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Fantasy sports and esports - Is unconventional becoming conventional? A case analysis

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ABSTRACT

Fantasy sports and esports are relatively recent phenomena that are growing in popularity and their importance in today's society. Per their nature, they are also tightly connected with sports. In this chapter, the authors present these two phenomena and explain their importance in today's sports industry. Furthermore, the chapter analyzes fantasy sports and esports consumption patterns and discusses how the Covid-19 pandemic affected them. To conclude, the chapter suggests the possible implications for fantasy sports and esports in the future.

INTRODUCTION

Unconventional competitive events, specifically games in online environments, are on the rise in the past decade. Not only are these events fast growing in number, but they are also becoming very attractive culturally and financially. Two of the most popular events are fantasy sports and esports. Although in the past years the topic of whether these sports, specifically esports, are considered as sports at all abound (Parry, 2018; Arnaud, 2010; Jenny et al., 2017), it is clear that the force of such sports is undeniable and has a very strong presence in society today. The fact that American high schools and universities run varsity teams in esports makes these discussions rather obsolete and unnecessary. The growth is apparent (Pei, 2019), and the interest, especially amongst young consumers, is undeniable.

There is a wide variety of esports and fantasy sports games. Indeed, these various games differ in many aspects. There are more players in fantasy sports games, whereas there are more spectators/viewers in esports. However, they are similar in the fact that they attract groups of people who may be historically disregarded, even marginalized, in previous competitions, the likes of the "nerds" now having their own platform to showcase their talents, even though they may lack talents in traditional sports (Baruca & Ulusoy, 2018). Another important commonality is that the fans are highly involved in both contexts. They follow the articles and news about the teams they support and follow and watch all the games. Overall, they are very devoted to any practice around these games.

However, with the recent interruption in life resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, the esports and fantasy sports markets have been transforming. It is crucial to understand these transformations to make better predictions about the future of these events. In this chapter, the authors first attempt to introduce what fantasy sports and esports are, address the common practices of consuming fantasy sports and esports, and how the consumption of these sports leads to social reproductions and changes in sports consumption. Moreover, the chapter reflects on what challenges these two unconventional competitions are facing during the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors have analyzed numerous industry data along with industry-related reports and experts' articles since the lockdown in March 2020 and found three common themes that reflect the shifts in these events: A shift in the focus from sensory spectacles to social interaction, changing audience, as well as how the instability of the context of these events is managed. Finally, the chapter discusses what these changes suggest about the possible future of these sports and the future of conventional sports in general.

What are fantasy sports?

Fantasy sports are online games where imaginary or virtual teams of real players play professional sports. The Fantasy Sports and Gaming Association (FSGA) reports that as of 2020, there were around 60 million players in the USA and Canada alone. The popularity of the Fantasy Sports League (FSL) arguably affects the lifestyle and sport consumption of a growing number of people today.

In the last couple of years, some significant changes have taken place in the landscape of fantasy sports. The most significant change has been that fantasy players can participate in a daily league rather than just in a traditional yearlong league. In the daily league, participants are tied to their players (real athletes in a professional league) on a daily basis, where winners win cash winnings daily. This option has increased the popularity of fantasy sports as it gives more flexibility to participants. According to Tasch (2014), out of the forty-one million players that participated in some form of fantasy sports in 2014, about 3% of those participated in daily leagues, and movement towards these daily leagues was expected to grow. Daily leagues created by FanDuel and DraftKings are two of the most popular daily fantasy leagues, while other competitors such as Daily MVP have struggled for market share (Heitner, 2014). The increase in daily fantasy sports participation has also caught the attention of major league sports executives, leading some executives to create agreements to be the official provider of daily sports leagues for the given major league (Boudway, 2014). Although fantasy sports have changed sports consumption, this new form of fantasy league participation is expected to change overall sports consumption habits even further. Today consumers increasingly expect personalization and flexibility in how, where, and when they consume. Indeed, such flexibility has been one of the most prominent values for most consumers in the past years (Haller et al., 2020). As predicted, the option of daily leagues has increased the popularity of fantasy sports as the daily leagues market share is significantly higher than the 3% from 2014.

According to the IBISWorld (2020), the fantasy sports industry in the US market has \$7.8 billion in revenue (compared to the \$29.7 billion of the sports franchise industry), with a \$186.4 million in profit, and had an annual growth of .5% in the last five year. For the next five years, it is projected to grow 3.8%. The two major players in the industry are ESPN (15.2% market share) and Yahoo (12.1% market share), while minor players are daily fantasy league providers DraftKings (3.9%) and FanDuel (2.1%). The season-long fantasy sports services hold 45.3% of the market share, while the Daily fantasy sports services have risen to 40.3%, and it's in line with what experts predicted. Despite an 8.4% decline in business due to the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, the industry is expected to grow to \$9.4 billion in the next five years due to the rising numbers of mobile internet users, online advertising, and an increased number of female players. As of now, the industry segmentation consists of 52.1% of consumers who are 34 and younger, 32.2% of consumers between 35 and 54 years old, and 15.6% of consumers aged 55 and older. More details in Table 1 below.

Year	Revenue (\$ million)	IVA (\$ million)	Establishments (Units)	Enterprises (Units)	Employment (Units)	Wages (\$ million)	Number of broadband connections (Million)
2005	2009.5	852.1	184.0	151.0	17438.0	671.3	32.7
2006	2786.5	1105.2	243.0	197.0	21501.0	917.7	50.0
2007	2924.6	1154.9	250.0	208.0	20306.0	901.6	77.7
2008	4421.5	1762.1	341.0	279.0	34297.0	1399.6	102.2
2009	4167.9	1566.9	309.0	254.0	29850.0	1235.6	136.3
2010	4642.1	1786.2	321.0	264.0	28550.0	1338.2	182.1
2011	5101.4	2140.3	326.0	264.0	27284.0	1515.4	230.2
2012	5253.2	2123.1	364.0	296.0	27647.0	1616.2	262.6
2013	5418.1	2189.5	382.0	304.0	28347.0	1853.5	293.4
2014	5583.0	2251.8	391.0	316.0	27915.0	1886.1	321.3
2015	7562.6	3053.9	544.0	439.0	35873.0	2577.5	355.2
2016	7564.2	3174.1	541.0	435.0	35727.0	2652.1	376.2
2017	7670.1	3176.9	675.0	535.0	46356.0	2908.4	387.0
2018	8109.0	3447.3	739.0	587.0	49563.0	3102.7	412.3
2019	8480.7	3669.8	811.0	646.0	52837.0	3295.1	429.9
2020	7765.4	3477.9	846.0	679.0	51713.0	3183.4	442.8
2021	8368.9	3764.9	937.0	753.0	56237.0	3455.7	452.3
2022	8705.6	3984.3	1030.0	831.0	59970.0	3667.0	459.0
2023	8935.9	4143.8	1101.0	891.0	62715.0	3820.7	463.8
2024	9145.8	4310.3	1183.0	961.0	65627.0	3980.6	467.1
2025	9360.1	4452.8	1254.0	1021.0	68007.0	4114.7	469.5
2026	9571.2	4592.2	1324.0	1081.0	70327.0	4245.6	471.1

Table 1: Industry statistics Fantasy Sport (IBISWorld 2020)

What are esports?

Esports are organized video-gaming competitions. They primarily feature professional video gamers (and sometimes amateurs) competing against each other on a variety of video game platforms. The categories of variety of games are fighting, first-person shooter, Multiplayer Online Battle Arena, Racing, and sports games. The video games Dota 2 and League of Legends are among the most popular ones. Competitors in these games are professionals. Esports athletes spend a minimum of 50 hours a week practicing (Jacobs, 2015). The income of esports athletes comes out of regular salaries, tournament prize money, and sponsorships. For example, the top 10 earners as of March 2021 earned between \$ 3.77 million (10th) and \$ 6.9 million (1st). Additionally, esports athletes also make an earning by featuring in online live gaming through sites such as Twitch. Popular players (current and retired) perform live, and the audiences pay and watch the player explain what (s)he does in certain game situations. The top 10 streamers on Twitch have millions of followers and hundreds of millions of viewers. Some, an example is a player named Ninja (Teng, 2018), crossed over to mainstream media in terms of popularity and are also known to non-gaming audiences. The best

esports players experience a celebrity status with all the perks of a “traditional” celebrity, such as endorsement deals, requests for autographs, and even proposals that would be considered indecent.

A quick snapshot of esports economic statistics (See Figure 1 below) tells that the esports industry revenue reached \$950 million in 2020 globally, which is slightly less than in 2019. Despite the dip in the last year that is attributed to the Covid-19 pandemic, esports is projected to grow to \$1.6 billion in 2023 (Statista, 2021).

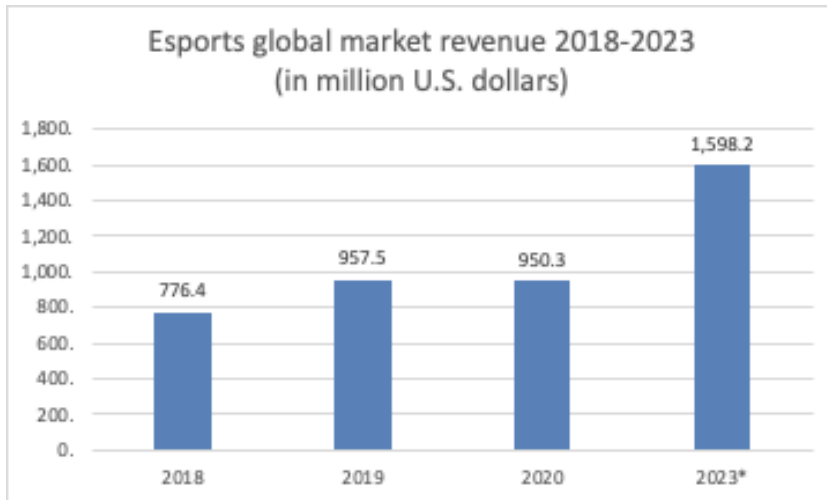


Figure 1: esports global market revenue (adapted from Newzoo and Statista)

The growth expectation is mainly attributed to the increase of revenues in sponsorship and advertising (see Figure 2 below).



Figure 2: Global esports market Revenue in 2020 by segment (adapted from Newzoo and Statista)

North America consists of only 12% of the world viewership market, while the biggest market is Asia. Revenue-wise, the biggest market in 2019 was the North American one with 37% of its revenue, China with 19% of the market revenue, and South Korea with 6%.

An essential aspect of the esports industry's growth is its viewership. In 2018 there were 173 million frequent viewers (and 222 million occasional viewers) who tuned in to watch their favorite games and players (see Figure 3 below). It is expected that there will be close to 300 million frequent viewers in 2023 (351 occasional viewers). In the US alone, there are 25.7 million estimated esports viewers in 2018 and are projected to grow to 46 million by 2023.

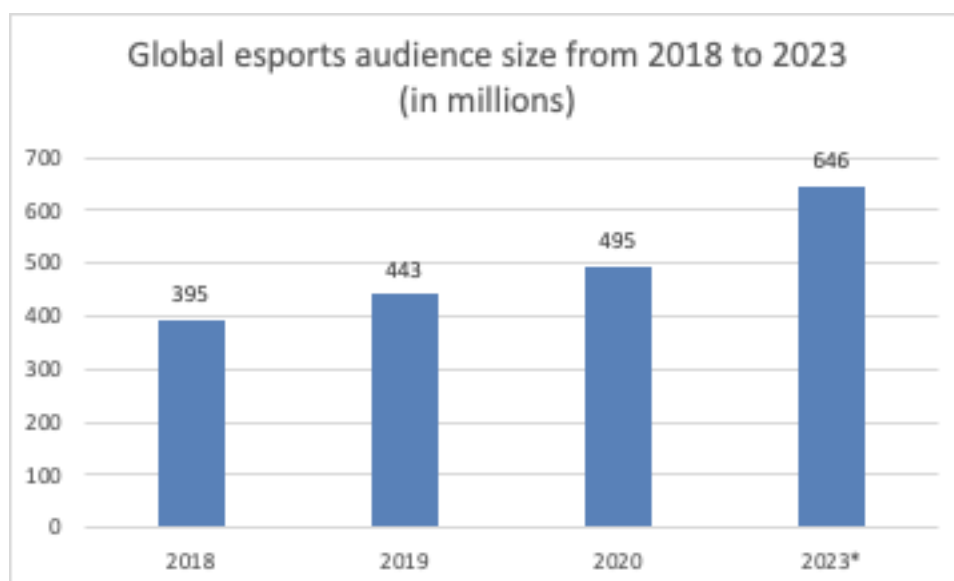


Figure 3: Global esports audience size from 2018 to 2023 (adapted from Worldwide, Newzoo, and Statista)

An increasingly important facet of the esports industry is the different game tournaments, where major teams and players compete with each other. Fans love to attend them live and watch them on stream. These tournaments are a major revenue opportunity for players, and also a big revenue stream for organizers of the tournaments, as Streams of such tournaments can reach up to a million peak viewers online, as it happened during a Counter-Strike: Global offensive game in the Intel Extreme Masters (Statista, 2021). With interest growing, the prize pool money grows as well. It's no surprise then that one of the highest prize pools in these tournaments is, in fact, the Counter-Strike: Global offense one (see Figure 4 below).

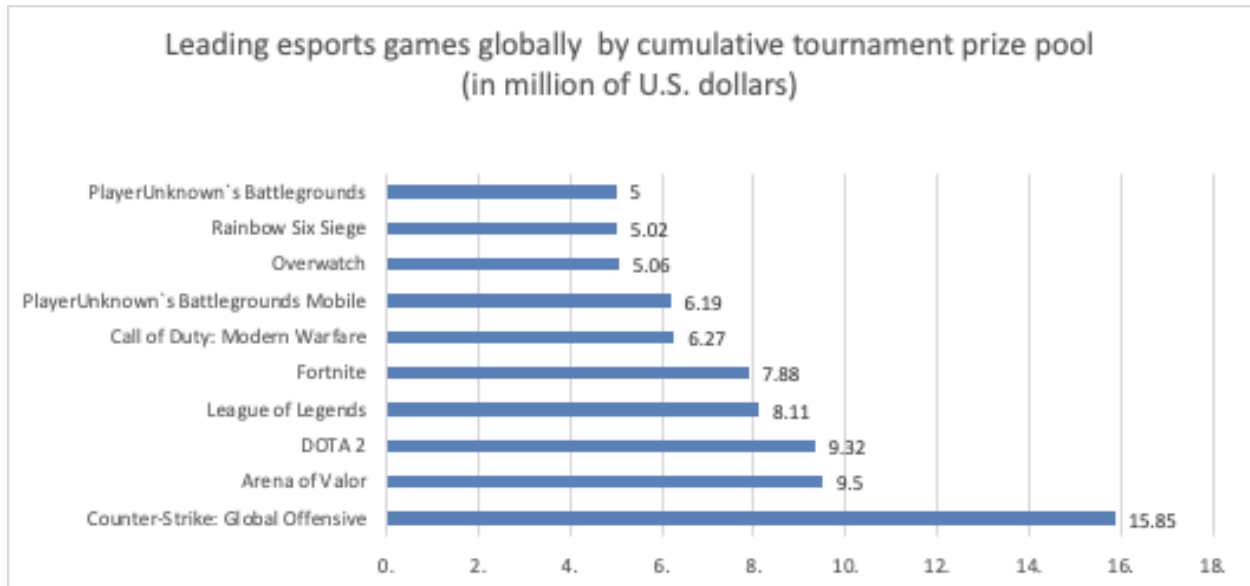


Figure 4: Leading esports games globally by cumulative tournament prize pool (adapted from Worldwide, E-sport earnings, and Statista)

FANTASY SPORTS AND ESPORTS CONSUMPTION PRACTICES

Fantasy sports and esports consumers, for the most part, are highly involved and devoted consumers. Their devotion generally is due to the interactive nature of these sports, these events being important spectacles that are important entertainment for many, and also that these games are tools through which consumers feel a sense of achievement as these competitive platforms can help them to increase their performances on many platforms.

Fantasy sports and esports practices as social interaction

Esports and fantasy sports are multiplayer platforms. In these platforms, consumers interact with players and other consumers virtually. Even though the competition is virtual, sometimes the players meet and play in the same location. One crucial characteristic in such games is consumers compete or cooperate with people from different geographic locations and even from different social groups on a global scale (Adachi et al., 2015). This practice offers a unique and intense socialization opportunity for people who do not have the chance to interact with such groups of people in some other context or platforms.

Another important aspect of these practices is that they intensify the sense of belongingness. Fan communities are increasingly important for consumers today because these communities offer the opportunity to share the love for a valued activity, thus, enjoy the activity even more. The interactions in these communities are multilevel; they are not only among players, or players and spectators but among fans as well. For many players, the main attraction is the sense of belongingness that results from intense and unique social interactions rather than playing the game (Martoncik, 2015).

Moreover, this aspect of fantasy sports and esports consumption practices also offers opportunities to increase social interaction in the players' everyday lives when they compete or cooperate with colleagues, friends, or partners on these platforms (Howie, 2014). The intergroup competition and cooperation satisfy interpersonal needs for inclusion and affection for many (Adahi, 2015). The focus for many participants in these practices is interacting with others in a meaningful way to intensify the relationships rather than developing a strategy to compete or win as an individual. Both competition and cooperation are understood as activities that contribute a different layer of meaning to everyday relations rather than as platforms of individual achievement. These games are largely strategized. Yet, consumers develop interaction and cooperation strategies rather than strategies to win.

Fantasy sports and esports practices as immersive spectacles

Just as is the case for sports in general, the sense of being a part of a spectacle is a dominating aspect of both fantasy sports and esports for most audiences. Research shows that fantasy sports participants tend to be more engaged spectators of sports in general (Carlson 2013). Both sports involve sensory spectacles, such as the case of watching the games in big arenas with other people and communal spectacles, as most people are devoted to the communal intensity of these events.

Consumers are devoted to esports and fantasy sports as spectacles mainly for two reasons: 1) to take a break from everyday life and immerse themselves into a spectacular fantasy world with meaningful social interactions, and 2) to enrich their experience of general sports consumption. In other words, these events offer a More immersive and interactive spectacle at many levels that the audience appreciates.

Furthermore, the sensationalized aspect of fantasy sports and esports consumption is a valuable focus for the most audience for two reasons;

In these practices, people focus more on the feelings of spectacles rather than winning in the games and, this offers a different mentality than the competitive mentality of everyday life. Overall, the spectacle aspect of fantasy sports and esports consumption complements and intensifies consumption of traditional sports on which these games are based (Nesbit & King, 2009) by offering consumers other ways to ways to understand, experience, and enjoy their favorite sports, teams, and players (Farquhar 2007 citing from Fantasy Sports Trade Association, 2003).

For instance, fans do not have to be fans of a specific team in fantasy sports, but rather they become fans of different players of their preference regardless of the team at which these players play in "real" life. This structure resonates with consumers who highly value personalization and flexibility. Such flexible games are more important spectacles for consumers as consumers get to enjoy their preferences and feel more immersed. Also, the community of very passionate fans creates a synergistic effect. These sports allow consumers to enjoy sports in a personal and flexible way with others whom they care about.

Fantasy sports and esports practices as performance increasers

Fantasy sports and esports involve considerable physical activity, social competition (Murphy, 2010), as well as cooperation skills. The fantasy sports and esports practices are mainly coordinated by a desire to perform increasingly better in these games. These practices allow consumers to relate to the games and sports in general in new and competitive ways. It is almost a double immersion of participants in the games and, thus, in how they perform. Through these practices, consumers increase their understanding of games, sports, or other varieties. This higher level of understanding leads to higher performance.

An important component of esports and fantasy sports practice for the audience is that consumers do not only aim to increase their physical performance in specific sports but also aim to increase their social, cognitive, teamwork, and psychological skills (Flockhart, 2006; Murphy, 2010).

Furthermore, these practices also help with improved consumer creativity capabilities as “some firms have opened a portion of their proprietary content for transformation by consumers and allowed the development of consumer-designed and consumer-implemented derivative products” (Arakji & Lang, 2007 p.2). Overall, most consumers focus on playing fantasy sports and esports as activities for the betterment of a multitude of their skills.

ESPORTS AND FANTASY SPORTS PRACTICE INTERRUPTIONS AND CHANGES: COVID-19 SITUATION

With the COVID-19 pandemic, fantasy sports and esports have been interrupted and adapted, as has been the case for all types of sports, especially team sports. And while the fantasy sports industry is directly intertwined with traditional sport, the esports industry is not and, as such, has been even more adaptable and creative in maintaining its operations. In fact, as reported by Rosenblatt (2021), the esports industry was one of the few entertainment industries that were minimally affected by the pandemic compared to most other entertainment industry events. This has changed many other practices in the big scheme of things. An example is that, since most of the sports were down during the pandemic, sports bars started playing competitive esports instead, which was quite unusual until then but could be an important practice for sports bars' future.

Some of the significant changes in the practices of esports and fantasy sports pertain to the changes in the dynamics of the sensory spectacle and communal spectacles, the characteristics of the audience, and the management of these sports' stability.

Dynamics of the sensory experience vs. communal experience

Both fantasy sports and esports leagues are typically linked to live events that offer sensory stimulation to the audience. Fantasy league players attend live traditional

sports events, like American football, basketball, or football (soccer), as they are fans of certain teams and/or players they “own” in their leagues.

Fantasy league players also gather in social chat platforms where users connect and exchange their strategies or ideas about certain leagues or players (Marinelli, 2020). The pandemic has slowed down the fantasy league industry, but the observed dedication of the fans/players even in the pandemic context guarantees that after-the-pandemic leagues have considerable potential.

Esports - have traditionally relied on sensory spectacles in which consumers are fully immersed in their experience in big arenas, with cheers of fans and big plays' celebrations. This is in a very similar, if not exactly the same, fashion as in traditional sports. Arenas of such events are typically sold out within hours, and such events are a very focal point of the esports industry; and as such, they are spectacles like other sports competitions in big sports arenas.

With the COVID-19 pandemic, one of the most significant changes has been that the arena gatherings have been canceled or been limited in the audience number and behavior. Yet, what is observed is that these sports have not disappeared as a result of these cancellations or limitations. Rather, the focus in these events has changed from sensory spectacles to experiences that create a community. Fandom is one of the most important tools of community building. In this context where people have felt the ever-increasing need to belong to a community, fantasy sports, and especially esports, has been a vital channel for people to share their passion and values.

One reason why fandom and community in these events are significant for many is that the connection in these events is constant, as explained earlier. In the case of esports, fans have had the chance to still follow their favorite competitions via streaming channels such as Twitch, and they have gathered into communities such as Discord, where they watch others play which motivates them to play more or discuss and comment on their favorite games (Lang, 2021). It offers players a sense of much-needed camaraderie in the pandemic context. Furthermore, this connection is global, reaching all continents.

Moreover, unlike traditional sports, esports games can go on forever and thus can be constantly discussed or analyzed, thus offering a constant, rather than temporary sense of community and connection. The extent to which the esports industry has embraced its fans and makes them feel more connected with the teams and with each other during the pandemic is evident in the case of Team Liquid. Team Liquid is an esports organization competing in 17 games and that just recently launched a new platform, Liquid+, on which fans of all 17 games connect, get the latest news about the team, and connect amongst each other, effectively creating a “virtual stadium” to recreate live events as best as possible. In fact will add onto them even when these live events come back (Church, 2021).

Another observation that is largely discussed in many news articles is that many school districts in different places have started to use esports as a tool for middle school and high school students to overcome some of the shortcomings caused by the pandemic, namely to provide them with teamwork assignments and camaraderie and to even teach them some tech skills to prepare them for future jobs in this industry. To make a more significant impact, teachers are trained to be esports coaches so students can easily and quickly join the spring and summer sports seasons (Tadayon, 2021).

The audience of COVID-19 fantasy Sports and esports

When viewership numbers of many traditional sports during the pandemic went down due to the complete cancellation of competitions, the viewership of the NBA 2K esports league surprisingly went up by 11.7%, with revenue also going up by 15.7%, as Williams (2021) reported citing data from Newzoo.

The news emphasizes that what has changed in terms of the audience of these events is not only the number of people viewing them but also the characteristics and values of the audience.

The most significant new audience is the group who seek a break from the pandemic stress and who seek strong and meaningful communal connections. In the time of the pandemic, people have an increased need to relieve extreme levels of stress. Typical distractions in everyday life, such as going to a group class at the gym, have also become a source of stress in this context. Fantasy sports, and especially esports, have become important stress-relieving platforms in a community.

Another important group of the audience is fans of sports, professional or recreational, games that have been involved in traditional sports as neither players nor spectators. But, the interest of these people in traditional sports has not decreased. Indeed, these people have a more significant desire for sports. Due to this desire, and the nature of social distancing, and more people spending time indoors, a considerable group of sports spectators has found esports to be the channel to live and share their love for games. Many recreational esports leagues started to pop up with organized games and tournament events (Nelson, 2021). All of that to offer additional safe fun to the fun depriving kids at home, and of course, for collaboration.

The diversity of the esports audience has, without a doubt, seen a significant increase as well. Fans that previously only preferred to play have most likely started to watch and vice versa. Just as the case in traditional sports, more viewership, and higher exposure mean increased participation. Viewership increases on Twitch and Youtube Gaming, 10% and 15%, respectively, and soon after the pandemic started are a clear indication of esports taking advantage of the situation. After all, as Smith (2020) described a joke circulating in the gaming community: "Many in the gaming community were preparing for a pandemic shutdown their entire lives."

Additionally, esports are now being used as a productivity tool, both for companies (Leporati, 2021) and schools. This has brought a new, big, and devoted audience base for these events. As mentioned before, recreational leagues being canceled has not deprived only the youngest one of sports, but also many adults. That is why many companies, like Walmart and IBM, to name a few, are now using esports to increase productivity, team building and are de facto using esports instead of, say, softball leagues to foster that work/life balance amongst their employees. The practice is so expanded now that an organization, Corporate Esports Association (CEA), organizes such leagues and events.

Management of Instability of the fantasy sports and esports practices

Due to the pandemic, both fantasy sports and esports have needed to adapt and change their modus operandi. The efficient and effective adaptation and change strategies of these industries are crucial aspects that offer a model concerning the importance of flexibility, multimodality, and technology orientation for many other industries in the market. Many news has celebrated these industries for their fast adaptation.

Fantasy league players are by nature dependent on live events. Although the task of preparing one's team for the weekly game is not an effortless task in "normal," non-pandemic times, doing it during the pandemic has just added to the uncertainty and makes this even more complicated. This situation has led to higher levels of engagement among fantasy players (Willingham, 2020). Despite the initial problems caused by game cancellation, soon after games started again, the entire industry adapted to this uncertainty. Scheduling became more flexible. Statistical analysts have offered different ways of analyzing games. And despite all these adaptations caused many frustrations, it actually connected fans with something new to talk and connect about.

Interestingly, some daily fantasy sports companies have continued throughout the pandemic without any major hiccups. Namely, Win Daily, Inc. kept on working even after the initial cancellations. First, they relied on the Mexican league soccer as it went on for a while after sport was shut down in the USA, then simulation Nascar and interestingly esports. This innovativeness kept them in business while actually increasing staff, payroll budget, and advertising budget (Mezrahi, 2021).

Another way that fantasy sports and esports have managed the instability has been that they understand and utilize technological advancements. The technological advancement happening in developing countries offers an increased possibility for both fantasy sports and esports to expand in these markets. With its 1.3 billion population, India has tremendous potential for fantasy sports as cricket is religiously followed just as American football is in the USA or football is in Europe and South America. The quick penetration of smartphones and the 5G technology offers endless opportunities to the fantasy sports industry for many big and small-sized companies.

The esports industry, too, needed to change how things are run quickly. Live tournaments, just as in traditional sports, were canceled. But after the initial scrambling, the industry promptly reorganized, ranging from switching tournament formats to redesigning whole circuit systems, and many of these adjustments are still in effect (Hyrlikova, 2021), and it looks like that will be a part of the industry if/when things go back to normal.

The fast adaptation of these events has brought many advantages. One of these significant advantages is to attract sponsors. And as they have attracted more sponsors, they had more resources for managing instability more efficiently. The NBA saw an opportunity with the NBA 2K esports league, which so far attracted many corporate sponsors. Sponsors saw an opportunity to connect with an audience that is traditionally difficult to reach, and by doing so, we can argue that esports extended the audiences of traditional sports.

In fact, as described by Campbell (2021), due to the fall out of many live traditional sports games that were canceled because of COVID-19, many traditional sports leagues used their esports counterparts and organized events and broadcasted live esports events instead. By doing so, some of the revenue was not lost, and their traditional fans "crossed-over" into the esports platform. With this higher media exposure, these events have attracted even more sponsors. Companies such as Mercedes, McDonald, Coca-Cola are just some of the most notorious ones who jump on the "esports bandwagon," factually legitimizing the esports industry with their consumers. Others who did the same were Gucci, IBM, and Chupa Chups (Hyrlikova, 2021)

Another critical point in the successful management of instability has been globalization. The esports industry already expanded globally before the pandemic. Yet, the news shows that the extent of globalization has been more considerable during the pandemic. The internet and Wi-Fi technologies have made it possible for players to play against each other no matter where they are. This was one of the biggest appeals of these sports, allowing them to thrive. Yet, during the pandemic, this has become even a more significant characteristic of these sports. Events are organized globally and can reach industry fans easily. For example, the NBA added a Chinese team to its NBA 2K competition. Now it's tapping the African continent.

DISCUSSION

After the analysis and review of industry reports and news about the trends in both fantasy sports and esports, it is suggested that the COVID-19 pandemic has not significantly affected their tremendous growth in the last decade as negatively as it has affected many other industries. However, it has changed the practices of the audience and management. Yet, these changes have so far worked for the benefit of these games.

Although there was some impact in fantasy leagues, such as the temporary cancellation of all sports competitions in March 2020 or the daily adjustments by fantasy league players due to COVID-19 exposures of some athletes, once competitions reopened, there was not any significant long term effect. Fantasy league, fueled by the NFL, was quickly back on its regular numbers, and it has not slowed much after.

Esports, as traditional sports did, were significantly affected by the cancellation of live competitions, but competitions have not stopped, and the audience was still able to follow the tournaments online, and in fact, due to the easiness of access and other reasons we have discussed earlier the audience base grew during the pandemic.

The three dimensions that we have discussed above have offered positive changes and offer hope for both fantasy sports and esports fields for growth in the near future after the pandemic: Audience identity and devotion, more intense and deeper meaning of fandom and community in the time of isolation, as well as effective and efficient management of fantasy and esports in a way to make it more conventional that would dominate the sports and gaming industries.

How consumers consume fantasy sports and esports is shaped by their understanding of traditional sports, their social activities that revolve around sports, and their self-concepts and skills. Consumers find the opportunities to develop new relationships, strengthen their relationships that revolve around the fandom of certain sports, develop various skills, and experience sports more intensely by consuming fantasy sports and esports.

Consumers start to see more of cooperation rather than competition or cooperation aspects of sports and routinize sports as a part of their everyday life selves. The practices help consumers help personalize and intensify their experiences with sports in general. These practices help with a higher level of immersion into the sports. They also transform fandom into a more interactive form.

Many unconventional practices have started to become conventional in the “new normal” due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Unconventional has meant finding alternatives as the solution to survival in the context of the pandemic. Due to changes in the expectations and skills of more diverse audiences, we expect that there will be even more diverse practices in more diverse formats after the pandemic.

A decade ago, Jonasson and Thiborg (2010) discussed what kind of an impact esports would have on the future of sports. They proposed three possible scenarios about the role of esports within the traditional framework of sports; i) they will be a counterculture within the big sports culture, ii) they will be a significant part of modern sports culture, and iii) they will be the future of sports. Some significant shifts happened in the past decade, and based on the observations and news analyzed in this chapter, it is suggested that the current status of esports is somewhat in between the first two scenarios proposed by Jonasson and Thiborg: esports is moving out of the role of the counterculture of sport and moving into being a part of the modern sports industry.

CONCLUSION

Overall, consumption of online sports requires an understanding of traditional sports. However, they also have an important impact on how traditional sports and people's relation to them are understood and experienced. There is always a need to understand and explain how new methods of consuming traditional products and services are influenced by traditional ways of consumption and, in return, how it shapes traditional ways of consumption. This approach can be extended to many traditional and everyday consumption practices that consumers have started to experience on multiple platforms. This has much significance to consumer researchers as most consumption behavior has begun to occur in various traditional and online platforms.

The big question is: Will games such as fantasy sports or esports be a strong complement to sports? The answer based on the analysis presented in this chapter is that it will complement the physical benefits of traditional sports with the flexibility and stronger community benefits. It is expected that traditional sports are here to stay and thrive after the pandemic, mainly due to all the physical benefits they offer and because people miss it during the pandemic. Indeed, sports activities are among the activities that consumers have missed most. The physical benefits of traditional sports will probably make them stay. But, as it was discussed in this chapter, there are already fantasy leagues about esports competitions. And at least in this particular case, esports will increasingly become an equal partner to traditional sports.

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