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Letter - Comparing behaviors and intentions toward sports and esports

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Note: This research was conducted before the global outbreak of COVID-19.

Introduction

One of the biggest challenges researchers face at the outset of their research is the question of knowing how much of something actually exists. For example, the underpinning of Ahn, Collis and Jenny's (2020) article titled "The one billion dollar myth: Methods for sizing the massively undervalued esports revenue landscape" and published in the *International Journal of Esports* is specifically focused on this type of question: How much revenue is actually generated by the esports industry? Are there other important questions facing the industry which would also benefit from the reporting of results?

In recent years, in collaboration with colleagues, students and industry professionals, I have personally collected thousands of responses about many of the most common questions asked about esports. As someone whose background is in sports marketing and consumer behavior, one of my favorite sets of questions involves asking about recent activities, current behaviors and future intentions. In addition, because like so many others, I started in sports, my natural instinct is to compare behaviors and future intentions toward sports and esports.

In this brief text, I would like to share results on some of the most interesting, and commonly asked esports marketing and consumer behavior questions. Based on a large-scale international data collection of English-speaking respondents who had experience playing and/or watching both traditional sports and esports, nine questions were asked about behaviors and future intentions toward both traditional sports and esports. The results allow for understanding on how people are allocating and planning to utilize their resources. Additional comparisons using t-tests, allow for statistical judgements about similarities and differences between allocations toward both traditional sports and esports. Moving forward, I imagine others can replicate this study with different populations around the world, report their respective findings and compare with the results shown below about how behaviors and intentions are changing over time.

Methodology

Based on the research purpose, 18 questions, with nine focused on traditional sports, nine focused on esports, and demographic questions were posed to international English-speaking respondents. Respondents who indicated they did not have experience playing or watching either sports or esports were disqualified from participating in the research. Table 1 displays the nine questions asked to respondents.

In order to measure activities and current behaviors, raw number scales were used for both years and hours (e.g., 1 year = 1 year, 2 hours = 2 hours). For future behavioral intentions, 7-point (coded as 0-6) scales were used to represent the likelihood of behaviors, labelled and coded as "No likelihood whatsoever (0% chance)" = 0, "Very unlikely" = 1, "Somewhat unlikely" = 2, "Neither likely nor unlikely, Neutral (50% chance)" = 3, "Somewhat likely" = 4, "Very likely" = 5, and "It will absolutely happen (100% chance)" = 6.

In order to recruit a diverse international population, Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) was used to recruit and compensate participants to complete an online questionnaire hosted on SurveyMonkey. Compensation (approximately 0.30 USD) was provided to those that fully completed the survey via MTurk. Preventive methods were used to minimize common types of response bias (i.e., the same respondent could not take the survey multiple times).

Results

In total, 1624 individuals began taking the survey of which 130 responses had significant numbers of missing responses, leaving an analyzable sample of 1,494 responses. The average age of respondents was 33.5 years old (SD = 9.5 years); 34.2% were female, 65.2% were male, and 0.6% preferred not to respond; 78.0% hailed from the United States, and 22.0% were located in other countries; and while 100% had either played or watched both traditional sports and esports event, 96.1% had experience playing traditional sports and 85.9% had played esports. The results for the nine paired sample t-tests about behaviors and future behavioral intentions toward traditional sports and esports are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1 – Paired sample t-test results for traditional and esports comparisons

					Paired Differences	
Items	**Paired Comparisons**	**Mean**	**SD**	**N**	**t-value**	***p***
For approximately how many years have you played _____?	Traditional Sports: Esports:	8.59 6.57	7.47 6.69	1360	9.33	***
On average, how many hours per day do you play_____?	Traditional Sports: Esports:	1.99 1.96	1.80 2.07	1350	0.51	N.S.
On average, how many hours per day do you watch _____?	Traditional Sports: Esports:	1.91 1.23	1.94 1.79	1425	14.82	***
In the future, how likely are you to play_____?	Traditional Sports: Esports:	4.19 3.96	1.64 1.91	1447	4.29	***
In the future, how likely are you to spend money on _____?	Traditional Sports: Esports:	3.92 3.53	1.62 1.99	1446	7.26	***
In the future, how likely are you to watch _____?	Traditional Sports: Esports:	4.15 3.19	1.71 2.03	1448	16.58	***
In the future, how likely are you to tell others to play _____?	Traditional Sports: Esports:	3.88 3.31	1.62 1.90	1446	10.69	***
In the future, how likely are you to attend _____?	Traditional Sports: Esports:	4.17 2.66	1.55 1.96	1446	26.63	***
In the future, how likely are you to buy _____ sponsors' goods or services?	Traditional Sports: Esports:	3.76 3.10	1.69 1.96	1445	12.89	***

Notes: SD = Standard Deviation, N = Sample Size, *p* = Significance Level, *** = $p<0.001$, N.S. = Not Significant

Discussion

For all nine measured variables, responses indicated individuals recently, currently and planned in the future to consume more traditional sports than esports. The statistical comparisons, tested via paired sample t-tests, confirmed significant differences in eight of the nine analyses. These results may not be entirely surprising to many, because traditional sports have a longer history and have been integrated into societies around the world for a much longer period of time than esports. However, while respondents have played traditional sports for more years than esports, the statistically non-significant result in the number of hours per day respondents play traditional sports and esports points to the notion that esports are becoming more mainstream and may be directly competing for "playing time" in respondents' lives. On the other hand, to play traditional sports such as soccer, basketball or tennis, space,

equipment and perhaps, other individuals to play with may all be required. For esports and video games, people can play with or against others or alone. While longitudinal or trend data (i.e., data collected at multiple points in time) was not collected in the current research, based on recently collected data from Newzoo, it can be inferred that in the near future, the consumption of esports may overtake that of traditional sports (Pannekeet, 2018).

The results also indicate differences between the future behavioral intentions of respondents toward six frequently measured areas for both traditional sports and esports. Understanding respondents' future behavioral intentions toward playing, watching, spending money on, telling others to play (i.e., word of mouth), attending events, and buying goods and services from sponsors are all important measurements of the potential for future revenue generation for both traditional sports and esports. The results found in this research show respondents intend in the future to engage in behaviors toward traditional sports to a larger (and statistically significant degree) than esports. In terms of future purchases of esports sponsors' goods and services, respondents indicated a strong likelihood (i.e., 4.10 out of 6.00 on a 0-6 likelihood scale) of engaging in these behaviors in the future. Documented evidence in support of the expectation of future purchases can be seen in mainstream media reporting on increases during 2018, in both endemic, and non-endemic sponsors supporting various esports organizations, teams, players and competitions in the hopes of motivating consumers' future consumption behaviors (Fitch, 2018).

Undertaking comparative research on traditional sports and esports provides important information for managers and industry personnel. Through engaging in this comparison, evidence is uncovered that provides a basis for evaluating whether traditional sports and esports are, and can be similarly managed. For example, according to the results, respondents are less likely to attend esports events in the future compared to traditional sports. One potential way in which the implications of this result can be interpreted would be that existing, and typically online or streamed broadcasts of esports competitions and events are the preferred manner through which consumers follow esports activities and broadcasts. As a result, esports event organizers may not need to frequently create and host large-scale events (similar to those for traditional sports at stadiums and arenas) as consumers may be satisfied by online streamed events. There may be consumer interest in attending more local esports events if managers and organizers create and offer these types of live and in-person events.

Another interesting area of discussion encompasses how consumers may allocate their resources toward traditional sports and esports. If, for example, individuals are consuming or planning to use their personal resources (e.g., time, energy, money) in similar ways with both traditional sports and esports, then perhaps many of the strategies and tactics sports managers use may be applicable to both industries. The results indicate respondents are more likely to spend money on traditional sports, however, they are still likely to spend some resources on esports as well. As a result, if consumers of traditional sports are motivated to spend money on jerseys and hats adorned with the colors and logos of their favorite traditional sports team, then consumers may also be interested in purchasing similar merchandise the represents their favorite esports team.

Related to the discussions of resource allocations is a similar notion that because consumers have finite and often limited time, energy and money, they are forced to make calculated choices about how they spend their resources. For example, if consumers spend more time playing and watching esports, then they are likely to have less time to play and watch traditional sports unless they reallocate time from some other activity.

Finally, in addition to competition amongst activities for larger resource allocations, there are also opportunities for value co-creation activities and collaboration between traditional sports and esports. For example, while there are currently National Basketball Association (NBA) teams that own and operate NBA 2K esports teams, there have not been extensive and coordinated activities between traditional sports and esports. In other words, while there are frequently hospitality and experiential marketing activities at traditional sporting events consisting of esports activities (e.g., consumers attending traditional sporting events have opportunities to play and experience esports at the venue) or competitions, many activities have simply been focused on sponsorship activation. Moving forward, there are opportunities to more directly connect traditional sports and esports, both at the event location and through media broadcasts. For example, during halftime of an NBA game, professional players or supporters of both teams can compete in NBA 2K competitions. Moreover, prior to or following an NBA game, an NBA 2K competition featuring the same two teams can be broadcasted. In this example, both the traditional sports and esports teams and competitions can be leveraged to engage a larger audience, while also attempting to keep their attention for a longer duration of time. These types of collaborative events would likely impact fan behavior and revenue generation opportunities due to an increasing number of consumers being engaged for longer periods of time.

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Declaration of Interest:

The author declares there is no known conflict of interest impacting this research.

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