

# The rise of eSports: A new audience model and a new medium?

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## Abstract

Electronic sports, or eSports, are competitive events that involve the use of computers and online video games to compare the skills and intelligence of the people who play. It has been increasing in popularity over the coming years, having its own audience following that is similar to that of traditional sports such as football and basketball. The model used to capture the audience's attention in eSports follows that of an experience economy, which is the idea that the companies who sponsor the events promise to give the viewers a unique experience that will allow them to escape from the throes of everyday life. Through research into various studies looking into the audiences of both eSports and traditional sports, a comparison is made between the two, showing that they follow similar models to reach their audience. The medium of broadcast and communication is different; traditional sports exist in the world of television, while eSports are just starting to make their way onto TV networks, currently relying more on live streaming services such as YouTube and Twitch to broadcast to their viewers. This new comparison suggests that eSports have taken the methods of attracting audiences from traditional sports and adapted it to fit livestream broadcasting. This shows that the method of promising an experience to consumers is a moldable method to attracting an audience.

*Keywords:* esports, video games, experience economy, audience

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## Introduction

In this new technological age, the world has moved more towards using the Internet as a medium for a variety of purposes. From finding information to setting up businesses, the Internet has become a part of everyday life for many people. This also comes to affect entertainment, giving rise to a new way to broadcast events, and with this ability, the Internet allows entrepreneurs and companies to reach millions of viewers. One of the largest growing forms of entertainment are eSports.

eSports, short for electronic sports, are competition events based around online video games. Individuals or teams of players come together in tournaments of various scales in order to compete and find out who is the best in skill, teamwork, and strategy, of a game franchise. A scientific definition of eSports is an area of sport activities in which people develop and train mental or physical abilities in the use of information and communication technologies (Wagner). Meanwhile, sports are defined as an activity involving physical exertion and skill in which an individual or team competes against another or others for entertainment. In comparing these two definitions, sports are physically exerting and for the purpose of entertainment, while eSports are a subset of sports that focus on information and communication technologies. The entertainment aspects of eSports follows a similar

audience model as that of sports, and uses a new medium to reach its audience.

## The eSports audience

eSports for various games have amassed huge followings, with viewership in the millions for online games such as Riot Games' *League of Legends* and Valve's *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive (CS:GO)*. In 2015, the *League of Legends* World Championship had an average concurrent viewership of 4.2 million, with the finals reaching a peak viewership of 14 million ([www.lolSports.com/en\\_US/articles/worlds-2015-viewership](http://www.lolSports.com/en_US/articles/worlds-2015-viewership)). Not all forms of eSports necessarily have viewer numbers reaching such high levels, but each game has its own audience following it, and looking at a large scale case such as *League of Legends* gives the greatest amount of information regarding the practices of successful eSports franchises that accrue large audience bases, on both a national scale as well as on the global scene. In fact, a recent announcement stated that eSports would be coming to the Asian Games, the second largest multi-sport event in the world (Brautigam, 2017). Through an experience economy and online streaming mediums, eSports have built an audience fan base that has been rising over the years.

According to Yuri Seo (2013), eSports have progressed to an economic model based on consumer

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experiences. Seo argues that Pine and Gilmore's (1999) experience economy is what runs the marketing landscape of eSports. This economic model focuses on giving consumers an experience of memorable events as the commodity that is traded for money, and Seo explains that eSport consumers partake in this economic model. Through this view, the eSports spectator also fits into this experiential economy, primarily in the esthetic, escapist and entertainment categories.

In the esthetic category, in which the consumer becomes immersed in a performance, the spectator of eSports participates by attending tournaments physically and watching online streams, which produce ad revenue for the tournament hosts. eSport tournaments typically involve a very brightly lit stage and a large screen on which audience members can watch how well the in-game avatars of the players are performing. The games themselves are built with spectacular environments and colors with CG graphics, which add to the esthetic enjoyment of the audience member. This allows audience members to fully immerse themselves in the game-scape of the eSport tournament they are viewing, so it follows that viewing eSports fulfills a sense of escapism.

The escapist experience is categorized by active participation and immersion to the point that nothing else seems to matter (Seo 2013). Escapism is commonly related to video games, as it is considered a cause of video game addiction (Beranuy, Carbonell, & Griffiths 2012). With this in mind, the spectator can also fall into an escapist sense of reality in viewing eSport tournaments, and they fully immerse themselves in watching the player-avatar's every move to see what will cause a change to the outcome of the match. In watching the 2016 *League of Legends* World Championship, just through an online stream, the crowd is loud and engaged in every play the opposing teams make, drowning out the commentators of the match. This escapism plays a large part in what draws consumers to watch eSport events.

The final category of the experience economy that applies to the spectators of eSports is the entertainment aspect, where consumers take on a much more passive role in participation, and the connection of the performance is more absorption than immersion (Seo 2013). Seo states that in South Korea, there are a number of television channels established specifically for the purpose of broadcasting eSport events to cater to the young adult population, which is the predominant demographic that watches eSports. Outside of South Korea, viewers watch eSport events through online medias, such as Twitch and YouTube, which offer streaming services and data storage for recordings of the eSport tournaments. This entertainment aspect of eSports that allow for passive viewers contributes to its success, as the target demographic of eSports enjoy being able to watch and be a part of an exciting event without needing to participate actively.

Upon mention of online mediums, Twitch and YouTube come immediately to mind, as they are highly notable sources for broadcasting eSport events, with both being used in livestreaming games such as *League of Legends* and Blizzard Games' *Overwatch*, both of which are commonly the top two games being viewed on Twitch. These two sites offer streaming and video services that allow eSport tournaments to broadcast their events online to millions of potential viewers, and it is free for anyone to watch them through these services. This allows for eSports to reach a very large range of consumers across the world through the use of the internet, and as such contributes greatly to the viewer base, as accessing broadcasts of tournaments is a simple task with just an Internet connection. Twitch specifically has been credited with raising the number of players and viewers of various online games and eSports, representing both the present and future of gaming (Burroughs and Rama, 2015).

A crucial aspect of the streaming services offered through the Internet is that they allow the players, especially the professional players, of eSports to have a means to communicate with fans, as these streaming services also have live chat rooms that the players can use to communicate with those viewing. This factor allows for a deeper connection between spectators of eSports and the professional players that play the games, which builds a greater sense of community and achievement within eSport communities (Hamari and Sjöblom, 2017). This connection between viewer and player helps keep the viewers that start following specific teams or players.

### **The sports audience**

Sports have had large audience followings for years, with research having been done that explains what draws fans to watch sporting events. One aspect of sports that brings in viewers is the existence of fantasy sport leagues, in which people can pick out specific players to build their own fantasy team that gains points based on how well each individual player performs during the week on their actual teams (Billings & Ruibley). Also, Raney (2006) outlined three main categories that drive sports fans to spectate: emotional, cognitive, and behavioral/social. Within the emotional category exists four subcategories: entertainment, eustress, self-esteem, and escape. (Raney) The second area, cognitive motives, includes learning and aesthetics. Finally, there are behavioral and social motivations for sports fans which include release, companionship, group affiliation, family, and economics.

Looking at Raney's discussion of the first group of motivations, the emotional motivations. First, there is the entertainment factor. Sports spectators are seeking to be entertained; to witness a fun and exciting event. Through this desire, sports fans become socialized, forming allegiances to specific teams for various reasons such as

geography or team colors (Raney). This allegiance to a team makes the spectator feel thrilled at their team's success and saddened by their failures (Raney). Nevertheless, the feeling that an audience member gets from watching their team win or lose is what gives them the entertainment they want.

The second motivation under the emotional category is eustress. Eustress is defined as moderate or normal stress that is interpreted as beneficial by the person who experiences it. Raney applies this to the feeling that a spectator experiences when they witness a victory. The greater the stress of the victory, the higher the eustress an audience member feels (Raney). Eustress is also experienced in the level of violence that occurs during a sports game, with higher levels of violence being rated higher by spectators (Raney). Both of these situations lead to increased arousal and excitement for the viewers (Raney). Following eustress, the next motivation is self-esteem, which follows almost immediately. Self-esteem builds for spectators when their team is doing well, and may drop some if their team loses (Raney).

The last motivation under the category of emotion is escapism. The previous three focused more on the feelings of the audience members in relation to their favorite teams or player; however escapism relates to the spectator uniquely. Raney argues that due to ever increasing stresses in our times, a person's desire to watch something unfold without needing to take part themselves becomes greater. Watching sports gives a spectator relief from their own worries (Raney).

The second category of motivations discussed by Raney are the cognitive motivations; the motivations that build mental development and learning. In fact, learning is the first of these. A spectator of sports is seeking to learn about the players and the teams in each instance they view the game, and with this knowledge they build conversations regarding the sports (Raney). The knowledge of the sport and its players gives the spectators a basis with which to discuss strategy, reasons for a team's success, and other topics, further building the social circle (Raney). Audience members may also be seeking to learn from professional players how to better play the sport themselves, which also applies to the learning motivation (Raney).

Next is the aesthetic motivation, in which audience members find beauty in the intricacies of the sports they are watching. Aesthetic appreciation can arise from the style of play, improvisations that prove fruitful, and grace found in particular players of sport (Raney). It is these kinds of beauty in a sport that also motivate a person to watch a particular sport.

The final category of motivations are the behavioral and social motivations. The first of these is release. Through watching sporting events, spectators feel joy and excitement, and the drama of a sports competition gives them an opportunity to release their emotions (Raney). This opportunity gives a reason for an individual to keep coming

back to the sport that allows them to release their pent-up emotions (Raney).

Following release, the next two motivations coincide with each other. Companionship and group affiliation go hand-in-hand. Sports viewing gives people an opportunity to interact on a common ground, allowing them to talk amongst others to build a feeling of camaraderie and companionship (Raney). Beyond the base companionship comes a group affiliation, as the common ground of viewing a sport between two people can extend to three, four, up to any number of people. This feeling of being part of a larger group gives a sports viewer further incentive to continue watching sports, and increases with a larger scale sports event, such as the Olympics (Raney).

Another motivation under the behavioral and social category is family. Family plays a role in motivating an individual to watch sports, as the viewing of sports can be a family pastime. Large sport events become a reason for family to come together and watch the big game, such as the Super Bowl in football (Raney). It is a common practice for family parties and dinners to occur around the Super Bowl each year, and has become a very large part of American culture in particular.

Raney's last motivation to view sports is the economic motivation. Some individuals chose to view sports due to financial incentive, primarily through gambling. These spectators bet large sums of money on the team they think is most likely to win, and have a chance to get away with a large payout (Raney). But there is also a risk in this, as, if their team loses, then the money that was bet is lost. Raney views those who focus only on the economic motivation to watch sports as untrue sport fans.

Overall, these motivations are the main factors, as determined by Raney, that dictate the audiences of traditional sports.

## Comparing the audiences

eSport audiences are built up based on Seo's experience economy, while traditional sports follow the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral motivations of Raney. First, the esthetic category of the experience economy relates heavily to Raney's aesthetic motivation. In both eSports and traditional sports, the stylistic and beauty of the games that are played are key roles in maintaining their respective audiences. From the fantastic stages of *League of Legends* World Championship Stage, to a well-executed made by a basketball team, there are elements in every sport that gives its audience something to look at in awe.

Second, escapism is prominent in both eSports and traditional sports audiences. This can likely be attributed to conditions in the world today, where people seek to get away from the longer work weeks, worrying about politics, and the many stressors of everyday life. People are looking for something to distract them from the woes of the world.

The last similarity is found in the fact that both eSports and traditional sports are a form of entertainment. Audiences watch these competitions for the purpose of seeing an eventful phenomena that they can enjoy and feel excited to be witnessing.

Overall, these three similar motivations between eSports and traditional sports create the primary link that makes the audience models almost the same. Both eSports and traditional sports experience gambling, and the communities that form around teams in both do so for the same reasons. Thus, eSports and traditional sports do follow a very similar audience model.

However, there are still differences, and these are primary in the mediums used to broadcast the events. eSports' primary form of broadcasting is through the internet, where millions can access the event from anywhere. Meanwhile, traditional sports still dominate television, and also make use of the radio, a sometimes forgotten means of communication in today's times. eSports are making their way onto television broadcasting, with a recent CS:GO championship appearing on TBS, but for the most part eSports will likely remain broadcasted online, as while the audiences are large, there isn't currently a high enough demand to greatly increase its presence on television.

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## Significance

It is important to compare sport audiences and eSport audiences to understand if the rising eSports phenomena is a new model of capturing an audience's attention or if it is just using a similar model to that of sports. This gives insight into how communication and technology play a role in how social communities form around eSports and how traditional social groups have formed around physical sporting events, and allows for a basis to make predictions regarding future phenomena that might give rise to large followings of consumers for the purpose of entertainment.

## Conclusion

The eSport phenomena has been on the rise for many years, and does not show signs of stopping. It attracts its audience with a similar model to that of generic sports, with the Internet as its broadcast medium instead of television and radio. In future analysis, it will be important to discover what possible effects this wide scale access of eSports will have on the younger generations, and what this means for future phenomena that might try and make use of the Internet and the sports audience model.