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## Abstract

Tourism research has yet to consider the growing esport sector. Through a mixed-method research design, we employ the theoretical lens of fandom to examine what online and experiential factors may influence esport players and spectators to attend physical events, which we argue have the potential to grow into a new tourism sub-sector. Study one surveys 549 League of Legends spectators; while study two consists of a twelve-month virtual ethnography on World of Warcraft coupled with 13 player interviews. We find antecedents such as star players, team loyalty, flow experiences, and self-congruity with event image may encourage live event attendance. Furthermore, our findings emphasise the importance of social and interactive experiences in generating friendship and a perceptual sense of belonging at events. Community socialisation is a fundamental tenet of fandom and plays a key role in intentions to attend esport events.



**Keywords:**

Esport, gaming, visit intention, event attendance, fandom, socialisation

## 1. Introduction

The esport industry has millions of online players and a global virtual audience of approximately 500 million (Newzoo, 2020). However, literature intersecting online social experiences with tourism activity are limited (Jiménez-Barreto et al., 2020; Wen & Leung, 2021) and never has literature considered esports as a sector which can translate to the physical tourism environment. Esports is rapidly growing and has some of the largest active global communities due to an increasingly active and engaged online population (Newzoo, 2020; Seo, 2016). The growth of esports has only been accelerated by Covid-19 where online gaming fulfilled a need for competition in periods of indoor lockdown and social distancing (The Economist, 2020). This growth is inverse to the decline of the tourism industry during the pandemic, which gives rise to the idea of how tourism could innovate to accommodate this growing esport sector in the future (Zenker & Kock, 2020).

Large-scale tourism events can offer long-term economic and social benefits to host cities (Magno & Dossena, 2020). Beyond the revenue from the physical event itself, host cities also benefit by virtue of tourists spending on food, drink, hospitality, local tourism, and parking (Cunningham & Kwon, 2003). The enhanced visibility and brand image of the city can also have positive socio-psychological implications for the host city's residents (Kim et al., 2015). As a result, tourism and event marketers are particularly interested in understanding what influences prospective tourists to attend large sporting events (Cunningham & Kwon, 2003). However, despite esports having a large, committed, and expanding fanbase, to this point, little research has explored how to target and position products, services, and events to online gamers (Hallmann & Giel, 2018).

As such, we apply the overarching theory of fandom (Obiegbu et al., 2019; Reichenberger & Smith, 2020) to understand how marketers and event managers can encourage players and spectators of online gaming to attend esport physical events in host cities. Traditionally, fandom is a participatory and social experience with fans travelling to live events in order to cheer for their favourite team and players as well as interact with fellow fans who share their self-identity (Fiske, 1992; Gibson et al., 2003; Obiegbu et al., 2019; Ono et al., 2019; Reichenberger & Smith, 2020). This paper extends existing research by exploring whether fandom can transcend the virtual environment and translate to attendance at physical esport events through a mixed-methods approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2017) with two complementary studies that seek to theorise esport fans' behaviour in a tourism context.

In Study one, guided by fandom theory, we conduct a survey of 549 League of Legends spectators sampled via Reddit forums, examining the extent to which star players, team loyalty,

flow experiences, and self-congruity with event image can influence online spectators' visit intentions toward live events. Further, given the collective and interactive nature of fandom, we test the intervening and mediating role of online community socialisation between antecedent items and visit intentions. This is conducted in parallel to Study two, which is a twelve-month virtual ethnographic study of World of Warcraft online gamers, which explores the social experiences of online gaming fandom and what factors may lead online gamers to attend esport events in-person. By studying both spectators and players of these respective games, we aim to form a complete picture of best practice when developing a tourism sector built upon online gaming.

## 2. Literature Review

### *2.1 Esports*

Playing games online is not merely a passive leisure activity, as esports (or electronic sports) is now a professional pursuit embedded in a regulated, hierarchal, and competitive global environment (Seo, 2016). It encapsulates many of the defining characteristics of traditional sport with competition, fans, spectators, and rivalries but is distinctive due to its reliance on computer mediated interfaces and the associated differences in physicality (Funk et al., 2018; Hallmann & Giel, 2018; Xue et al., 2019). For many, esport is a substantive hobby as the pursuit to master games requires perseverance, special skills, and knowledge, which would be classified by Stebbins (1982) as serious leisure.

Gamers can make a 'career' out of esport as they can progress, achieve goals, and have lifetime highlights (Stebbins, 1982). However, only a few manage to turn their serious leisure pursuit into a lucrative monetary career. These rare professional players compete in front of large online audiences as illustrated by the 2019 League of Legends world championship attracting 105 million viewership hours across YouTube and Twitch (Newzoo, 2020). However, in 2019 esports generated just $56 million from ticket sales; a small fraction of the $1 billion total revenue from the sector as a whole (Newzoo, 2020) meaning fans are consuming the experience online rather than in-person.

### *2.2 Online Tourism*

Tourism is traditionally dependent upon in-person and offline travel but, increasingly, literature is exploring how online environments intersect with tourism activity (Farmaki et al., 2021; Jiménez-Barreto et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2018; Kromidha, Gannon & Taheri, 2021; Lee & Hyun, 2015; Perez-Vega et al., 2018; Wen & Leung, 2021; Zhang et al., 2017). Immersive

online technologies such as virtual reality can evoke tourists' behavioural intentions (Kim et al., 2018; Wen & Leung, 2021). Indeed, the online experience can build enthusiasm and demand for tourism destinations (Kim et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2017).

Devotion to an online experience has the potential to motivate the consumption of the tourism experience offline, in-person, and with others (Kim et al., 2018; Lee & Hyun, 2015). Thus, the sensory experience in the online domain can establish a bridge between tourism operators and a prospective traveller (Xiang et al., 2008). However, this is yet to be explored in the context of esports where the online experience has no implicit link to tourism-related activity. Therefore, we explore how the online experience of esports may begin to construct fans' perceptions and desire for live gaming events.

### *2.3 Fandom*

Fandom captures the behavioural, attitudinal, and experiential loyalty of supporters and accounts for fans' engagement and attachment to the source of their enthusiasm (Obiegbu et al., 2019). Fandom is characterised by engagement and emotional attachment which is weaved into an individual's sense of identity (Lee et al., 2019; Obiegbu et al., 2019). The theorisation of fandom informs our proposed model, which aims to test the antecedents of intentions to attend live esport events, because, while fans can consume individually and online, fandom is more powerful when it is experienced socially and in-person (Obiegbu et al., 2019; Reichenberger & Smith, 2020). Fandom is a performative act and fans are traditionally participatory characters who will overcome potential barriers due to their emotional obligation to travel, attend, and purchase tickets (Fiske, 1992; Gibson et al., 2003; Obiegbu et al., 2019). The enthusiasm and hype surrounding an event from passionate fans can motivate travel intentions (Rojas-Méndez et al., 2019). For fans, the meaning and value of live events is high as they seek an opportunity to augment their fandom (Kinnunen et al., 2021).

Stars players, team loyalty, flow experience, and self-congruity with event image are all constructs that fandom literature suggest are central to the fan experience (Fiske, 1992; Obiegbu et al., 2019). Indeed, fans are highly motivated to conduct themselves in a way that improves their identification and emotional relationships with the stars central to their fandom, illustrating the role of star players in fandom (Lee et al., 2019). However, even in the absence of stars, the status of a 'real fan' means participating, travelling to events, and unconditional team loyalty (Matsuoka et al., 2013; Obiegbu et al., 2019). For online fandom in particular, flow-like experiences may gratify a fans' need to be fully immersed so they feel a greater connection and relationship with the object of fandom (Shim & Kim, 2018). Fans feel at-home

at an event and with fellow attendees when self-congruence exists (Sirgy et al., 2008) and, thus, strong fans build their identity to distinguish themselves from outsiders and they seek the socialisation of likeminded people that meet their needs for congruity (Fiske, 1992; Lee et al., 2019; Ono et al., 2019; Reichenberger & Smith, 2020).

## 3. Constructs and Hypotheses Development

We develop and assess a model for esport spectators based on the key themes that inform fandom theory (**see Figure 1**). In doing so, we measure the role of the team (the team's star players and spectator's attitudinal loyalty to their team), the game (flow experience), and the event itself (self-congruity with event image) in building esport fandom whereby consumers seek socialisation with fellow fans which fosters their desire to attend physical events.

### *3.1 Star Players*

A star player is an individual with all-star recognition due to their elite performance in their field (Funk & James, 2006) Star players resonate with fans because they are aspirational role models (Funk et al., 2002). In esports these players are famed for their rare technical ability which affords them increasingly prosperous salaries (Newzoo, 2020).

### *3.2 Attitudinal Loyalty to the Team*

Attitudinal loyalty goes beyond short-term committal constructs and captures the distinctive feature of fans' loyalty and resistance to change (Farmaki et al., 2021; Heere & Dickson, 2008). This means teams can maintain the support of their fanbase despite limited success (Heere & Dickson, 2008; Matsuoka et al., 2003). Large esport teams such as Team Liquid, Evil Geniuses, and Fnatic include many of the defining characteristics of sporting teams with uniforms, allegiances, and great rivalries (Funk et al., 2018).

### *3.3 Flow Experience*

Flow is a measurement for the quality of a sport service experience, capturing cognitive absorption in the game, time distortion, and personal enjoyment (Kim & Ko, 2019). A person in a state of flow is completely immersed, experiencing optimal fulfilment that omits all external stimuli and distractions (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008). Spectators in a state of flow may lose track of time and become detached from their surroundings due to their heightened concentration on the game (Chang et al., 2018; Csikszentmihalyi, 2008), i.e., esport spectators become deeply immersed in the online gameplay (Kim & Ko, 2019). These experiences are

generally associated with satisfaction and intention to repeat the activity that induced the state of flow (Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999).

### *3.4 Self-Congruity with Event Image*

Self-congruity is the theoretical idea of behaving consistently with one's view of oneself (Sirgy, 1982) and, thus, self-congruity with event image represents the extent to which attendees perceive the image and personality of themselves to be similar to the image of the event (Shin et al., 2018). Self-congruity explains consumer behaviour by psychological comparison where the purchaser makes decisions based on their level of match (Sirgy et al., 1997). Self-congruity is measured by asking participants to conjure up an image of the event holistically at the moment of response (Shin et al., 2018; Sirgy et al., 1997; Sirgy & Su, 2000).

### *3.5 Online Community Socialisation*

Consistent with fandom, community socialising is a chance for people with similar interests and identities to engage (Qian et al., 2019; Reichenberger & Smith, 2020). Online social experiences offer opportunity for active, participatory, and interactive fan communities to develop (Calder et al., 2009) where information is communicated and friendships are formed (Lee & Hyun, 2015). Indeed, evidence increasingly alludes to the fact that esports is a social experience where social ties can be established and reinforced through communication with players and online streamers who share an appreciation for online gaming (Qian et al., 2019; Trepte et al., 2012). Games stimulate social discourse, which has the potential to transfer to real-world consequences (Jung, 2020).

Fans are seeking out professional esport players on streaming sites where they can socialise and interact with the streamer and the rest of the community while watching high level esports (Qian et al., 2019). The emphasis on socialising and interaction is inherent to gaming as fans wish to have two-way communication with professional gamers who they admire (Sjöblom et al., 2019). Thus, we propose our first hypothesis:

**H1** Esport spectators' perception of Star Players has a positive direct influence on their Online Community Socialisation.

Collins et al. (2016) suggest that displaced fans utilise social media to socialise and reinforce their loyalty to their hometown team. As a result, sport teams are employing online channels to encourage loyal fans to build communities and interact (Scholl & Carlson, 2012). Thus:

**H2** Esport spectators' Attitudinal Loyalty to their Team has a positive direct influence on their Online Community Socialisation.

Sharing the experience with others is an essential feature of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008; Perez-Vega et al., 2018). Interaction, group atmosphere, and quality company are all central to flow-like experiences (Zatori et al., 2018). In fact, Chang et al. (2018) states that spectators who experience a state of flow feel inclined to share their knowledge and tell others. Thus:

**H3** Esport spectators' Flow Experience has a positive direct influence on their Online Community Socialisation.

When there is consistency between a destination and an individual's sense of self, tourists often wish to tell others about the place to further convey the similarity of their self to a particular location (Usakli & Baloglu, 2011). As such, self-congruity can encourage consumers to build a connection with likeminded people who fit with their sense of identity (Mazodier & Merunka, 2012). Thus:

**H4** Esport spectators' Self-Congruity with Event Image has a positive direct influence on their Online Community Socialisation.

### *3.6 Visit Intentions*

Visit intentions refer to tourists' willingness and desire to visit a tourism destination (Matzler et al., 2016; Stokburger-Sauer, 2011). Gaining an understanding for travellers' visit intention is particularly important for tourism practitioners as mindset and aspiration are effective predictors of future travel behaviour (Horng et al., 2012). We can expect positive and negative experiences to change prospective tourists' perception of a place, thus, influencing future intentions to travel (Rojas-Méndez et al., 2019). However, while tourism studies have explored how online news and events influence tourists' intentions to travel and attend events (Rojas-Méndez et al., 2019; Stokburger-Sauer, 2011), never have studies explored how online gaming experiences can drive fans to attend physical events.

Yet, literature has explored how star players of traditional sport can be an important driver of support, enthusiasm, and allegiance from spectators (Funk & James, 2006; Gladden & Funk, 2002; Mahony et al., 2002). Tourism literature has well documented visitors' desire

to attend events in the hope of feeling a greater connection to their idolised celebrities (Lee et al., 2019). Thus:

**H5** Esport spectators' perception of Star Players has a positive direct influence on their Visit Intentions toward esport events.

Cunningham and Kwon (2003) suggest that fans' attitude towards their favourite team strongly influences intention to attend sporting events. Indeed, team identification may be the most critical factor in predicting intention to attend games in the future (Matsuoka et al., 2003). Thus:

**H6** Esport spectators' Attitudinal Loyalty to their Team has a positive direct influence on their Visit Intentions toward esport events.

Experiential flow can also encourage attendance from spectators (Chang et al., 2018), and experiential flow in a tourism context has been shown to positively influence purchase intentions from the source of the flow (Perez-Vega et al., 2018). Thus:

**H7** Esport spectators' Flow Experience has a positive direct influence on their Visit Intentions toward esport events.

It is natural for tourists to seek some consistency over their beliefs and the activities they conduct when travelling (Matzler et al., 2016) and, thus, we would expect esport spectators to attend events that match the image they create for themselves and how they wish to be seen (Bianchi et al., 2017). Indeed, Matzler et al. (2016) and Stokburger-Sauer (2011) suggest that similarity between the self-identity of the individual and a nation brand image has positive implications for travel intentions. Thus:

**H8** Esport spectators' Self-Congruity with Event Image has a positive direct influence on their Visit Intentions toward esport events.

Lee and Hyun (2015) suggest online communities foster trust and friendship which can influence travel intentions. Tourists' travel for social bonding experiences with likeminded people and to share their passion and fandom of sport (McLeay et al., 2019). As a result, sport marketers have emphasised the importance of socialising at sport events so the social lives of

fans become intertwined with their attendance at the associated events (Cunningham & Kwon, 2003). Thus:

**H9** Esport spectators' Online Community Socialisation has a positive direct influence on their Visit Intentions toward esport events.

### *3.7 Mediating Role of Online Community Socialisation*

While fans can consume individually, the power of fandom comes through its collective social consumption (Fiske, 1992; Obiegbu et al., 2019; Reichenberger & Smith, 2020). Similarly, esports represents a coming together of people who have a shared interest in online gaming (Qian et al., 2019). The attraction of esports is that it can offer the chance to build strong social ties, friendships, and participatory collaboration (Jung, 2020; Martončik, 2015; Trepte et al., 2012). Online live chats during streamed esport tournaments provide opportunity to communicate through copypastas and emotes with other spectators, while the streaming of esport games and events provide more interactive community-based experiences between professionals and fans which can augment perceptions of gameplay (Qian et al., 2019; Sjöblom et al., 2019; Xue et al., 2019).

These interactions between likeminded individuals can enhance the sense of belonging, camaraderie, and social acceptance for fandom within online gaming (Qian et al., 2019). Online spaces have always been a source of community and social-interactive engagement (Calder et al., 2009). And, scholars have identified how peer communication and interactions in online communities develops trust and can influence purchase and travel intentions (Lee & Hyun, 2015; Perez-Vega et al., 2018). Indeed, Reichenberger and Smith (2020) argue that fandom by its nature is a social experience. Interactive spaces for individuals to express fan behaviours is more than just an antecedent influence but can also augment and enhance the nature of fandom and its influence on behavioural intentions (Obiegbu et al., 2019)

Therefore, we suggest that online community socialisation brings esport fans together to talk about their interests, experiences, opinions, and team values and this may mediate the relationship toward intentions to attend an esport event. Thus, we propose our final hypotheses:

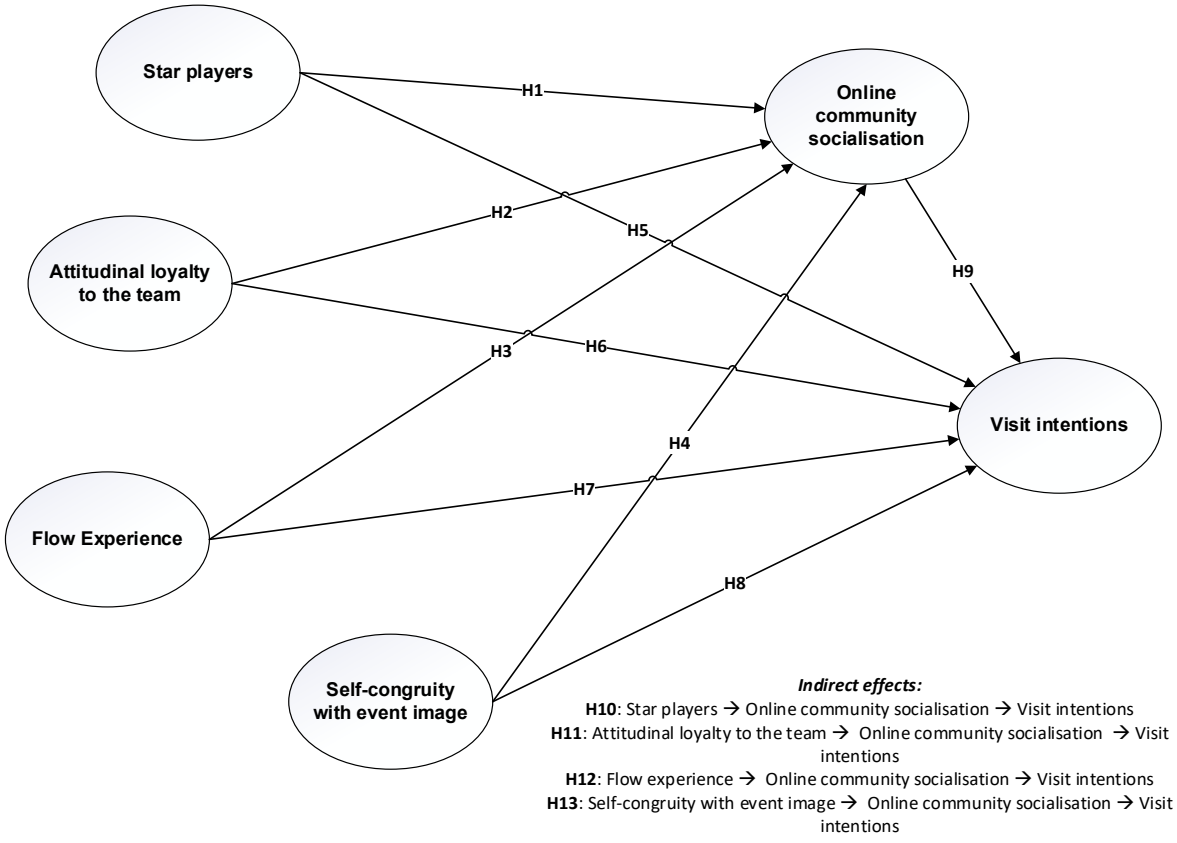
**H10:** Spectators' Online Community Socialisation mediates the relationship between perceptions of Star Players and Visit Intentions.

**H11:** Spectators' Online Community Socialisation mediates the relationship between Attitudinal Loyalty to their Team and Visit Intentions.

**H12:** Spectators' Online Community Socialisation mediates the relationship between Flow Experience and Visit Intentions.

**H13:** Spectators' Online Community Socialisation mediates the relationship between Self-Congruity with Event Image and Visit Intentions.

**Figure 1** displays the proposed hypotheses in our conceptual framework which underpins our quantitative study.




### *3.8 Esport Culture*

National culture explains how tourists from different countries behave heterogeneously, having implications for international travel intentions and habits (Woodside et al., 2011). Research generally views European countries as distinct national cultures (Minkov & Hofstede, 2014). However, within esport contexts Europe is clustered together as players compete and play together almost exclusively with other Europeans on Europe servers (Helgeson, 2018). The rivalry of 'EU vs NA' is the longest-lasting rivalry in esports and the hostility between the two regions 'pits millions of fans from either side of the pond against one-another' (Helgeson, 2018, para. 1). Though the USA and Western Europe are culturally similar (Hofstede, 1983), Rita et

al. (2019) find travelling for event attendance may be of greater interest to US millennials. Yet, Parry et al. (2014) suggest the regularity of sport consumption and the frequency of fan related behaviour may be higher in Western Europe than in North America. As a result, there may be significant differences between the US and European esport spectators and thus, we propose a multigroup analysis to evaluate the differences between US and European esport spectators.

## 4. Methodology

Data were collected from spectators and players of esports. We employed a mixed-methods approach by combining quantitative surveys of online spectators with a twelve-month virtual ethnography of esport players (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Following Dayour et al. (2019) and Gannon, Taheri and Olya (2019), we adopt a non-sequential research design, employing qualitative and quantitative approaches in parallel in order to most effectively achieve the proposed research outcome. Therefore, the paper is split into two sub-studies which attempts to offer an overall understanding of "what works" (Ying et al., 2021). Embracing a pragmatic epistemological position, we question the social mechanisms that attract esport players and spectators to attend physical events (Gross, 2009). Such a project necessitates a multi-methodological approach (Gross, 2009) so that we can understand the complexities of attendance intentions amongst those who consume different esports games (i.e., League of Legends and World of Warcraft) whilst building a more comprehensive understanding for how to develop an esport tourism sector.

Esport spectators view matches and tournaments as a collective group, and though the experience may differ, for the most part, each viewer consumes the same live online content simultaneously (Qian et al., 2019). In contrast, playing esports is consumed with greater autonomy and, while it can be social, it is an opportunity for players to construct and perform their own identity (Seo, 2016). Therefore, we justify a quantitative instrument using existing constructs/items to test the antecedents influencing the collective group of spectators but a qualitative ethnographic tool to understand and explore the long-term and individualised gameplay experiences of players which may influence their intentions to attend physical events. The quantitative sub-study of spectators precedes a qualitative sub-study of players.

## 5. Study 1: Quantitative Phase

### *5.1 Study Context*

League of Legends (LoL) is an esport game launched by Riot Games in 2009 (Xue et al., 2019). It is a multiplayer online battle arena where teams of five choose their individual champions

and compete against one another to destroy the other team's base (Mora-Cantallops & Sicilia, 2018). The 2019 World Championship was esport's biggest tournament with 105.5 million viewership hours across YouTube and Twitch (Newzoo, 2020). Fans could attend the world championship in-person across venues in Paris, Berlin, and Madrid where large, seated crowds surround the players and large gameplay screens.

### *5.2 Data Collection*

Data were collected using an online survey, which was distributed via LoL subreddit forums toward the end of the 2020 LoL Summer Split competition in July. Posts were made on the forums by the lead researcher at varying intervals during the day in order to capture the widest possible audience of spectators. The forum posts gave information about the aim of the study and contact details if informants wished to find out more about the survey. Following non-probability judgmental sampling, informants comprised of spectators who watched the LEC (LoL European Championship) and LCS (LoL North America Championship Series). The instructions requested "if you are a spectator of LEC/LCS, could you please complete the following 5-10 minute survey." An extra attention filter was added to the survey in order to ensure higher valid responses from the sample (Schoenherr et al., 2015).

In total, 764 participants started the survey with 549 participants successfully completing it. **Table 1** shows the demographic characteristics of the sample. Following power analysis procedure, G*Power was employed to assess minimum required sample size (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2019). The findings indicate that the necessary sample size to produce a power of 0.95 for our model was 138. Though the data is skewed toward spectators who are male (91.1%) and those aged 16-25 (77.2%), these demographics are consistent with the young and male dominant nature of the esport sector (Xue et al., 2019). Participants took approximately 10 minutes to finish the survey.

**Table 1.** Quantitative Participant Demographics

| Characteristics | Frequency (N) | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Gender | | |
| Male | 500 | 91.1 |
| Female | 37 | 6.7 |
| Other | 7 | 1.3 |
| Prefer not to say | 5 | 0.9 |
| Age (years) | | |
| 16-25 | 424 | 77.2 |
| 26-35 | 113 | 20.6 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 36+ | 11 | 2.0 |
| Prefer not to say | 1 | 0.2 |
| Income ($) | | |
| 0-20,000 | 284 | 51.7 |
| 20,001 – 40,000 | 77 | 14.0 |
| 40,001 – 60,000 | 55 | 10.0 |
| 60,000+ | 48 | 8.7 |
| Prefer not to say | 85 | 15.5 |
| LoL Region | | |
| LEC (Europe) | 354 | 64.5 |
| LCS (North America) | 195 | 35.5 |

### *5.3 Measurement*

All constructs were borrowed from extant literature. We measured Star Players using a three-item scale from Gladden and Funk (2002), Attitudinal Loyalty to the Team (four-item) from Heere and Dickson (2008), Self-Congruity with Event Image (five-item) from Shin et al. (2018), and Flow (eight-item) from Kim and Ko (2019). Online Community Socialisation (five-item) was borrowed from Qian et al. (2019) and, finally, Visit Intentions (three-item) was measured with a scale from Matzler et al. (2016). All items within their respective constructs were evaluated by a 7-item Likert scale (1 = Strongly Agree, 7 = Strongly Disagree), with a neutral midpoint (4 = Neutral) judged appropriate to the prospective participant sample (Weijters et al., 2010).

## 6. Quantitative Results and Key Findings

### *6.1 Common Method Variance*

We tested for Common Method Variance (CMV) due to the data being collected through a self-reported survey. Harman one factor assessment approach was used on all measurement scales (Podsakoff et al. 2003). The eigenvalue unrotated principal component analysis (with a principal components' extraction) acknowledged 7 distinctive factors ($F_1 = 9.365$; $F_2 = 3.315$; $F_3 = 2.849$; $F_4 = 2.471$; $F_5 = 2.115$; $F_6 = 1.212$; $F_7 = 1.029$) with an eigenvalue above 1, which account for 77.087% of the variance. The largest percentage of variance described by a single factor was 32.294%. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) was 0.890 (>0.5) and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant at 0.000 (below $p < 0.05$). In addition, the unmeasured method factor was employed to calculate the average variance for construct indicators and method factor (Coelho et al., 2021). The findings showed that the average variance linked to indicators/items for the scales was 58%, whilst the average method-based variance was 1.2%, producing a ratio of 48:1. Consequently, CMV was not an issue for our study.

### *6.2 Analytical approach*

Our conceptual framework was tested using PLS-SEM (Hair et al., 2017). It can be used for both non-normal and normal distribution. The suitable Kurtosis and Skewness values are between -3 and +3 (Hair et al., 2017; Taheri et al., 2021). Tests of Kurtosis and Skewness results demonstrate the violation of the assumption of normality (see **Table 2**). SmartPLS 3.24 software was employed to evaluate both measurement and structural models (5,000 subsamples) (Hair et al., 2017).

**Table 2.** Assessment of the Measurement Model

| Construct/underlying items | *t*-value* | Standard loading | Mean | SD | Skewness | Kurtosis |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ***Star players*** (CR=0.81; $\rho$A=0.80; α=0.80; AVE=0.53) | | | | | | |
| My favourite team does not have any star players that I like to watch | 13.03 | 0.67 | 2.13 | 1.67 | 1.54 | 1.39 |
| I like to watch my favourite team's star players | 2317 | 0.71 | 2.36 | 1.57 | 1.22 | 0.88 |
| My favourite team has star players that I like to watch | 9.77 | 0.73 | 2.25 | 1.60 | 1.39 | 1.18 |
| ***Attitudinal Loyalty to the Team*** (CR=0.81; $\rho$A=0.80; α=0.77; AVE=0.55) | | | | | | |
| I would still be committed to [team] regardless of the lack of any star players | 7.29 | 0.67 | 2.98 | 1.97 | 0.72 | -0.74 |
| I could never switch my loyalty from [team] even if my close friends were fans of another team | 6.72 | 0.73 | 3.17 | 2.15 | 0.54 | -1.14 |
| I would still be committed to [team] regardless of the lack of physical skill among the players | 8.91 | 0.77 | 3.34 | 2.10 | 0.47 | -3.17 |
| It would be difficult to change my beliefs about [team] | 11.72 | 0.81 | 3.40 | 1.98 | 0.42 | -1.05 |
| ***Flow Experience*** *(last time I watched the [LEC/LCS] I felt...)* (CR=0.82; $\rho$A=0.81; α=0.81; AVE=0.62) | | | | | | |
| I was totally focused on the game | 9.29 | 0.72 | 2.53 | 1.43 | 1.08 | 0.79 |
| I was deeply engrossed in the game | 11.04 | 0.77 | 2.71 | 1.59 | 0.89 | 0.07 |
| I was absorbed intensely | 17.03 | 0.71 | 2.82 | 1.62 | 0.78 | -0.11 |
| It felt like time flew | 12.76 | 0.68 | 2.74 | 1.59 | 0.66 | -0.45 |
| Time seemed to go by very quickly | 14.71 | 0.73 | 2.76 | 1.58 | 0.67 | -0.41 |
| It was enjoyable | 10.09 | 0.72 | 1.79 | 1.12 | 2.08 | 5.37 |
| It was exciting | 11.32 | 0.69 | 1.90 | 1.28 | 1.94 | 4.08 |
| It was fun | 20.38 | 0.73 | 1.85 | 1.19 | 2.00 | 4.75 |
| ***Self-Congruity with Event Image*** (CR=0.80; $\rho$A=0.81; α = 0.83; AVE=0.64) | | | | | | |
| My self-image fits the image of the [LEC/LCS] well | 11.03 | 0.77 | 3.34 | 1.59 | 0.45 | -0.37 |
| I feel like I am a part of the [LEC/LCS] | 9.47 | 0.71 | 3.80 | 1.80 | 0.22 | -0.95 |
| Spectating the [LEC/LCS] reflects who I am | 9.11 | 0.75 | 3.75 | 1.77 | 0.27 | -0.84 |
| The image of the [LEC/LCS] represents my self-image well | 17.86 | 0.75 | 3.77 | 1.69 | 0.30 | -0.62 |
| My self-image and the image of the event are similar | 12.76 | 0.70 | 3.83 | 1.68 | 0.24 | -0.69 |
| ***Online Community Socialisation*** (CR=0.83; $\rho$A=0.80; α=0.77; AVE=0.61) | | | | | | |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| I enjoy interacting with other fans online when watching League of Legends | 12.76 | 0.65 | 3.84 | 2.03 | 0.17 | -1.22 |
| It provides an online social outlet when watching League of Legends | 13.54 | 0.73 | 3.43 | 1.93 | 0.49 | -0.87 |
| I can connect with other esports fans and be part of the online community | 15.29 | 0.81 | 3.48 | 1.94 | 0.38 | -0.96 |
| I enjoy interacting with streamers online and getting to know them | 12.76 | 0.83 | 4.01 | 2.05 | 0.02 | -1.25 |
| I can interact with other spectators online and get a sense of camaraderie | 10.32 | 0.80 | 3.87 | 2.00 | 0.12 | -3.22 |
| ***Visit Intentions*** | | | | | | |
| (CR=0.81;$\rho$A=0.81;α=0.80;AVE=0.68) | | | | | | |
| I can imagine spending my holiday attending an E-sport event | 10.47 | 0.76 | 2.66 | 1.99 | 1.11 | -0.04 |
| I already thought about spending my holiday attending an E-sport event | 9.38 | 0.73 | 3.18 | 2.20 | 0.62 | -1.05 |
| I intend to attend an E-sport event in the near future | 16.86 | 0.79 | 3.85 | 2.18 | 0.15 | -1.35 |

*Note:* AVE=average variance extracted; *3.29 ($p$<0.001).

### *6.3 Measurement Model*

Hair et al.'s (2017) approach was used for reliability, convergent, and discriminant validity assessment (see **Tables 2** and **3**) prior to calculating the structural model. From **Table 2**, Cronbach's Alpha (α), Composite Reliability (CR) and Dijkstra-Henseler's rho ($\rho$A) values were above the proposed cut-off of 0.70. All items indicated the greatest loadings on measurement scales, and the factor loadings were >0.60. The average variances extracted (AVE) for all constructs were >0.50. Discriminant validity was established employing two different assessments. (1) Following Fornell and Larcker's (1981) procedure, **Table 3** shows the square root of the AVE for all measurement scales was larger than other constructs cross correlations and below the 0.70 cut-off. (2) Discriminant validity tactic employing heterotrait–monotrait (HTMT) ration of correlations was adapted (Henseler et al., 2015). Discriminant validity was determined as all $HTMT_{0.85}$ criterion findings (varying between 0.42 and 0.61) were lower than the recommended value of 0.85. Hence, there is no issue with discriminant validity in this study.

**Table 3.** Correlation matrix.

| | SP | ALT | FE | SCI | OCS | VI |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Star players (SP) | **0.72** | | | | | |
| Attitudinal loyalty to the team (ALT) | 0.36 | **0.74** | | | | |
| Flow experience (FE) | 0.42 | 0.37 | **0.78** | | | |
| Self-congruity with event image (SCI) | 0.31 | 0.45 | 0.21 | **0.80** | | |
| Online Community Socialisation (OCS) | 0.22 | 0.19 | 0.47 | 0.15 | **0.78** | |
| Visit intentions (VI) | 0.27 | 0.33 | 0.32 | 0.42 | 0.23 | **0.82** |

Square root of AVE (diagonal).

### *6.4 Structural Model and hypothesis testing*

Before assessing the direct paths, several initial fit measures were calculated. Standardised Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) "measures the difference between the observed correlation matrix and the model-implied correlation matrix. Put another way, the SRMR reflects the average magnitude of such differences, with lower SRMR being better fit" (Garson, 2016, p.68). The SRMR value was 0.063 for our model; lower than the recommended value of 0.08 (Hair et al., 2017; Taheri et al., 2020). The PLS-SEM blindfolding technique using cross-validated redundancy procedure indicated that all predictive relevance $Q^2$ values surpassed 0. $Q^2$ values were: online community socialisation (0.176) and visit intentions (0.189). Following Khalilzadeh and Tasci (2017) recommendation, Cohen's effect sizes ($f^2$) indicate different value for large (0.14), medium (0.06) and small (0.01) effects for structural equation modelling method. Results indicate that the $f^2$ (ranging 0.072-0.181) for the significant relationships surpassed the suggested medium effective size value for all direct relationships. Finally, the Normal Fit Index (NFI) (which calculates and compares the $Chi^2$ value of the conceptual model against a meaningful benchmark value) of 0.93 was satisfactory for our model (NFI>0.90) (Hair et al., 2017). The model explained online community socialisation (38.33%) and visit intentions (53.28%).

Per **Table 4**, star players (H1: $\beta = 0.43$, $p<0.001$), attitudinal loyalty to the team (H2: $\beta = 0.48$, $p<0.001$), flow experience (H3: $\beta = 0.48$, $p<0.001$), and self-congruity with event image (H4: $\beta = 0.49$, $p<0.001$) had a significant direct relationship with online community socialisation. Star players (H5: $\beta = 0.54$, $p<0.001$), attitudinal loyalty to the team (H6: $\beta = 0.47$, $p<0.001$), flow experience (H7: $\beta = 0.39$, $p<0.001$), self-congruity with event image (H8: $\beta = 0.48$, $p<0.001$), and online community socialisation (H9: $\beta = 0.52$, $p<0.001$) had a significant direct relationship to visit intentions.

**Table 4.** Findings for the direct paths

| Hypotheses | Path coefficient | *t*-value* | $f^2$ | Supported? |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| H1: Star players → Online community socialisation | 0.43 | 10.23 | 0.09 | Yes |
| H2: Attitudinal loyalty to the team → Online community socialisation | 0.48 | 11.11 | 0.10 | Yes |
| H3: Flow experience → Online community socialisation | 0.48 | 14.32 | 0.11 | Yes |
| H4: Self-congruity with event image → Online community socialisation | 0.49 | 9.71 | 0.14 | Yes |
| H5: Star players → Visit intentions | 0.54 | 17.76 | 0.09 | Yes |
| H6: Attitudinal loyalty to the team → Visit intentions | 0.47 | 21.76 | 0.16 | Yes |
| H7: Flow experience → Visit intentions | 0.39 | 16.29 | 0.23 | Yes |
| H8: Self-congruity with event image → Visit intentions | 0.48 | 18.1 | 0.27 | Yes |
| H9: Online community socialisation → Visit intentions | 0.52 | 21.70 | 0.18 | Yes |

*Note:* *$t > 3.29$ ($p<0.001$).

### *6.5 Analysis of indirect effects*

Williams and MacKinnon's (2008) approach was used to examine the significance of the indirect paths (*t*-values and the 95% confidence interval (CI)). The results demonstrated that star players indirectly impact visit intentions through online community socialisation (**Table 5**). As the direct path was significant, the findings indicate that online community socialisation mediates the influence of star players on visit intentions. Additionally, attitudinal loyalty to the team indirectly influences visit intentions through online community socialisation (**Table 5**). As the direct path was significant, the findings revealed that online community socialisation mediates the impact of attitudinal loyalty to the team on visit intentions. The findings also demonstrated that flow experience indirectly impact visit intentions through online community socialisation (**Table 5**). As the direct path was significant, the findings indicate that online community socialisation mediates the impact of flow experience on visit intentions. Finally, self-congruity with event image indirectly influences visit intentions through online community socialisation (**Table 5**). Since the direct path was significant, the findings revealed that online community socialisation mediates the influence of self-congruity with event image on visit intentions.

**Table 5.** Assessment of indirect paths

| Indirect hypotheses | Indirect path coefficient | *t*-value* | Low CI | High CI |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| H10 | 0.22 | 8.13 | 0.20 | 0.31 |
| H11 | 0.24 | 7.22 | 0.21 | 0.44 |
| H12 | 0.24 | 10.18 | 0.17 | 0.27 |
| H13 | 0.26 | 9.07 | 0.20 | 0.40 |

*Two-tailed $t > 3.29$ at $p < 0.001$; CI: Confidence Interval (95%).

### *6.6 Post-hoc Multi-group analysis*

Multi-group analysis approach (MGA), using Measurement Invariance of Composite Models (MICOM), was used to evaluate the differences between LEC and LCS groups (Henseler et al., 2009). Hult et al. (2008, p.1028) highlight the importance MICOM that "failure to establish data equivalence is a potential source of measurement error (i.e., discrepancies of what is intended to be measured and what is actually measured), which accentuates the precision of estimators, reduces the power of statistical test of hypotheses, and provides misleading results." MICOM involves 3 different steps (1) Configural invariance, (2) Compositional invariance, and (3) Scalar invariance (Henseler et al., 2015; Taheri et al., 2020). The results showed that the distinctions between the factorial loads of both LEC and LCS groups were not significant

(Welch-Statterthwaite and permutation tests $p$ >0.05). **Table 6** indicates the compositional and scalar invariance ensuring PLS-SEM full measurement invariance. Moreover, Henseler et al.'s (2009) tactics employed $p$-value to assess the differences between LEC and LCS groups. **Table 7** indicates statistically significant differences between LEC and LCS cultural group participants for all relationships.

**Table 6.** Results of invariance testing.

| Construct | c-Value (0=1) | 95% CI | Permutation $p$-value | Compositional invariance? |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| SP | 0.999 | [0.989;1.000] | 0.986 | Yes |
| ALT | 0.972 | [0.965,1.000] | 0.695 | Yes |
| FE | 0.999 | [0.998,1.000] | 0.554 | Yes |
| SCI | 0.991 | [0.990,1.000] | 0.629 | Yes |
| OCS | 0.999 | [0.999,1.000] | 0.107 | Yes |
| VI | 0.943 | [0.920,1.000] | 0.391 | Yes |
| Construct | Variance difference | 95% CI | Permutation $p$-value | Equal variance? |
| SP | 0.311 | [-0.288,0.342] | 0.123 | Yes |
| ALT | 0.237 | [-0.321, 0.399] | 0.401 | Yes |
| FE | 0.329 | [-0.270, 0.376] | 0.181 | Yes |
| SCI | 0.161 | [-0.207, 0.220] | 0.357 | Yes |
| OCS | 0.342 | [-0.223, 0.421] | 0.211 | Yes |
| VI | 0.322 | [-0.235, 0.435] | 0.311 | Yes |
| Construct | Mean difference | 95% CI | Permutation $p$-value | Equal mean value? |
| SP | -0.321 | [-0.122, 0.125] | 0.170 | Yes |
| ALT | -0.190 | [-0.134, 0.123] | 0.211 | Yes |
| FE | -0.171 | [-0.119, 0.124] | 0.323 | Yes |
| SCI | -0.023 | [-0.125, 0.127] | 0.368 | Yes |
| OCS | -0.211 | [-0.131, 0.177] | 0.150 | Yes |
| VI | -0.268 | [-0.131, 0.133] | 0.471 | Yes |

*Note:* CI = Confidence Interval. Star players (SP); Attitudinal loyalty to the team (ALT); Flow experience (FE); Self-congruity with event image (SCI); Online community socialisation (OCS); Visit intentions (VI).

**Table 7.** MGA results

| Relationships | LEC* | LCS* | $\beta$ differences | Henseler's MGA $p$-value test | Permutation $p$-value test | Result |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Star players → Online community socialisation | 0.41 | 0.23 | 0.18 | 0.02 | 0.00 | LEC>LCS |
| Attitudinal loyalty to the team → Online community socialisation | 0.52 | 0.27 | 0.25 | 0.01 | 0.01 | LEC>LCS |
| Flow experience → Online community socialisation | 0.44 | 0.21 | 0.23 | 0.00 | 0.00 | LEC>LCS |
| Self-congruity with event image → Online community socialisation | 0.40 | 0.23 | 0.17 | 0.01 | 0.01 | LEC>LCS |
| Star players → Visit intentions | 0.52 | 0.31 | 0.21 | 0.02 | 0.00 | LEC>LCS |
| Attitudinal loyalty to the team → Visit intentions | 0.43 | 0.17 | 0.26 | 0.00 | 0.01 | LEC>LCS |
| Flow experience → Visit intentions | 0.36 | 0.21 | 0.15 | 0.02 | 0.01 | LEC>LCS |
| Self-congruity with event image → Visit intentions | 0.42 | 0.18 | 0.24 | 0.02 | 0.02 | LEC>LCS |
| Online community socialisation → Visit intentions | 0.43 | 0.19 | 0.24 | 0.00 | 0.00 | LEC>LCS |
| Star players → Online community socialisation → Visit intentions | 0.44 | 0.18 | 0.26 | 0.01 | 0.01 | LEC>LCS |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Attitudinal loyalty to the team → Online community socialisation → Visit intentions | 0.37 | 0.17 | 0.20 | 0.00 | 0.00 | LEC>LCS |
| Flow experience → Online community socialisation → Visit intentions | 0.43 | 0.23 | 0.20 | 0.02 | 0.00 | LEC>LCS |
| Self-congruity with event image → Online community socialisation → Visit intentions | 0.41 | 0.25 | 0.16 | 0.01 | 0.00 | LEC>LCS |

*Note:* *$p$<0.001.

## 7. Study 2: Qualitative Phase

### *7.1 Study Context*

World of Warcraft (WoW) is a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) which was released by Blizzard Entertainment in 2004 (Rapp, 2017). Players can login and instantly be immersed in a world with the freedom to pursue quests, combat, or social activities with other interacting and social players (Rapp, 2017). All players make decisions on their character's 'race' and 'class' which have associated skills and abilities that can be employed collaboratively with other characters in order to complete missions such as dungeon raids (Rapp, 2017).

The competitive scene of WoW has over 350 professional esport players competing for prize pools of over $3 million (Jang & Byon, 2020), which culminates in the Arena World Championships (AWC) at Blizzcon. It should be noted that many practitioners consider much of WoW gameplay to lack the professionalised or competitive structure to be classified as esport (Newzoo, 2020). Indeed, Blizzcon as an event consists of more than just the AWC finals, as it offers a broad range of product launches, social opportunities, activities, and parties. However, despite the comparative lack of a player versus player (PvP) competitive scene compared to LoL, Dota, and other such games, player versus environment (PvE) professionals attract significant attention from sponsors and fans alike (Prax, 2018). Thus, for the purpose of this study, WoW is considered within the online gaming and esport sector (Jang & Byon, 2020).

### *7.2 Data Collection*

Data are collected for esport players using a virtual ethnographic method. A virtual ethnography is born out of a netnographic-style of data collection where the researcher visits internet sites and communities to interact with and observe other users to understand online social life (Hines, 2008). However, our virtual ethnography collects data from WoW's fictional world (Azeroth) by chatting, walking, questing, and exploring with other players. Therefore, data does not preclude the analysis of the environment as the gameplay fictional world serves

as a substitute to real-life physical environments in an ethnography (Rapp, 2017). Thus, we adhere to a traditional ethnographic design with a reflective researcher immersed in the environmental context over twelve months, interpreting and experiencing social interactions alongside the participants (Wilson & Holinshead, 2015). This longitudinal data allowed trust to build between participants and the researcher, leading to richer and more informed data. Long-term observation is consolidated with informal chats and formal interviews with 13 players (Wilson & Holinshead, 2015).

The lead qualitative researcher had played WoW for 14 years prior to data collection so had experience with the gameplay and had connections to player guilds where rich data could be accessed. Guilds are player associations within the game that usually have shared goals, making organising raids and seeking assistance easier (Rapp, 2017). This allowed the researcher access to group quests/raids/activities including casual engagements and day-to-day questing. To further enhance our data, 13 players participated in a formal interview and their data is displayed in **Table 8**. These participants were sampled using convenience sampling as all were fellow guild members.

**Table 8.** Qualitative Participant Information

| ID | Role | Main Class | Attendance at Physical Events | Age | Years Played | Hours per Week |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Player 1 | Led the guild to Realm First successes across two expansions as guild leader/raid leader | Mage (DPS) | Gamescom, self-organised social events | 36 | 10+ | 10 to 15 |
| Player 2 | An essential member to the success of the guild that became first officer for Tanks and Loot Council coordinator | Warrior (Tank) | Self-organised social events | 51 | 10+ | 15 to 30 |
| Player 3 | Player dedicated to the guild's success and class/spec leader | Priest (Healing) | Gamescom, self-organised social events | 29 | 10+ | 15 to 30 |
| Player 4 | Leads the DPS caster group of the guild | Warlock (DPS) | Gamescom, self-organised social events | 33 | 10+ | 5 to 10 |
| Player 5 | Main tank role for the guild | Death Knight (Tank) | Gamescom | 31 | 5 to 10 | 15 to 30 |
| Player 6 | Created iconic "Boss Kill" videos for the guild. Responsible for web presence and content creation | Rogue (DPS) | None | 24 | 5 to 10 | 1 to 5 |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Player 7 | Had been running/playing Mythic+ Dungeons together with the researcher | Priest (DPS) | Gamescom | 21 | < 5 | 15 to 30 |
| Player 8 | One of the most enthusiastic role players of the guild and organiser of in-game events | Druid (Healing) | None | 19 | < 5 | 30 to 50 |
| Player 9 | Casually quested together with the researcher while levelling Alts (additional characters) | Hunter (DPS) | None | 24 | < 5 | 30 to 50 |
| Player 10 | Playing PvP Battlegrounds and Arena matches together with researcher following a "looking for group" message in the general chat | Monk (Tank) | Gamescom | 32 | <5 | 15 to 30 |
| Player 11 | Met the researcher during a 5-player dungeon group who were "farming" gear for an upcoming raid | Shaman (Healing) | Gamescom, self-organised social events | 26 | 5 to 10 | 1 to 5 |
| Player 12 | Met this player after fighting off players from the opposing faction who were trying to take hold of the fishing spots we were farming | Druid (Tank) | None | 21 | <5 | 15 to 30 |
| Player 13 | Started chatting with the researcher during a "Looking for Raid" group run | Hunter (DPS) | Gamescom, self-organised social events | 41 | 10+ | 5 to 10 |

Our pragmatic epistemological lens informed the questions asked to participants as we sought to answer the question of 'what works' when attracting players to physical esport events (Gross, 2009; Ying et al., 2021). While playing the game, players would be asked how their gameplay experiences had influenced their intentions to attend any live events. Often these questions would lead to internal group discussion amongst the players and field notes were made detailing the context for such discussions. Screenshots were also taken of the data collection within those in-game settings to add an additional layer of qualitative evidence. During the formal interviews, participants were initially asked what in-game experiences influenced their feelings about attending physical events. Sequential probing sought to expand further on these answers and seek deeper understanding for the meanings players had built for physical gaming experiences. Interviews were initially recorded on in-game chat logs before being transcribed upon completion of the interview.

All participants contributing to formal interviews were informed about the intentions of the research and consented to be a part of the study. However, given the 'massively

multiplayer' nature of WoW other players were always free to intercept, interact, and contribute to in-game conversations and drive discussion with their own agenda. Therefore, a virtual ethnography means it is not always possible to receive consent from all those that contribute to the research (Hines, 2008). Yet, the virtual ethnography does allow for two-tier confidentiality as players use anonymous usernames so their real names and personal details are unknown to the researcher unless requested in a formal interview. Ethnographic participants are then further anonymised by removing the username from any data.

### *7.3 Data Analysis*

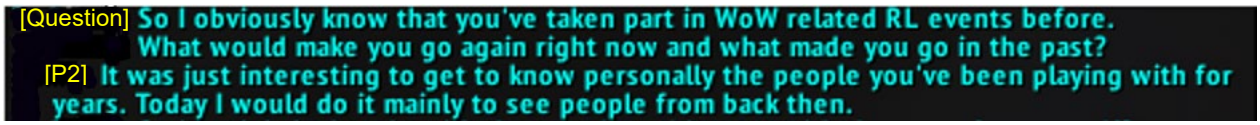
Field notes and transcribed chat logs were analysed using abductive thematic analysis (Thompson & Taheri, 2020). Guided by a pragmatic epistemology, we analysed data with a focus on the ability for the narratives to answer our research question on fans and esport event attendance (Gross, 2009). Three rounds of coding were conducted with the primary round noting all elements of importance to answering the question while second and third rounds were more selective and dismissed codes which upon further review were deemed inconsequential to the overall narrative (Braun & Clark, 2006). Related codes which collectively told the story of the data were considered themes. To ensure credibility, these steps were undertaken independently by members of the research team before being scrutinised collectively with a focus on discovering inconsistencies on thematic interpretation. We consistently found that four themes found were prominent within the data, which are discussed further below: Friendship, Sense of Belonging, Idolisation, Geographical Proximity.

#### *7.3.1 Friendship*

When asked about their feelings for attending physical esport events, WoW players indicated that friendship was a significant driver of intentions to attend. During formal interviews with players, guild members outlined how gameplay activities had fostered long-term friendships and that an esport event could facilitate an enjoyable face-to-face meeting amongst members:

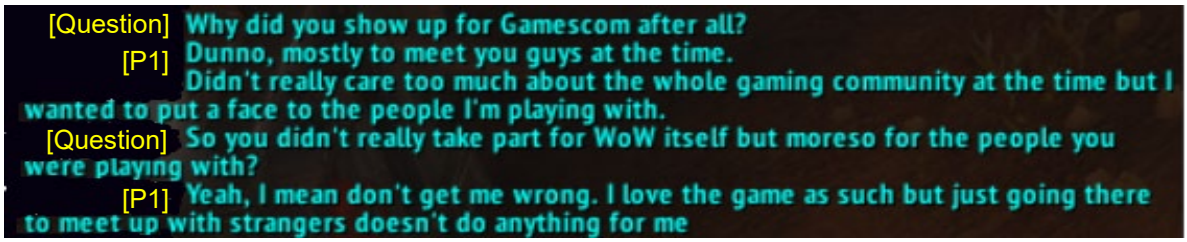
> I have some close friends which I see regularly [in-person] and we got to know each other through WoW ... The game was definitely the main reason we met. Since it was a raiding guild, we have to cooperate with strangers at first but after some time you get to know other people and some of them become friends, others are just acquaintances.
> *Player 4.*

**Figure 2.** Chatlog with Player 2 [IN COLOUR]




Trepte et al. (2012) outlines how online gaming can build strong social ties which are further strengthened with offline social relationships. This idea of transcending online friendships through event attendance was important for WoW players in our study. For example, while running weekly mythic dungeons Player 1 elaborated how his participation at live events was linked to a desire to put a face to the friends they had met online:

**Figure 3.** Chatlog with Player 1 [IN COLOUR]




Oswald and Ernst (2021) outline how friends can be a driver of travel intentions as tourists seek to maintain their global social connections. Indeed, literature has noted how friendships in online communities can have a significant influence over tourists' travel intentions (Lee & Hyun, 2015). Likewise, this theme shows how friendships in online gaming environments can influence intentions to travel for events, particularly due to the desire to transform and strengthen virtual friendships into real-life and physical ones.

### *7.3.2 Sense of Belonging*

During the virtual ethnography players discussed how they felt a live event could bring a sense of belonging. Participants outlined how the structure of WoW created a strong community with extensive opportunities to socialise which could carry into real-life interactions. This belief was held particularly strong amongst participants who partook in top-tier raiding which requires an organised and well-coordinated group of at least 20 players:

Field Notes: While conducting daily quests with four other players from the guild (see **Figure 4**) discussion arose around attending esport events. The players discussed how the main reason they would take part in such events was to build on the existing relationships they had nurtured over hundreds of hours with other guild members without ever having met in person. One player added that he believed that physical events are "just a great place to meet like-minded people".

**Figure 4.** Daily questing [IN COLOUR]


Field Notes: While raiding with 19 players the conversation moved to WoW Classic (which is the redeployed 2004 instalment of WoW, that allows players to relive the original experiences once more). Reflecting on the changes over the years, several raid members shared that the original game environment strongly encouraged and rewarded socialising and working as a team. This subsequently led to the formation of player groups and guilds which for many translated to an offline setting. The group discussed how the socialising aspect of an esport live event was a nice outcome as they felt they shared the same interests for the content at the event which created a sense of belonging and comfort.

Jung (2020) has noted previously how online gaming can bring about strong community attitudes. Indeed, Martončik (2015) suggests that esports can satisfy players' need to belong. During informal discussions with players following activities like questing or raiding, they discussed and elaborated how they felt this sense of belonging would extend to live events as the common ground of gaming would make it easy for them to socialise with other likeminded people. This was even more pronounced amongst interviewed players who are members of the same raid group as shown in the following quote:

> Having built those relationships with players in my guild, it definitely made me want to attend the events they decided to show up at as well. Showing up as a group at events like Gamescom was amazing, especially in the early days of the game you felt pretty special having t-shirts with your guild banner and in-game name on display. I remember chatting to complete strangers about our boss tactics, my specialisation, and WoW in general.
> *Player 3.*

This theme echoes Lee et al. (2019) who suggest tourists' behaviour is influenced by their sense of belonging to the community they identify with. The combination of an online and offline community can strengthen the sense of belonging among participants (McLeay et al., 2019). Indeed, establishing a sense of belonging or 'fit' within the online community appeared to increase discussion about attending events amongst participants. This feeling was even stronger when members of the same community or guild organised attending the same event to meet-up offline.

#### *7.3.3 Idolisation*

Players held well-known WoW stakeholders in high regard and desired events where there was a chance to interact and engage with these stars:

> Field Notes: While running five-player Heroic dungeons (see **Figure 5**) with guild members, in-between encounters players were asked for their thoughts on offline events and the content they would enjoy experiencing. Two players emphasised that getting to discuss the game with star players like Sco, Kungen, or Rogerbrown would draw them to

> live esport events. Similarly, the whole group agreed that playing with and learning from the world's best players would be an amazing and worthwhile experience.

**Figure 5.** Playing dungeons as a group of five [IN COLOUR]


Furthermore, participants indicated that meeting star players has been a positive and memorable experience that would bring them back to live esports events. Some emphasised that Blizzard could do more to utilise the WoW star player portfolio to increase the attractiveness of physical events:

> I have always been a big fan of Sco, I met him at Gamescom once and he was so approachable. Playing with those guys would be amazing and I would definitely want to be part of that.
> *Player 2*

To date, literature on stars has generally focussed on players or performance artists (Gladden & Funt, 2002; Mahony et al., 2002). However, participants in our study also discussed game developers as the 'stars' of WoW and there was particular interest in meeting these people at events. According to our participants, this stems from the strong followership which these game developers have built over decades of engaging with the community and building the experiences players love:

> It would be an absolute honour to meet Metzen [in real life]. To me he always will be the biggest name in WoW history. The storylines and experiences he created will stay with me all my life.
> *Player 3.*

Our findings suggest that prospective esport tourists seek engaging opportunities with their idolised celebrities when attending physical events (Lee et al., 2019). This extends beyond famous players and includes well-known developers like Mike Morhaime, Chris Metzen, Rob Pardo, and Ben Brode who at different times were seen as the face of WoW or Blizzard itself. This level of stardom was cultivated through their continuous engagement with the community via digital channels and their religious attendance at Blizzard's own yearly offline event - Blizzcon. Mahony et al. (2002) suggest these celebrities can often be a source of initial engagement from incomers into a sporting context and the perceptions of them as a role model may be inspirational and augment identification with an event (Funk et al., 2002).

#### *7.3.4 Geographical Proximity*

When approached about their intentions to actually attend an event in the near future participants consistently discussed the proximity of events as a constraint which made attendance challenging:

> Field notes: During a raid (see **Figure 6**) in which 11 guild members took part, they all discussed their desire to attend an esport event but had not yet done so. So, they were probed about, "if you're interested, why haven't you attended an in-person event yet?" They discussed how they all really desired and wished to attend but they perceived events such as Blizzcon as a 'once in a lifetime' opportunity because it always took place in California.

**Figure 6.** Raiding with guild members [IN COLOUR]


729
730
731 The desire and interest to participate in Blizzcon was mentioned multiple times by players
732 when discussing events as they would attend should the opportunity arise. The event taking
733 place in Anaheim, California repeatedly was highlighted as too costly and time consuming for
734 most players. It was found to be a contentious topic as European players perceived the selection
735 of event locations as preferential treatment of the North American player base:
736
737 > I have paid for the digital Blizzcon ticket several times, but it just does
738 > not compare. It is an amazing event. I am really jealous of all the guys
739 > being able to go but I don't think I will ever be able to go due to the
740 > costs involved.
741 > *Player 13.*
742
743 Players discussed concerns with the centralisation of WoW events in the US and desired closer
744 national and regional esport events they could attend. The lack of flagship events for the
745 European player base was perceived as detrimental to offline player engagement with the
746 franchises of Blizzard:
747

> Blizzard has HQs in France and Ireland but there are no events in Europe which does not seem fair to me. I mean there are tonnes of players in Europe, and Asia for the matter. Why do we not get a European Blizzcon? I would attend that.
>
> *Player 10.*

For European tourists, the prospect of long-haul international travel is perceived as risky due to a lack of destination familiarity (Bianchi et al., 2017) not to mention the significant financial burden of attending these events. Particularly, this is a concern for prospective esport tourists as travel uncertainty may already be high due to the likelihood of travelling to meet online players as opposed to close family or in-person friends. Therefore, there may be opportunity to develop more localised events in order to build confidence and reduce risk prior to players attending esport events. This consideration along with the rest of this paper's findings are elaborated upon in the following discussion and conclusion.

## 8. Conclusion and implications

Given the expansion and significant growth in the esport sector as a whole (Newzoo, 2020), we explore how the tourism sector could attract online gaming stakeholders to attend physically hosted events. To achieve this aim, we gathered survey responses from 549 individuals who spectate competitive League of Legends and conducted a twelve-month virtual ethnography amongst World of Warcraft players. Therefore, our data captures multiple esport stakeholders and gaming genres, leading to an overall perspective of what may influence esport fans' visit intentions toward live esport events whilst extending research linking the online environment and tourism destinations (e.g., Farmaki et al., 2021; Jimênez-Barreto et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2018; Perez-Vega et al., 2018; Wen & Leung, 2021; Zhang et al., 2017).

To answer this question, we first tested our conceptual model. In theorising the nature of the quantitative results, we found the role of the team (**H1**: star players and **H2**: attitudinal loyalty to the team), the game (**H3**: flow experience), and the event (**H4**: self-congruity with event image) had a significant positive relationship with online community socialisation, which confirms previous studies (Chang et al., 2018; Mazodier & Merunka, 2012; Scholl & Carlson, 2012; Sjöblom et al., 2019). In addition, star players, attitudinal loyalty to the team, flow experience, and self-congruity with event image had a positive influence on visit intention (**H5**, **H6**, **H7**, **H8**) (Cunningham & Kwon, 2003; Lee et al., 2019; Matsuoka et al., 2003; Perez-Vega et al., 2018; Stokburger-Sauer, 2011). Furthermore, results confirmed that online community

socialisation mediated the antecedent online factors with intentions to attend events in-person (**H10**, **H11**, **H12**, **H13**). This reinforces the importance of online social experiences in bringing likeminded persons together with a shared interest and how this can translate to offline tourism intentions (Kim et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2017).

Secondly, our qualitative ethnographic study found that players' friendships and a perceptual sense of belonging would positively influence their intentions to attend events in-person. Players in our study discussed how meeting online friends and guild members at a live event could strengthen existing relationships and would make them feel at-home. Participants' feelings were generated from their interactions and long-term memberships of guilds and the sense of community they had constructed through years of playing online. This echoes tourism literature of online communities that suggest trust and friendships can influence tourists' travel intentions (Lee & Hyun, 2015). The qualitative analysis also explored how celebrities of the game can be a motivational pull factor for players to attend live events whilst the geographical distance can be a restraint. Players were particularly concerned about the costs involved in travelling internationally to events.

### *8.1 Theoretical contributions*

Collectively, our qualitative and quantitative results emphasise the importance of socialisation, friendships, and player guilds in encouraging live esport event attendance, which illustrates the role of community in the theorisation of fandom (Obiegbu et al., 2019; Reichenberger & Smith, 2020). Esport literature has shown that esports is a social experience where relationships are built (Qian et al., 2019; Trepte et al., 2012). And, accordingly, our findings show that when esport players and spectators perceive a relationship with the larger community, this triggers fans' desire to enact their fandom through attendance at live events.

Both qualitative and quantitative findings show that esport players and spectators are seeking experiences where they feel a sense of 'belonging' and 'congruence' with an event. This gives fans reassurance that they 'fit' with the essence of the event, contributing to our understanding of fandom as more than just fervent enthusiasm, but as a concept associated with comfort and togetherness (Obiegbu et al., 2019). Our qualitative and quantitative findings also collectively show the importance of star players in the esport scene and how these celebrities can drive intentions to attend events. Interestingly, our qualitative findings also point to the celebritisation of WoW game developers and creators, whilst the fandom surrounding these roles within other games such as LoL is unexplored.

The importance of flow and team loyalty in our quantitative findings show that immersive gameplay features and competitive rivalries are important for spectators, which echoes existing research (e.g., Chang et al., 2018; Matsuoka et al., 2003). Yet, our player sample rarely discussed gameplay or aspects of team loyalty and passion directly affecting their intentions to attend live events. It appears from our qualitative data that competition and immersed gameplay is associated with guild activities such as dungeon raids, which fit within our 'sense of belonging' theme. Players voiced how the gameplay mechanics of WoW encouraged teamwork, which led to camaraderie and commitment to their personal guild, which they would display through banners and t-shirts. Therefore, for WoW players, fandom is triggered by their connection to the competitive role they enact as a member of a team whereas for LoL spectators' competition is experienced vicariously through their favourite team.

Theoretically, our paper illustrates how spectator and player fandom can transcend the online sphere and translate to real-world tourism consequences that could benefit host city destinations (Magno & Dossena, 2020). Serious esport fans are more immersed and feel a sense of connection and congruity with their genre of gaming meaning they wish to pursue greater heights to their fandom through attendance at a live event (Stebbins, 1982). Particularly, online socialisation is shown to be a key tenet of online fandom as participatory, interactive, and friendship-based activities augment and enhance esport experiences (Fiske, 1992; Obiegbu et al., 2019; Reichenberger & Smith, 2020). Accordingly, being a fan in the context of esports can provide individuals with a sense they are part of a bigger and wider community.

Therefore, despite esports being experienced without the physical proximity of others, fandom acts as a bridge that connects an online community of friends, guild members, loyal supporters, star players, game developers, and creators to a physical live event that can be experienced in-person. Fandom within the online sphere leads to a sense of belonging and 'fit' among like-minded players and spectators who believe such connections will convert to a live event setting. Overall, this demonstrates that fandom is a participatory concept in tourism and esport contexts as fans seek events that bolster and exemplify their fandom (Fiske, 1992; Lee et al., 2019; Ono et al., 2019; Reichenberger & Smith, 2020).

### *8.2 Managerial Implications*

This study provides interesting and important implications for practitioners and managers within esport and tourism settings. Esports has a global virtual audience of 500 million, a single LoL event can expect over 100 million viewership hours, and there are over 25 million active

monthly WoW players. Therefore, the esport industry is a significant, expanding, and potentially lucrative target for tourism, which means attracting esport fans to events may be an appealing option for host cities in order to innovate their service offering and contribute to post-pandemic recovery (Zenker & Kock, 2020). Fans who travel for events also perform the role of a tourist by shopping, sightseeing, and visiting local bars and restaurants, meaning this large fanbase could contribute significantly both economically and socially (Cunningham & Kwon, 2003; Gibson et al., 2003; Kim et al., 2015; Magno & Dossena, 2020).

Organisers of esport events should market any star players who may be competing as our findings show this a key driver of visit intention. To attract players of the game, event marketers may also consider reaching out to developers and content creators who are 'idolised' within the player community so that attendees have the chance to meet these celebrities of the gaming world (Lee et al., 2019). Gibson et al. (2003) suggest host cities should promote special events for the fans of particular teams, which may tap into loyal fans of esport organisations and make these 'can't miss' events for those who consider themselves dedicated fans of their team (Obiegbu et al., 2019; Reichenberger & Smith, 2020). Furthermore, consistently across our quantitative and qualitative studies the sense of belonging and feeling connected to the event encourages attendees' visit intentions. Thus, events should be organised in such a way that attendees feel connected with the image of the event and what it represents (Shin et al., 2018). This could include events encouraging attendees to portray their sense of self by wearing personalised guild or team t-shirts which our participants said helped their sense of belonging and comfort at events.

From a game developer perspective, competitive and close matches are something which induce flow experiences so when patching, organisations such as Riot should continue to ensure the Meta is fun and dynamic in order to maintain current online viewership and encourage in-person attendance (Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). Beyond this, tourism destinations such as host cities should explore opportunities to partner with esport providers such as Riot Games, Blizzard, Valve, Epic Games etc so that destinations can create their own online experiences to encourage attendance. Community socialisation is a key element of fandom (Obiegbu et al., 2019; Reichenberger & Smith, 2020) and if local event providers could offer official forums, chat areas, and discord channels promoted by the esport organisation prior to events, this may lead to friendship and enthusiasm in the build-up to the event, making fans feel more comfortable about travelling whilst also giving attendees a chance to seek advice on where to stay and what to do when in the host city (Lee & Hyun, 2015).

Last but not least, our multigroup analysis (MGA) between LEC and LCS spectators' groups revealed that European participants show stronger relationships between antecedent measures and intentions to attend esport events, illustrating that these results are particularly important in a European context. Notably, EU participants in our qualitative study discussed their frustration at the geographical proximity of esport events. This raises the potential for smaller more local esport events (particularly in Europe), which may reduce barriers to travel for players and spectators, whilst making attendees feel close and more connected to the event.

## 9. Limitations and Further Research

The benefit of using Reddit forums for data collection was that many participants chose to respond directly to the forum with their feedback on the survey. While the vast majority responded with positive messages and requests for results upon completion, two respondents commented that they found the survey questions from the Self-Congruity with Event Image item from Shin et al. (2018) confusing. Thus, a small change in terminology may be worth pilot testing for future research using this item. Both studies were conducted in 2020-21 during the Covid-19 pandemic, which may (positively or negatively) have an influence on participants' intentions and enthusiasm for future travel and event attendance (Zenker & Kock, 2020).

Furthermore, our survey asked for participant's intention to attend but did not ask about capacity to attend (Matzler et al., 2016). Our qualitative analysis revealed that constraints such as geographical proximity play a role in visit intentions from esport spectators and, therefore, this may be considered in future research on esport and event attendance. The qualitative data was collected via convenience sampling meaning some of the participants were acquaintances of the researcher, which may have yielded slightly different results than if a stranger were to question participants. However, we recommend our qualitative virtual ethnography method for future tourism research as it allowed for rich, immersive, and longitudinal ethnographic data. With an increasing intersection between online spaces and tourism through VR technologies (Kim et al., 2018; Wen & Leung, 2021) tourism scholars will need to expand their use of virtual ethnographic methods in order to continue experiencing tourism alongside participants.

Finally, as far as we are aware, this is the first example of tourism research in the context of esport. We hope that tourism scholars will continue this worthwhile avenue of research as our findings and analyses reveal significant potential for tourism spaces to take advantage of a growing esport sector. It would be worthwhile to join the conversation early to forge a sub-sector that is mutually beneficial to tourism providers and esport practitioners.

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