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23 **Declarations of interest:** 'None'

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## 41            **Developing esports tourism through fandom experience at in-person events**

42

### 43    **Abstract**

44    Tourism research has yet to consider the growing esports sector. Through a mixed-method  
45    research design, we employ the theoretical lens of fandom to examine what online and  
46    experiential factors may influence esports players and spectators to attend physical events,  
47    which we argue have the potential to grow into a new tourism sub-sector. Study one surveys  
48    549 League of Legends spectators; while study two consists of a twelve-month virtual  
49    ethnography on World of Warcraft coupled with 13 player interviews. We find antecedents  
50    such as star players, team loyalty, flow experiences, and self-congruity with event image may  
51    encourage live event attendance. Furthermore, our findings emphasise the importance of social  
52    and interactive experiences in generating friendship and a perceptual sense of belonging at  
53    events. Community socialisation is a fundamental tenet of fandom and plays a key role in  
54    intentions to attend esports events.

55

### 56    **Keywords:**

57    Esports, gaming, visit intention, event attendance, fandom, socialisation

58 **1. Introduction**

59 The esports industry has millions of online players and a global virtual audience of  
60 approximately 500 million (Newzoo, 2020). However, literature intersecting online social  
61 experiences with tourism activity are limited (Jiménez-Barreto et al., 2020; Wen & Leung,  
62 2021) and never has literature considered esports as a sector which can translate to the physical  
63 tourism environment. Esports is rapidly growing and has some of the largest active global  
64 communities due to an increasingly active and engaged online population (Newzoo, 2020; Seo,  
65 2016). The growth of esports has only been accelerated by Covid-19 where online gaming  
66 fulfilled a need for competition in periods of indoor lockdown and social distancing (The  
67 Economist, 2020). This growth is inverse to the decline of the tourism industry during the  
68 pandemic, which gives rise to the idea of how tourism could innovate to accommodate this  
69 growing esports sector in the future (Zenker & Kock, 2020).

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

80 As such, we apply the overarching theory of fandom (Obiegbu et al., 2019;  
81 Reichenberger & Smith, 2020) to understand how marketers and event managers can encourage  
82 players and spectators of online gaming to attend esports physical events in host cities.  
83 Traditionally, fandom is a participatory and social experience with fans travelling to live events  
84 in order to cheer for their favourite team and players as well as interact with fellow fans who  
85 share their self-identity (Fiske, 1992; Gibson et al., 2003; Obiegbu et al., 2019; Ono et al.,  
86 2019; Reichenberger & Smith, 2020). This paper extends existing research by exploring  
87 whether fandom can transcend the virtual environment and translate to attendance at physical  
88 esports events through a mixed-methods approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2017) with two  
89 complementary studies that seek to theorise esports fans' behaviour in a tourism context.

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

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

101

## 102 **2. Literature Review**

### 103 **2.1 Esports**

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

112 Gamers can make a 'career' out of esports as they can progress, achieve goals, and have  
113 lifetime highlights (Stebbins, 1982). However, only a few manage to turn their serious leisure  
114 pursuit into a lucrative monetary career. These rare professional players compete in front of  
115 large online audiences as illustrated by the 2019 League of Legends world championship  
116 attracting 105 million viewership hours across YouTube and Twitch (Newzoo, 2020).  
117 However, in 2019 esports generated just \$56 million from ticket sales; a small fraction of the  
118 \$1 billion total revenue from the sector as a whole (Newzoo, 2020) meaning fans are consuming  
119 the experience online rather than in-person.

120

### 121 **2.2 Online Tourism**

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

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

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

136

### 137         **2.3 Fandom**

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

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

160 at an event and with fellow attendees when self-congruence exists (Sirgy et al., 2008) and, thus,  
161 strong fans build their identity to distinguish themselves from outsiders and they seek the  
162 socialisation of likeminded people that meet their needs for congruity (Fiske, 1992; Lee et al.,  
163 2019; Ono et al., 2019; Reichenberger & Smith, 2020).

164

### 165 **3. Constructs and Hypotheses Development**

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

171

#### 172 ***3.1 Star Players***

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

177

#### 178 ***3.2 Attitudinal Loyalty to the Team***

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

185

#### 186 ***3.3 Flow Experience***

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

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

196

### 197 ***3.4 Self-Congruity with Event Image***

198 Self-congruity is the theoretical idea of behaving consistently with one's view of oneself  
199 (Sirgy, 1982) and, thus, self-congruity with event image represents the extent to which  
200 attendees perceive the image and personality of themselves to be similar to the image of the  
201 event (Shin et al., 2018). Self-congruity explains consumer behaviour by psychological  
202 comparison where the purchaser makes decisions based on their level of match (Sirgy et al.,  
203 1997). Self-congruity is measured by asking participants to conjure up an image of the event  
204 holistically at the moment of response (Shin et al., 2018; Sirgy et al., 1997; Sirgy & Su, 2000).

205

### 206 ***3.5 Online Community Socialisation***

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

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

221

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

224

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

228

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

231

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

236

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

239

240 When there is consistency between a destination and an individual's sense of self, tourists often  
241 wish to tell others about the place to further convey the similarity of their self to a particular  
242 location (Usakli & Baloglu, 2011). As such, self-congruity can encourage consumers to build  
243 a connection with likeminded people who fit with their sense of identity (Mazodier & Merunka,  
244 2012). Thus:

245

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

248

### 249 ***3.6 Visit Intentions***

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

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

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

264

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

267

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

271

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

274

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

278

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

281

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

288

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

291

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

296 fans become intertwined with their attendance at the associated events (Cunningham & Kwon,  
297 2003). Thus:

298

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

301

### 302 **3.7 Mediating Role of Online Community Socialisation**

303 While fans can consume individually, the power of fandom comes through its collective social  
304 consumption (Fiske, 1992; Obiegbu et al., 2019; Reichenberger & Smith, 2020). Similarly,  
305 esports represents a coming together of people who have a shared interest in online gaming  
306 (Qian et al., 2019). The attraction of esports is that it can offer the chance to build strong social  
307 ties, friendships, and participatory collaboration (Jung, 2020; Martončik, 2015; Trepte et al.,  
308 2012). Online live chats during streamed esport tournaments provide opportunity to  
309 communicate through cypypastas and emotes with other spectators, while the streaming of  
310 esport games and events provide more interactive community-based experiences between  
311 professionals and fans which can augment perceptions of gameplay (Qian et al., 2019; Sjöblom  
312 et al., 2019; Xue et al., 2019).

313 These interactions between likeminded individuals can enhance the sense of belonging,  
314 camaraderie, and social acceptance for fandom within online gaming (Qian et al., 2019). Online  
315 spaces have always been a source of community and social-interactive engagement (Calder et  
316 al., 2009). And, scholars have identified how peer communication and interactions in online  
317 communities develops trust and can influence purchase and travel intentions (Lee & Hyun,  
318 2015; Perez-Vega et al., 2018). Indeed, Reichenberger and Smith (2020) argue that fandom by  
319 its nature is a social experience. Interactive spaces for individuals to express fan behaviours is  
320 more than just an antecedent influence but can also augment and enhance the nature of fandom  
321 and its influence on behavioural intentions (Obiegbu et al., 2019)

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

325

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

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

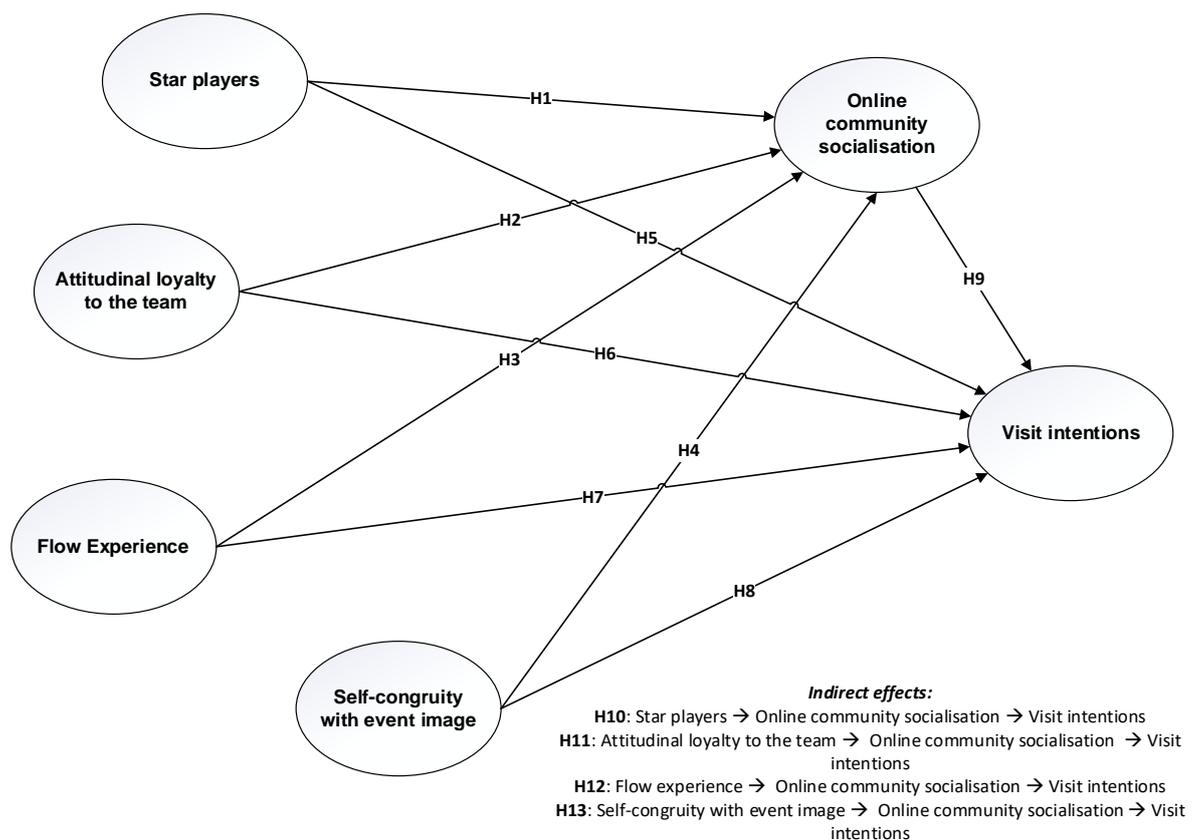
330 **H12:** Spectators' Online Community Socialisation mediates the relationship between Flow  
331 Experience and Visit Intentions.

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

334

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

337



338

339

### 340 3.8 Esport Culture

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

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

354

#### 355 **4. Methodology**

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

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

378

#### 379 **5. Study 1: Quantitative Phase**

##### 380 ***5.1 Study Context***

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

383 and compete against one another to destroy the other team’s base (Mora-Cantalops & Sicilia,  
 384 2018). The 2019 World Championship was esports’s biggest tournament with 105.5 million  
 385 viewership hours across YouTube and Twitch (Newzoo, 2020). Fans could attend the world  
 386 championship in-person across venues in Paris, Berlin, and Madrid where large, seated crowds  
 387 surround the players and large gameplay screens.

388

389 **5.2 Data Collection**

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

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

408

409 **Table 1.** Quantitative Participant Demographics

410

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

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411

412

### 413 **5.3 Measurement**

414 All constructs were borrowed from extant literature. We measured Star Players using a three-  
415 item scale from Gladden and Funk (2002), Attitudinal Loyalty to the Team (four-item) from  
416 Heere and Dickson (2008), Self-Congruity with Event Image (five-item) from Shin et al.  
417 (2018), and Flow (eight-item) from Kim and Ko (2019). Online Community Socialisation  
418 (five-item) was borrowed from Qian et al. (2019) and, finally, Visit Intentions (three-item) was  
419 measured with a scale from Matzler et al. (2016). All items within their respective constructs  
420 were evaluated by a 7-item Likert scale (1 = Strongly Agree, 7 = Strongly Disagree), with a  
421 neutral midpoint (4 = Neutral) judged appropriate to the prospective participant sample  
422 (Weijters et al., 2010).

423

## 424 **6. Quantitative Results and Key Findings**

### 425 **6.1 Common Method Variance**

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

438

439 **6.2 Analytical approach**

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

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

Construct/underlying items	<i>t</i> - value*	Standard loading	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
<b>Star players</b> (CR=0.81; $\rho_A$ =0.80; $\alpha$ =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
<b>Attitudinal Loyalty to the Team</b> (CR=0.81; $\rho_A$ =0.80; $\alpha$ =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
<b>Flow Experience</b> (last time I watched the [LEC/LCS] I felt...) (CR=0.82; $\rho_A$ =0.81; $\alpha$ =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
<b>Self-Congruity with Event Image</b> (CR=0.80; $\rho_A$ =0.81; $\alpha$ = 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
<b>Online Community Socialisation</b> (CR=0.83; $\rho_A$ =0.80; $\alpha$ =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
<b>Visit Intentions</b>						
(CR=0.81; $\rho$ A=0.81; $\alpha$ =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 ( $\alpha$ ), 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<sub>0.85</sub> 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)	<b>0.72</b>					
Attitudinal loyalty to the team (ALT)	0.36	<b>0.74</b>				
Flow experience (FE)	0.42	0.37	<b>0.78</b>			
Self-congruity with event image (SCI)	0.31	0.45	0.21	<b>0.80</b>		
Online Community Socialisation (OCS)	0.22	0.19	0.47	0.15	<b>0.78</b>	
Visit intentions (VI)	0.27	0.33	0.32	0.42	0.23	<b>0.82</b>

Square root of AVE (diagonal).

### 6.4 Structural Model and hypothesis testing

469 Before assessing the direct paths, several initial fit measures were calculated. Standardised  
 470 Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) “measures the difference between the observed  
 471 correlation matrix and the model-implied correlation matrix. Put another way, the SRMR  
 472 reflects the average magnitude of such differences, with lower SRMR being better fit” (Garson,  
 473 2016, p.68). The SRMR value was 0.063 for our model; lower than the recommended value of  
 474 0.08 (Hair et al., 2017; Taheri et al., 2020). The PLS-SEM blindfolding technique using cross-  
 475 validated redundancy procedure indicated that all predictive relevance  $Q^2$  values surpassed 0.  
 476  $Q^2$  values were: online community socialisation (0.176) and visit intentions (0.189). Following  
 477 Khalilzadeh and Tasci (2017) recommendation, Cohen’s effect sizes ( $f^2$ ) indicate different  
 478 value for large (0.14), medium (0.06) and small (0.01) effects for structural equation modelling  
 479 method. Results indicate that the  $f^2$  (ranging 0.072-0.181) for the significant relationships  
 480 surpassed the suggested medium effective size value for all direct relationships. Finally, the  
 481 Normal Fit Index (NFI) (which calculates and compares the  $Chi^2$  value of the conceptual model  
 482 against a meaningful benchmark value) of 0.93 was satisfactory for our model (NFI>0.90)  
 483 (Hair et al., 2017). The model explained online community socialisation (38.33%) and visit  
 484 intentions (53.28%).

485 Per **Table 4**, star players (H1:  $\beta = 0.43, p < 0.001$ ), attitudinal loyalty to the team (H2:  $\beta$   
 486  $= 0.48, p < 0.001$ ), flow experience (H3:  $\beta = 0.48, p < 0.001$ ), and self-congruity with event image  
 487 (H4:  $\beta = 0.49, p < 0.001$ ) had a significant direct relationship with online community  
 488 socialisation. Star players (H5:  $\beta = 0.54, p < 0.001$ ), attitudinal loyalty to the team (H6:  $\beta = 0.47,$   
 489  $p < 0.001$ ), flow experience (H7:  $\beta = 0.39, p < 0.001$ ), self-congruity with event image (H8:  $\beta =$   
 490  $0.48, p < 0.001$ ), and online community socialisation (H9:  $\beta = 0.52, p < 0.001$ ) had a significant  
 491 direct relationship to visit intentions.

492

493 **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

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

495

496 **6.5 Analysis of indirect effects**

497 Williams and MacKinnon’s (2008) approach was used to examine the significance of the  
 498 indirect paths (*t*-values and the 95% confidence interval (CI)). The results demonstrated that  
 499 star players indirectly impact visit intentions through online community socialisation (**Table**  
 500 **5**). As the direct path was significant, the findings indicate that online community socialisation  
 501 mediates the influence of star players on visit intentions. Additionally, attitudinal loyalty to the  
 502 team indirectly influences visit intentions through online community socialisation (**Table 5**).  
 503 As the direct path was significant, the findings revealed that online community socialisation  
 504 mediates the impact of attitudinal loyalty to the team on visit intentions. The findings also  
 505 demonstrated that flow experience indirectly impact visit intentions through online community  
 506 socialisation (**Table 5**). As the direct path was significant, the findings indicate that online  
 507 community socialisation mediates the impact of flow experience on visit intentions. Finally,  
 508 self-congruity with event image indirectly influences visit intentions through online  
 509 community socialisation (**Table 5**). Since the direct path was significant, the findings revealed  
 510 that online community socialisation mediates the influence of self-congruity with event image  
 511 on visit intentions.

512

513 **Table 5.** Assessment of indirect paths

Indirect hypotheses	Indirect path coefficient	<i>t</i> -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

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

515

516 **6.6 Post-hoc Multi-group analysis**

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

526 (Welch-Statterthwaite and permutation tests  $p > 0.05$ ). **Table 6** indicates the compositional and  
 527 scalar invariance ensuring PLS-SEM full measurement invariance. Moreover, Henseler et al.'s  
 528 (2009) tactics employed  $p$ -value to assess the differences between LEC and LCS groups. **Table**  
 529 **7** indicates statistically significant differences between LEC and LCS cultural group  
 530 participants for all relationships.

531 **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

532 *Note:* CI = Confidence Interval. Star players (SP); Attitudinal loyalty to the team (ALT); Flow  
 533 experience (FE); Self-congruity with event image (SCI); Online community socialisation  
 534 (OCS); Visit intentions (VI).  
 535

536 **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

537 *Note: \*p<0.001.*

538

## 539 **7. Study 2: Qualitative Phase**

### 540 **7.1 Study Context**

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

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

558

### 559 **7.2 Data Collection**

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

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

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

581

582 **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

583

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

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

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

605

### 606 **7.3 Data Analysis**

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

619

#### 620 **7.3.1 Friendship**

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

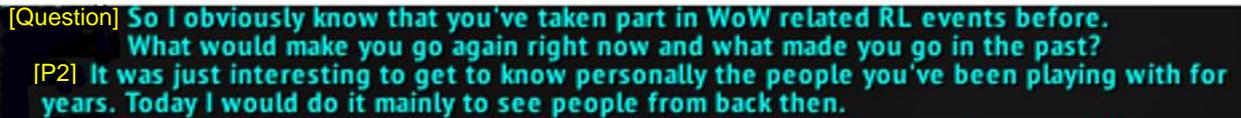
625

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

631 *Player 4.*

632

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



[Question] So I obviously know that you've taken part in WoW related RL events before.  
What would make you go again right now and what made you go in the past?  
[P2] It was just interesting to get to know personally the people you've been playing with for years. Today I would do it mainly to see people from back then.

634

635

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

641

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



[Question] Why did you show up for Gamescom after all?  
[P1] Dunno, mostly to meet you guys at the time.  
Didn't really care too much about the whole gaming community at the time but I  
wanted to put a face to the people I'm playing with.  
[Question] So you didn't really take part for WoW itself but more so for the people you  
were playing with?  
[P1] Yeah, I mean don't get me wrong. I love the game as such but just going there  
to meet up with strangers doesn't do anything for me

643

644

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

651

### 652 **7.3.2 Sense of Belonging**

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

658

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

666

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



668

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

680

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

688

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

696 *Player 3.*

697

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

705

### 706 **7.3.3 Idolisation**

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

709

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

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

718

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



720

721

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

726

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

730

*Player 2*

731

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

738

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

742 *Player 3.*

743

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

753

#### 754 **7.3.4 Geographical Proximity**

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

758

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

766

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



768

769

770 The desire and interest to participate in Blizzcon was mentioned multiple times by players  
771 when discussing events as they would attend should the opportunity arise. The event taking  
772 place in Anaheim, California repeatedly was highlighted as too costly and time consuming for  
773 most players. It was found to be a contentious topic as European players perceived the selection  
774 of event locations as preferential treatment of the North American player base:

775

776 I have paid for the digital Blizzcon ticket several times, but it just does  
777 not compare. It is an amazing event. I am really jealous of all the guys  
778 being able to go but I don't think I will ever be able to go due to the  
779 costs involved.

780

*Player 13.*

781

782 Players discussed concerns with the centralisation of WoW events in the US and desired closer  
783 national and regional esports events they could attend. The lack of flagship events for the  
784 European player base was perceived as detrimental to offline player engagement with the  
785 franchises of Blizzard:

786

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

791 *Player 10.*

792

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

801

## 802 **8. Conclusion and implications**

803 *Given the expansion and significant growth in the esports sector as a whole (Newzoo, 2020),*  
804 *we explore how the tourism sector could attract online gaming stakeholders to attend physically*  
805 *hosted events. To achieve this aim, we gathered survey responses from 549 individuals who*  
806 *spectate competitive League of Legends and conducted a twelve-month virtual ethnography*  
807 *amongst World of Warcraft players. Therefore, our data captures multiple esports stakeholders*  
808 *and gaming genres, leading to an overall perspective of what may influence esports fans' visit*  
809 *intentions toward live esports events whilst extending research linking the online environment*  
810 *and tourism destinations (e.g., Farmaki et al., 2021; Jimenez-Barreto et al., 2020; Kim et al.,*  
811 *2018; Perez-Vega et al., 2018; Wen & Leung, 2021; Zhang et al., 2017).*

812 To answer this question, we first tested our conceptual model. In theorising the nature  
813 of the quantitative results, we found the role of the team (**H1**: star players and **H2**: attitudinal  
814 loyalty to the team), the game (**H3**: flow experience), and the event (**H4**: self-congruity with  
815 event image) had a significant positive relationship with online community socialisation, which  
816 confirms previous studies (Chang et al., 2018; Mazodier & Merunka, 2012; Scholl & Carlson,  
817 2012; Sjöblom et al., 2019). In addition, star players, attitudinal loyalty to the team, flow  
818 experience, and self-congruity with event image had a positive influence on visit intention (**H5**,  
819 **H6**, **H7**, **H8**) (Cunningham & Kwon, 2003; Lee et al., 2019; Matsuoka et al., 2003; Perez-Vega  
820 et al., 2018; Stokburger-Sauer, 2011). Furthermore, results confirmed that online community

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

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

836

### 837 ***8.1 Theoretical contributions***

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

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

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

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

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

883

## 884 ***8.2 Managerial Implications***

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

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

895 **Organisers of esports events should market any star players who may be competing as**  
896 **our findings show this a key driver of visit intention. To attract players of the game, event**  
897 **marketers may also consider reaching out to developers and content creators who are ‘idolised’**  
898 **within the player community so that attendees have the chance to meet these celebrities of the**  
899 **gaming world (Lee et al., 2019).** Gibson et al. (2003) suggest host cities should promote special  
900 events for the fans of particular teams, which may tap into loyal fans of esports organisations  
901 and make these ‘can’t miss’ events for those who consider themselves dedicated fans of their  
902 team (Obiegbu et al., 2019; Reichenberger & Smith, 2020). Furthermore, consistently across  
903 our quantitative and qualitative studies the sense of belonging and feeling connected to the  
904 event encourages attendees’ visit intentions. Thus, events should be organised in such a way  
905 that attendees feel connected with the image of the event and what it represents (Shin et al.,  
906 2018). This could include events encouraging attendees to portray their sense of self by wearing  
907 personalised guild or team t-shirts which our participants said helped their sense of belonging  
908 and comfort at events.

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

921 Last but not least, our multigroup analysis (MGA) between LEC and LCS spectators'  
922 groups revealed that European participants show stronger relationships between antecedent  
923 measures and intentions to attend esports events, illustrating that these results are particularly  
924 important in a European context. Notably, EU participants in our qualitative study discussed  
925 their frustration at the geographical proximity of esports events. This raises the potential for  
926 smaller more local esports events (particularly in Europe), which may reduce barriers to travel  
927 for players and spectators, whilst making attendees feel close and more connected to the event.  
928

## 929 **9. Limitations and Further Research**

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

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

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

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