognitive dimension of esports engagement refers to the consumer's level of thinking and elaboration devoted to esports. The emotional or affective dimension of esports, on the other hand, refers to a consumer's level of positive affect toward esports. Finally, based on Hollebeek et al. (2014), the behavioral or conative dimension of esports refers to the consumer's level of energy, effort, and time spent on esports spectating.

Theoretical Background and Hypotheses Development

We propose a nomological framework of esports engagement that outlines the major antecedents based on the uses and gratifications (U&G) theory and its consequences based on Hollebeek et al.'s (2014) and Brodie et al.'s (2011) works. The U&G theory is a widely used framework that helps understand why and for what purposes people use media (Katz et al. 1973). This theory was deemed appropriate since motivations can be understood as the incentives that drive people's selection and use of media and media content (Rubin 2002), in this case online esports content. The U&G theory (Katz et al. 1973, Katz et al. 1974) also served as a nomological framework for the MSSC, to understand the gratification and experiences that sports consumption affords its spectators. MSSC is a modified version of U&G that fit the sports environment, to understand sports consumer behavior. The MSSC consists of eight to ten constructs (Trail et al. 2000, Trail and James 2001, Fink et al. 2002), including empathizing and co-living with the achievements of teams and players (vicarious achievement), aesthetics of a sport, drama of a sport, watching sports as a means of escaping everyday life, knowledge acquisition related to a sport, admiring the skills of athletes, social interaction with other spectators, physical attractiveness of athletes, novelty of new players and teams, and enjoyment of aggression and aggressive behaviors that athletes exhibit. The motivational antecedents of online esports engagement were drawn from MSSC but were also stretched by including two other gratifications (parasocial interaction and coolness) pertained to new media engagement. This was so because differing from live-esports spectators, online esports spectators use livestreaming media platforms (e.g., Twitch, YouTube Live), and the gratifications related to digital media needed to be demonstrated by the measurement of additional, new media related constructs.

Motivational Antecedents of Online Esports Engagement

A study by Weiss and Schiele (2013) was one of the first to understand esports usage and found that competitive (competition, challenge) and hedonic (escapism) gratifications were both positively associated with esports use. Another study showed that esports spectators watch esports based on motivations that are similar to those of traditional sports fans (Choi 2019). Among the motivations, achievement and economics were strongly related to watching esports, while escapism explained passion for esports. In another study, the frequency of esports spectatorship was predicted by motivations such as escapism, acquiring knowledge about the games being played, novelty, and athlete aggressiveness (Hamari and Sjöblom, 2017). Similarly, Xiao (2020) found a correlation between drama, escapism, and aesthetics and watching esports. Aesthetics, drama, and escapism, along with social factors, were also positively related to attitude toward watching esports (Xiao 2020). Rogers et al.'s (2020) study on NBA 2K viewers showed that consumers have emotional (arousal, entertainment, enjoyment of passing time), cognitive (surveillance, fanship, autonomy), and behavioral (peer pressure, social interaction, relatedness) motivations. Online esports spectators were found to be motivated by

dimensions such drama, acquisition of knowledge, appreciation of skill, novelty, aesthetics, and enjoyment of aggression at higher levels compared to live esports event attendees (Sjöblom et al. 2020). Furthermore, the flow felt in games is found to be affected by motivations such as achievement, drama, and players' skills (Kim and Kim 2020). Finally, Qian et al. (2020) developed the Motivation Scale of Esports Spectatorship (MSES) and identified skill improvement and vicarious sensation as the unique motives that emerged in the esports context.

Apart from the motivations discussed in the MSSC, this study incorporates parasocial interaction and coolness motivations as other possible dimensions and extends the MSSC framework. Parasocial interaction and coolness dimensions were often considered as motivating factors in studies on new media (online) engagement. Therefore, we decided to include them and extend MSSC to better understand online esports spectators' mindset. Parasocial interaction is long-term involvement with media characters that is comparable to friendship (Rubin et al. 1985). Hartmann et al. (2008) were the first to focus on parasocial interaction with sports people (Formula 1 racers in this case) in their study on sportscasting. Years later, Wulf et al. (2020) mentioned parasocial interaction as a motivating reason to engage with (e.g., donate to, ask questions of, root for) Twitch esports streamers. As viewers form stronger bonds with esports streamers via parasocial interaction, they engage with their favorite esports players more by interacting with them, motivating them, or donating money to them. Consequently, it is expected that parasocial interaction with esports players acts as a gratification and motivates engagement with esports as well.

Another gratification discussed as motivating engagement with new online media platforms is self-promotion and gaining popularity, which is termed as "coolness" in the extant literature (Sheldon and Bryant 2016, Smock et al. 2011). Warren and Campbell define coolness as "a subjective and dynamic, socially constructed positive trait attributed to cultural objects inferred to be appropriately autonomous" (2014, p. 544). People are typically interested in being on a forum/ medium that is popular among their peers and esport is one such medium in the recent decades. Spectating esports validate their popularity and status among their peers.

Based on the above stated (a) Aesthetics, (b) escape, (c) enjoyment of aggression, (d) social interaction, (e) vicarious achievement, (f) drama, (g) physical attractiveness, (h) coolness, and (i) parasocial interaction, (j) skillful learning motivations hypotheses were formed as follows:

H1: Motivations (a-j) have a positive impact on cognitive engagement.
H2: Motivations (a-j) have a positive impact on affective engagement.
H3: Motivations (a-j) have a positive impact on behavioral engagement.

The Hierarchical Relationship and Components of Esports Engagement

It is assumed that there is hierarchical relationship between different levels of esports engagement based on the hierarchy of effects model (Lavidge and Steiner 1961), which says that there is a "think," "feel," and "do"—or cognitive, affective, and behavioral—sequence in consumer behavior. According to the model, after

exposure to a subject, a consumer first develops awareness and gains knowledge about the subject. Then, they evaluate their beliefs and form emotions toward the subject through the liking and preference phases, which results in the development of behavior (Barry and Howard 1990, Lavidge and Steiner 1961). People's attitudes are also divided into three classes: cognition, affect, and conation (or behavioral intention) (Bagozzi 1978). As such, using these general components of attitude, Oliver (1997) stated that consumers become "loyal first in a cognitive sense, then later in an affective sense, and still later in a conative manner" (p. 392). Following this lead, our conceptual model hypothesizes that there is a hierarchical link between cognitive, affective, and behavioral engagement. The definition of engagement already indicates attitudinal engagement as a driver of behavioral engagement (van Doorn et al. 2010). This linkage found support in Barari et al.'s (2020) meta-analysis of customer engagement behavior and Saks' (2006) study on employee engagement. Thus,

> **H4a:** Cognitive engagement has a positive impact on affective engagement.
> **H4b:** Affective engagement has a positive impact on behavioral engagement.

Impact of Esports Engagement on Purchase Intention

Purchase intention is one of the most important outcomes that brands expect from their consumers, and engagement is known to create a positive influence on purchase intention (Hollebeek et al. 2014). The findings of Huang et al.'s (2017) study suggested that entertainment and self-presentation triggered consumer engagement in mobile social network games, which stimulated purchase intentions during the game. Similarly, Ji and Hanna (2020) showed in their study that heavily engaged consumers are more willing to buy esports merchandise than less engaged consumers are. The engagement literature also provides evidence that both affective (e.g., Barari et al. 2020, Harrigan et al. 2018, Harmeling et al. 2017) and behavioral engagement (e.g., Abbasi et al. 2020, Harrigan et al. 2018) affect purchase intention. Therefore,

> **H5a:** Affective engagement has a positive impact on the intention to purchase.
> **H5b:** Behavioral engagement has a positive impact on the intention to purchase.

In line with the proposed hypotheses, Figure 1 visually represents the theoretical model that integrates the key variables identified in the literature. The figure illustrates the interrelationships and hypothesized directional effects between the variables, providing a visual framework for understanding the dynamics of online esports engagement.

Figure 1. *Theoretical Model*
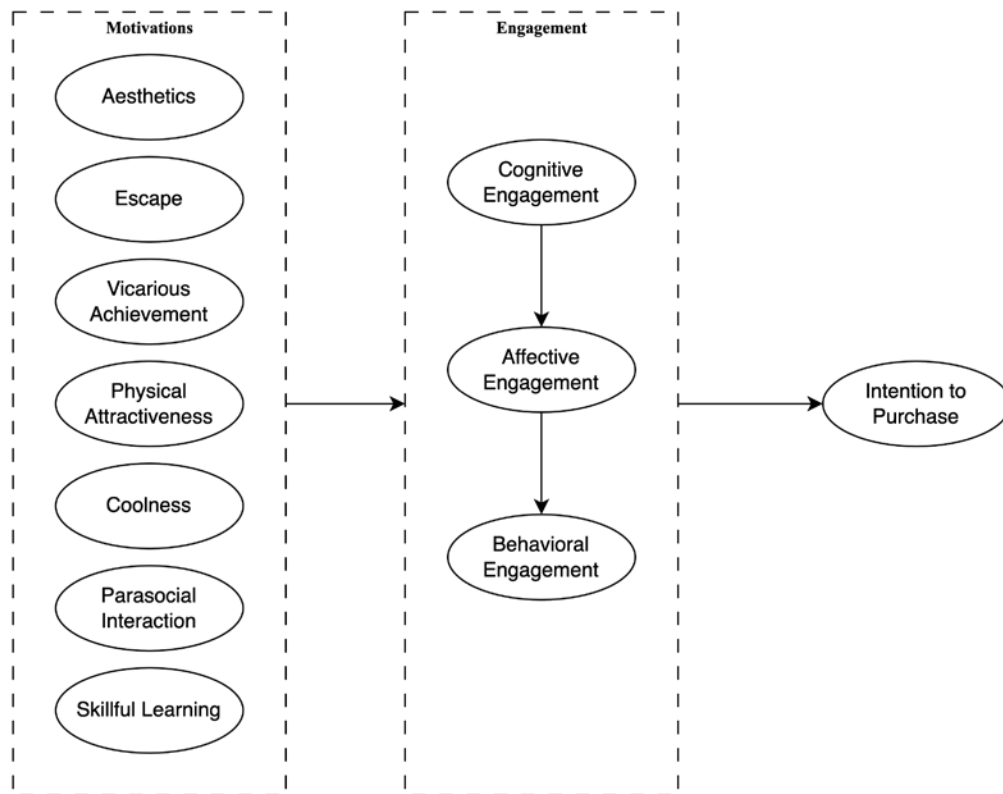
Research Methodology

Data Collection Procedures

A quantitative approach was adopted to test the hypotheses. The target population of the research was online esports spectators. To gather data, an online survey was designed, taking into consideration the specific characteristics and interests of esports enthusiasts. Responses were collected through snowball sampling technique. This approach involved recruiting participants who were already familiar with esports games and had a vested interest in the subject matter. The initial group of online esports spectators who completed the survey played a crucial role in facilitating the distribution of the survey to their contacts within the esports communities.

Survey items were drawn from established scales that have been widely used in previous studies focusing on similar topics. The online survey included measures of nine esports motivations adapted from Trail and James (2001), and Hamari and Sjöblom (2017). Further, measures of coolness (Smock et al. 2011, Sundar and Limperos 2013), and parasocial interaction (Labrecque 2014) and Vivek et al. (2014)'s, and Hollebeek et al. (2014)'s engagement measures were adapted to esports to measure esports engagement. Finally, the intention to

purchase scale was based on O'Reilly et al. (2008)'s study. Each of the constructs was measured with more than three items that were on a 5-point Likert-type scale, "1" being "strongly disagree" and "5" being "strongly agree". The descriptive data were analyzed in SPSS and the testing of both the measurement and structural model was conducted on AMOS.

Participant Demographics

A total of 726 participants completed the survey. After omitting the ones with missing data and incorrect answers to the filter question, 436 responses were found eligible to be used in the analysis. Most of the participants were men (81.7%), single (75%), and highly educated (75% undergraduate or graduate level). The participants' familiarity level with esports was measured with length of time they have been watching eSports. 80% of the participants claimed to watch esports for more than 3 years and the share of the spectators who claimed less than 1 year was 5.5%. Participants used Youtube (83%) and Twitch (74%) to view esports. Participants were mostly from Turkey (57.9%), followed by Brazil (8.4%) the United States (7.3%), Spain (4.8%), and others.

Research Findings

Assessment of Measurement Model

The measurement model included esports engagement with three dimensions (cognitive, affective, behavioral; four items each), engagement motivations consisting of 9 dimensions (36 items in total,) and purchase intention (five items). A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), using the maximum likelihood method was conducted to test the measurement model, assess the overall measurement quality. The goodness of fit statistics indicated a good measurement model fit (X^2: 3037.45; X^2/df: 2.29; CFI: 0.917; TLI: 0.907; and RMSEA: 0.054). Convergent validity was tested with measures of Cronbach's alpha, average variance extracted (AVE), and composite reliability (CR). All the loadings were significant and the standardized loading estimates were over 0.5, the AVE values of the constructs were over 0.5 and all the composite reliability values were over 0.7. Thus, convergent validity was ensured. Discriminant validity was assessed by comparing the square root of the AVE of each construct to all correlation measures (Fornell and Larcker 1981, Nunnaly 1978). Discriminant validity was also confirmed with high loading estimates to the appropriate constructs with no cross-loadings (see Table 1).

Table 1. *Convergent and Discriminant Validity*

	CR	AVE	PURC.INT.	VICH.ACH.	AEST.	DRAMA	ESCAPE	SKLL.LEARN	SOC.INT.	PS.ATTR.	ENJ.ofAGR.	COOLNESS	PARASOCIA	COGN.	AFFC.	BEHV.
PURC.INT.	0,948	0,784	**0,886**													
VICH.ACH.	0,902	0,754	0,355	**0,868**												
AEST.	0,913	0,778	0,264	0,496	**0,882**											
DRAMA	0,869	0,689	0,175	0,450	0,689	**0,830**										
ESCAPE	0,905	0,760	0,308	0,348	0,367	0,404	**0,872**									
SKLL.LEARN	0,928	0,683	0,165	0,440	0,674	0,777	0,468	**0,826**								
SOC.INT.	0,922	0,798	0,315	0,329	0,503	0,463	0,362	0,566	**0,893**							
PS.ATTR.	0,833	0,636	0,363	0,058	-0,012	-0,105	0,220	-0,142	0,099	**0,797**						
ENJ.ofAGR.	0,811	0,590	0,292	0,167	0,103	0,075	0,274	0,102	0,195	0,584	**0,768**					
COOLNESS	0,874	0,639	0,461	0,195	0,077	-0,021	0,204	-0,049	0,115	0,571	0,387	**0,799**				
PARASOCIA	0,890	0,575	0,416	0,512	0,516	0,498	0,440	0,577	0,530	0,169	0,295	0,343	**0,758**			
COGN.	0,906	0,707	0,421	0,454	0,569	0,544	0,342	0,656	0,548	-0,003	0,151	0,182	0,711	**0,841**		
AFFC.	0,922	0,749	0,424	0,600	0,637	0,606	0,532	0,682	0,543	0,043	0,250	0,200	0,774	0,777	**0,865**	
BEHV.	0,901	0,697	0,470	0,393	0,476	0,417	0,306	0,495	0,462	0,059	0,179	0,246	0,643	0,830	0,698	**0,835**

Diagonal values represent square root of AVE's.

Assessment of Structural Model

In the equations for testing motivation hypotheses, cognitive engagement, affective engagement, and behavioral engagement are conceptualized as dependent variables and engagement motivations (aesthetics, escape, enjoyment of aggression, social interaction, vicarious achievement, drama, skillful learning, physical attractiveness, coolness, and parasocial interaction) are the independent variables. On the other hand, in the equation regarding H4, purchase intention is the dependent variable, and cognitive engagement, affective engagement, and behavioral engagement are the independent variables. Standardized regression weights for significant relationships are shown in Table 2.

The fit assessment for the path analysis indicated that the hypothesized model was consistent with the data (X^2: 3077.92; X^2/df: 2.39; CFI: 0.911; TLI: 0.901, SRMR: 0.081; and RMSEA: 0.057). The model explained 64% of the variance in cognitive engagement, 81% in affective engagement, 60% in behavioral engagement, 26% of the variance in intention to purchase products advertised during esports events and/or products of official esports sponsors.

Results regarding cognitive engagement hypotheses (H1) revealed that social interaction (H1e: β=0.119; t=2.50; p<0.05) skillful learning (H1l: β=0.311; t=3.86; p<0.01), and parasocial interaction (H1k: β=0.460; t=6.99; p<0.01), have a positive influence on cognitive engagement.

According to the results of affective engagement hypotheses (H2) vicarious achievement (H2f: β=0.161; t=4.45; p<0.01), aesthetics (H2a: β=0.101; t=2.21; p<0.05), escape (H2c: β=0.179; t=4.99; p<0.01), and parasocial interaction (H2k: β=0.249; t=4.54; p<0.01) have a positive impact on affective engagement.

Results regarding behavioral engagement hypotheses (H3) revealed that escape (H3c: β=-0.132; t=-2.64; p<0.01), coolness (H3j: β=0.138; t=2.57; p<0.05), and parasocial interaction (H3k: β=0.205; t=2.70; p<0.01) positively impact behavioral engagement.

Cognitive engagement has an effect on affective engagement (H4a: β=0.398; t=7.35; p<0.01). Affective engagement impacts behavioral engagement (H4b: β=0.656; t=7.19; p<0.01) and intention to purchase (H5a: β=0.166; t=2.31; p<0.05). Lastly, behavioral engagement positively impacts intention to purchase (H5b: β=0.373; t=4.94; p<0.01).

Table 2. *Standardized Regression Weights for Significant Relationships*

Hypothesis	Hypothesized Relationship	Estimate	P
H1d	Social Interaction → Cognitive Engagement	0.119	P<0.05
H1i	Parasocial Interaction → Cognitive Engagement	0.460	p<0.01
H1j	Skillful Learning → Cognitive Engagement	0.311	p<0.01
H2a	Aesthetics → Affective Engagement	0.101	p<0.05
H2b	Escape → Affective Engagement	0.179	p<0.01
H2e	Vicarious Achievement → Affective Engagement	0.161	p<0.01
H2i	Parasocial Interaction → Affective Engagement	0.249	p<0.01
H3b	Escape → Behavioral Engagement	-0.132	p<0.01
H3h	Coolness → Behavioral Engagement	0.138	p<0.05
H3i	Parasocial Interaction →Behavioral Engagement	0.205	p<0.01
H4a	Cognitive Engagement → Affective Engagement	0.398	p<0.01
H4b	Affective Engagement → Behavioral Engagement	0.656	p<0.01
H5a	Affective Engagement → Intention to Purchase	0.166	p< 0.05
H5b	Behavioral Engagement → Intention to Purchase	0.373	p< 0.01

Discussion

This study showed that as spectators affectively and behaviorally engage with online esports, they become willing to buy products advertised during online esports events and/or products of official esports sponsors. The study also provided support for a hierarchy of effects between cognitive, affective, and behavioral esports engagement dimensions in respective order. The parasocial interaction with esports players is identified as the most influential factor in the engagement with online esports at all levels. Enhanced interactivity in online environments may cause spectators to form strong bonds with esports players (Labrecque 2014, Wulf et al. 2020) and experience a phenomenon of immersion with these players (Shin 2016). Our results show that this involvement, immersion, and one-sided relationship with the players may drive spectators to be actively engaged with online esports itself as well.

Other than parasocial interaction, skillful learning and social interaction have a positive impact on cognitive online esports engagement, which in return has a positive influence on affective engagement. Hollebeek et al.'s (2019) study supports that one of the motivations to engage with brands is customers' desire to learn about particular products/brands. Therefore, it can be inferred that the greater the spectators' need for acquiring esports-related knowledge, skills, or strategy (skillful learning), the more likely their mind will be occupied with esports, they will pay attention to anything related to it, and they will learn more about it. Tang et al. (2020) addressed the importance of knowledge acquisition as one of the motivations that differentiates esports spectators from traditional sports viewers. Moreover, Qian et al. (2020), found in his study that skill improvement was an important emerging motive in online esports spectatorship, suggesting that most esports spectators might also be active players who desire to learn from the best and improve their mastery of the game.

Social interaction motivation in esports, on the other hand, shows the strong group dynamic present in online esports, and implies that spectators are interested

in interacting with each other and offer their brand-related knowledge to others to create value (Lim et al. 2020). Socialization on esports online spectatorship centers on Twitch's chat function, over which spectators meet, interact, and befriend with each other in the online esports community (Qian et al. 2020). Similarly, online friendship formation was recognized to be an important factor in heavy gaming as well (Carras et al. 2017). This finding lends support to findings of Qian et al. (2020) and reverses the idea that esports players are socially isolated and previous findings that socialization is unimportant to esports spectatorship (Hamari and Sjöblom 2017).

Affective engagement is an important factor for esports because it has a positive effect on both behavioral engagement and intention to purchase the advertised or sponsored products. Besides parasocial interaction, vicarious achievement, aesthetics, and escapism exert positive influences on affective engagement in esports. When watching esports, viewers experience a sense of collaboration with esports players to achieve the goal of winning the game (Wohn et al. 2018, Lim et al. 2020). This experience of involvement and self-identification with the team may stimulate them to feel the same joy and pride as the team players when the team wins the game (Lim et al. 2020). Consequently, their enthusiasm and passion (affective engagement) toward esports may increase, making them like and enjoy esports. Similarly, aesthetics may trigger spectators' enthusiasm, excitement, and passion toward esports because it provides a positive sensory experience, which causes the spectators to enjoy the atmosphere and the game more (Ahn and Back 2018). Finally, escapism from stress and bothersome daily activities also increases spectators' affective engagement with esports. They may find esports to be a joyful escape from life's responsibilities and develop positive feelings toward it. Previous research supported this finding by showing that the escapism motivation explained passion toward esports (Choi 2019).

Escapism and coolness motivations influenced the behavioral engagement of esports spectators, along with the parasocial interaction motivation. Previous research found escapism to be a strong motivator behind esports usage (Weiss and Schiele 2013) and spectatorship (Hamari and Sjöblom 2017, Xiao 2020). However, our results show that escapism negatively influences behavioral engagement with esports, providing evidence contrary to previous findings. One plausible explanation might be the dichotomous nature of the escapism concept. Kuo et al. (2016) indicated that there are two forms of escapism: passive and active. Observing, watching, or exerting only minimal effort are considered forms of passive escapism (e.g., watching a film). On the other hand, consumers might also want to interact, be actively involved, and participate, which fall under the active escapism categorization (e.g., playing a video game). From this point of view, it can be said that esports spectators consider esports engagement to be a passive mode of escapism, which motivates them to enjoy watching the games passionately and affectively engage with esports. However, engaging with esports on a behavioral level requires active participation and effort, and a passive form of escapism has a negative effect on this type of engagement. Finally, coolness appears to be an important motivator of behavioral engagement with esports. Given the increasing numbers of spectators, players, and tournaments in esports (Hallman and Giel

2018), people might consider being heavily engaged in esports to be a cool and hip behavior, which would promote their self-image in their social circle. Similar findings on coolness motivation were also reported for new media types such as Facebook (Smock et al. 2011) and Instagram (Sheldon and Bryant 2016) in their hype periods.

Theoretical Contributions

The current research explores the psychology of esports engagement formed around the new ecosystem of esports business, sponsorship, and advertising. In doing so, it makes several contributions: (1) providing a definition of esports engagement; (2) exploring the hierarchy of effects between esports engagement dimensions; (3) creating a theoretical linkage between U&G, MSSC, and esports engagement dimensions; and (4) exploring how esports engagement leads to the willingness to buy products advertised during esports events and/or products of official esports sponsors.

There was no proposed definition for esports engagement in the extant literature. The closest definition was provided for video game engagement (Abbasi et al. 2017, 2019, 2020). Therefore, an "esports engagement" definition that incorporates the multidimensionality of the concept was provided in this study. Furthermore, this study investigated the relationship among dimensions of online esports engagement and contributed to filling this gap in the literature by investigating and finding support for the hierarchy of effects among the dimensions of esports engagement (cognitive, affective, and behavioral, respectively).

Previous research showed that U&G and MSSC work as a theoretical lens to provide a better understanding of motivations for watching esports (e.g., Hamari and Sjöblom 2017, Xiao 2020). Our research contributes to this research stream by showing that different motivations impact different esports engagement dimensions. Furthermore, this research extended the commonly utilized MSSC framework by adding parasocial interaction and coolness dimensions from new media engagement research. In doing so, it proved that parasocial interaction with esports players acts as an exceptionally strong motivator for online esports engagement in all dimensions. Finally, the research adds to the sponsorship and advertising literature in sports marketing (e.g., Pradhan 2020, Walsh et al. 2014) by showing that both affective and behavioral esports engagement has a positive impact on sponsorship and advertising effectiveness.

Managerial Implications

Parasocial interaction increases identification with and attachment to esports players and is important for holding the esports community together and keeping members engaged. One way to encourage this feeling is to create real-life-like conversations with spectators to make them feel that they are on the receiving end of the conversation. Live tools of social media; vlogging; storytelling; open-ended,

engaging language; and asking live questions to the spectators may encourage this type of interaction between the esports players and spectators.

According to Lowood (2010), esports players are artists, playing for audiences as an expression of art. Even though every esports game has its own aesthetic differences, based on rules, play communities, and relations to the screen, the interface of the esports games should be designed carefully to create an atmosphere of aesthetics for the audience. One way to achieve this is through careful analysis of the camera shooting and viewership through aesthetic lenses. Aesthetically minimal, sophisticated, and functional equipment designs might also help to increase the sensory experience of the esports spectators, increasing their cognitive and affective engagement. As Design Works (2020) put it, a holistic emphasis can be placed on form, weight, and technology integration of the gaming chair, mouse, and entire gaming ecosystem so that people's immersion in esport is secured.

Games, conversations, and bets might be increased for online esports spectators to interact with each other more often, convey their knowledge of the game and players, develop friendships based on common understanding, and socially support each other. For example, spectators can rate or recommend games for each other or leave tips and comments that would smarten each other's viewership. Moreover, informative content such as virtual courses on esports strategies and skills could be designed to enhance the esports learning process. Esports events and leagues should continuously improve and introduce innovative changes to keep their cool and interesting image alive. Finally, even though escapism creates a negative influence on behavioral engagement, research shows that people use esports to escape from the increased stress and anxiety of the COVID-19 pandemic (Cranmer et al. 2021). Given this fact, escapism should be a relevant and substantial dimension of esports positioning strategies in current circumstances.

Limitations and Further Research

As with all research, this research is not free from limitations. Cultural differences were not within the boundaries of this study; further studies should replicate the analysis with samples representing major esports markets (such as Asia, North America, etc.) to account for possible cultural differences. Further, a multidimensional analysis of purchase intention could yield to valuable results for understanding consumption patterns in esports. There are still numerous research questions to be addressed such as how engagement leads to in-game purchases, whether there are differences in purchase intentions of in-game purchases and purchases derived from sponsorship and/or advertising efforts, whether there are factors that hinder the purchase intention in esports and the effectiveness of esports streamers on esports related purchases. Behavioral engagement metrics such as viewing time and frequencies, number of comments, and number of participants in the audience could also provide insights for evaluating actual consumption patterns. A particular focus on game genres could also reveal fruitful implications because different types of games require different play or watch times, and people might have varying expectations and motivations as well (Ghuman and Griffiths

2012, Johnson and Gardner 2010, Qian et al. 2020). For instance, enjoyment of aggression could be a unique motivation for specific game genres. It could be argued that ones who enjoy nonviolent games (e.g., FIFA, NBA2K) may have divergent motivations than those who spectate violent games (e.g., CS: GO, PUBG).

Conclusion

This research contributes to the understanding of esports engagement within the context of esports business, sponsorship, and advertising. The study provides a definition of esports engagement and explores the hierarchy of effects between its dimensions. By linking user and gratification (U&G) theory and engagement theory in esports, the research highlights the impact of different motivations on various dimensions of engagement. It particularly emphasizes the role of parasocial interaction as a strong motivator for online esports engagement across all dimensions. Additionally, the study demonstrates the positive influence of both affective and behavioral engagement on sponsorship and advertising effectiveness.

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