Why Do They Stay Home? The Dual Structure of Identity and Constraints in Offline Esports Consumption

Lihua Quan
Department of Culture and Tourism Content, Kyung Hee University
26, Kyungheedae-ro, Dongdaemun-gu
Seoul 02447, Republic of Korea
junryeohwa@khu.ac.kr

Yue Dong, Changsok Yoo
Smart Tourism Education Platform, Kyung Hee University
26, Kyungheedae-ro, Dongdaemun-gu
Seoul 02447, Republic of Korea
dongyue@khu.ac.kr, csyoo@khu.ac.kr

Keywords

esports, offline esports consumption, fan identity, psychosocial constraints, non-attendance

INTRODUCTION

Esports has been shaped by the convergence of live streaming and platform-based media ecologies, which has reconfigured competitive gaming as mediated entertainment (Taylor 2018). Esports consumption has also been theorized as professionalized consumption linked to identity formation (Seo 2016). Prior studies have compared esports and traditional sport spectator motives (Pizzo et al. 2018). Other studies have conceptualized live esports events as participatory experiences and examined how fandom-related and experiential factors are associated with esports tourism and in-person attendance (Jung et al. 2024; Thompson et al. 2022).

RESEARCH GAP AND PURPOSE

Despite these contributions, most existing studies have focused primarily on why fans attend offline esports events, whereas relatively little attention has been devoted to non-attendance. This gap is significant because many highly engaged digital fans nevertheless choose not to participate in offline forms of esports consumption. Although attendance constraints have been examined in traditional sport contexts (Rocha and Fleury 2017; Yamashita and Hallmann 2020), their integration into esports-specific consumption models remains underdeveloped.

To address this gap, the present study examines the structural relationships among

Proceedings of DiGRA 2026

fan identity, overall satisfaction, perceived constraints, and intention to attend offline esports events. In this study, offline esports consumption refers specifically to in-person attendance at esports events or venues. By analyzing a unified sample of esports consumers with varying levels of offline participation, this study seeks to reduce the selection bias inherent in attendee-only samples and clarify the conditions under which digital fandom does, or does not, translate into in-person attendance.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

This study draws on Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979) and the hierarchical model of leisure constraints (Crawford and Godbey 1987; Crawford et al. 1991). Fan identity refers to multidimensional attachment to esports teams, players, streamers, and fan communities. Satisfaction captures cumulative evaluations of esports consumption experiences. Perceived constraints denote barriers that may weaken offline attendance intention.

An online survey of adult esports consumers in China was administered via Credamo from February 9 to 13, 2025. The authors designed the survey and model, while Credamo handled recruitment and administration. After screening, 297 of 332 responses were retained; 55.2% were female and 53.2% had prior offline esports event experience.

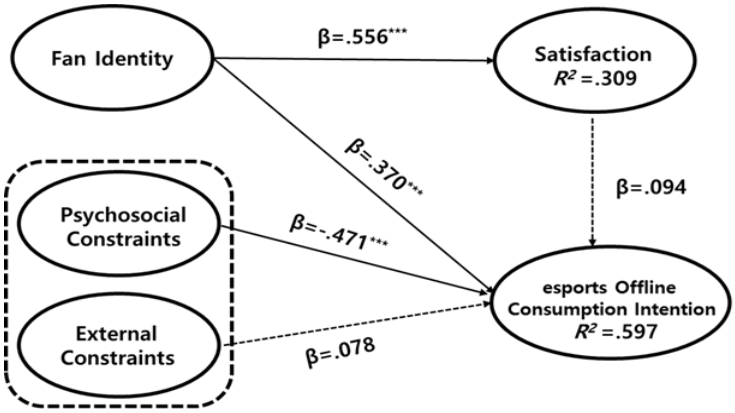
All items used five-point Likert-type scales. Fan identity items were adapted from social identity and fan consumption studies (Cameron 2004; Lee et al. 2019; Seo 2016). Satisfaction and attendance intention items were adapted from satisfaction, spectatorship, and behavioral intention research (Oliver 1999; Shi and Ren 2023; Zeithaml et al. 1996). Constraint items were adapted from leisure and sport spectator constraint research (Kim and Trail 2010; Trail et al. 2008; Yamashita and Hallmann 2020).

Exploratory factor analysis identified two constraint dimensions: psychosocial and external constraints. Psychosocial constraints include the absence of companions, social discomfort, and competing leisure commitments. External constraints include time, distance, transportation difficulties, and travel burden. The hypothesized relationships were tested using PLS-SEM in SmartPLS 4.0 with 5,000 bootstrap iterations. Measurement model assessment supported reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity.

RESULTS

The structural model explained 59.7% of the variance in intention to attend offline esports events. Fan identity significantly predicted both overall satisfaction ($\beta = .556$, $p < .001$) and offline attendance intention ($\beta = .370$, $p < .001$). Contrary to expectations, the direct effect of satisfaction on offline attendance intention was not significant at the .05 level ($\beta = .094$, $p = .086$), suggesting that positive evaluations of prior esports consumption experiences do not necessarily translate into physical participation.

Psychosocial constraints emerged as the strongest negative predictor of offline attendance intention (β = −.471, p < .001), whereas external constraints had no significant direct effect (β = .078, p = .137). This pattern indicates that the primary barriers to offline attendance lie not merely in logistical challenges but also in socially embedded frictions, including the absence of companions, low perceived social fit, and competing interpersonal or leisure commitments.



Note: ***p < .001. **p < .01. *p < .05.

Figure 1: Structural model results

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

These findings indicate that offline esports consumption is not simply an extension of digital fandom but a behaviorally distinct outcome shaped by both identity-driven motivation and psychosocial friction. The stronger effect of psychosocial constraints, compared with external constraints, aligns with leisure constraint negotiation perspectives (Hubbard and Mannell 2001) and reflects the specific ecology of esports consumption, in which high-quality online alternatives are continuously available.

Theoretically, this study integrates Social Identity Theory and leisure constraint theory to develop a dual-structure model of non-attendance that distinguishes identity-based pull factors from constraint-based inhibitors. The non-significant satisfaction path challenges simple transfer assumptions across consumption contexts (Edwards and Rothbard 2000), suggesting that positive evaluations of esports consumption do not automatically translate into offline attendance.

Practically, these findings suggest that strategies targeting psychosocial friction may be more effective than infrastructure improvements alone. Such strategies may include companion-matching systems, solo-friendly event designs, small-group seating blocks, and social normalization campaigns. At the same time, content and event strategies that strengthen fan identification may serve as upstream mechanisms for cultivating offline attendance intention.

This study is limited by its China-based sample, and the findings should not be treated as universally generalizable across all esports markets. In addition, the online/offline

distinction used here should be understood as an empirical distinction between platform-based spectatorship and in-person attendance, not as a strict separation between digital and non-digital participation. Future research should examine how national contexts, esports genres, event formats, and hybrid spectatorship practices shape the relationships among identity, constraints, and in-person attendance.

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Supplementary Table 1. Multidimensional Construct of Fan Identity

Dimension	Description	Example Item	Theoretical Foundation
Team/Player /Streamer Identification	Psychological bond with a specific esports-related target	My favorite esports team/player/streamer is an important part of my identity.	Seo (2016); Lee et al. (2019)
Ingroup Ties	Sense of belonging with fellow fans	My passion for esports connects me with others who share similar interests.	Cameron (2004); Lee et al. (2019)
Ingroup Affect	Pride and positive emotion as a fan	I feel proud to be a fan of my favorite esports team/player/streamer.	Cameron (2004); Lee et al. (2019)
Behavioral Expression	Participation intention and consumption practices	I will continue to consume content related to my favorite esports team/player/streamer.	Seo (2016); Lee et al. (2019)

Note. All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale.

Supplementary Table 2. Multidimensional Construct of Constraints

Construct	Description	Example Item	Theoretical Foundation
Psychosocial Constraints	Intrapersonal and interpersonal barriers, including absence of companions, social discomfort, and competing leisure priorities	I do not attend esports offline events because I have no one to go with.	Crawford and Godbey (1987); Trail et al. (2008); Kim and Trail (2010)
External Constraints	Logistical barriers, including limited time, geographic distance, transportation-related difficulties, and travel burden	The distance to the esports venue or transportation-related inconvenience makes it difficult for me to attend.	Crawford and Godbey (1987); Trail et al. (2008); Yamashita and Hallmann (2020)

Note. All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale.

Supplementary Table 3. Measurement Model Assessment

Construct	Items	Outer Loadings	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE	VIF
Personal Constraints	Con_1	0.849	0.876	0.910	0.668	2.269
	Con_2	0.811				1.877
	Con_3	0.825				2.107
	Con_4	0.822				2.064
	Con_5	0.780				1.856
External Constraints	Com_6	0.777	0.839	0.885	0.607	1.597
	Com_7	0.814				1.905
	Com_8	0.792				1.917
	Com_9	0.766				1.812
	Com_10	0.746				1.670
Fan Identity	Fandom_1	0.827	0.843	0.889	0.616	1.745
	Fandom_2	0.753				1.558
	Fandom_3	0.837				2.078
	fan_1	0.783				1.633
	fan_3	0.719				2.223
Satisfaction	Sati_1	0.733	0.627	0.800	0.572	1.203
	Sati_2	0.793				1.251
	Sati_3	0.742				1.259
Offline Intention	Subint_1	0.832	0.756	0.860	0.672	1.547
	Subint_2	0.770				1.437
	Subint_3	0.854				1.625

Note. HTMT values ranged from .470 to .862, all below the .90 threshold (Henseler et al., 2015), supporting discriminant validity.

Supplementary Table 4. Path Analysis Results (PLS-SEM)

Hypothesis	Independent Variable → Dependent Variable	β	t	*p*	Result
H1	**Fan Identity -> Satisfaction**	**0.556**	**11.252**	**0.000**	**Supported**
H2	**Fan Identity -> Offline Intention**	**0.370**	**4.477**	**0.000**	**Supported**
H3	**Psychosocial Constraints -> Offline Intention**	**-0.471**	**5.736**	**0.000**	**Supported**
H4	**External Constraints -> Offline Intention**	**0.078**	**1.486**	**0.137**	**Rejected**
H5	**Satisfaction -> Offline Intention**	**0.094**	**1.715**	**0.086**	**Rejected**

Note. R^2 for Overall Satisfaction = .309; R^2 for Offline Consumption Intention = .597. Path coefficients estimated via bootstrapping (5,000 iterations; SmartPLS 4.0).