Exploring Motives for Twitch Viewership and Content Creation With the Exergame Zwift

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Exergames require users to actively participate in sports in real time. Individuals taking part in exergames can use the livestreaming platform Twitch to create and view related content. This study employed uses and gratifications theory to examine Twitch usage and the motives of viewers and content creators of Zwift, a bicycling exergame. Thematic analysis of semistructured interviews with 10 Twitch users revealed viewers and content creators shared the motives of interaction and knowledge. Viewers also identified the motives of community, fandom, and competition as important, while content creators were additionally motivated by accomplishments, brand, and broadcasting. These findings align with previous research of Twitch usage and offer advice for practitioners. The study also highlighted the importance of studying the underinvestigated exergames, providing an opportunity to grow this participation.

Keywords: Uses and Gratifications Theory, bicycling, esports, motivation

Since its emergence in 2011, the content creation platform Twitch allows users and content creators to livestream their activities online. Viewers can watch activities and interact directly with content creators (also known as streamers) and other viewers using a built-in chat function within Twitch (TwitchTracker, 2022). The platform offers the most livestreaming (Newzoo, 2022) as content creators share livestreams with an international audience (Pizzo et al., 2022). In September 2012, Twitch averaged 78,000 concurrent viewers, watching 56 million hours of content from approximately 2,000 channels (TwitchTracker, 2022). This activity increased to an average of 2.5 million viewers, who watched 1.7 billion hours from 7.2 million content creators on 94,000 channels in February 2023 (TwitchTracker, 2022).

Academic researchers have taken interest in this growing phenomenon (Qian et al., 2019, 2020). Limited studies to date have focused on exergames (Bjärehed & Bjärehed, 2022; Viana et al., 2020, 2021), which have carved out space on the platform. Exergames require active participation in real time using platforms such as PlayStation (Sony) and XBOX (Microsoft) (Viana et al., 2021). Users can engage in a variety of physical activities such as dancing and walking as well as sports such as bowling, boxing, tennis, and yoga (Viana et al., 2020, 2021). Participants in the bicycling exergame Zwift ride actual bicycles to control their avatars within the game. Zwift has attracted the attention of the Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI) and International Olympic Committee (IOC), which targeted the game for branded events such as the Olympic Virtual Series (Schlange, 2021).

Complementing this active participation, Zwift users can livestream their gameplay or watch the gameplay of others via Twitch. Three window options provide viewers with a view of each content creator's gameplay as in-game races unfold (Schlange, 2020). Content creators develop and provide the content for viewers to watch. Without this content, Twitch would not exist. Understanding the motives of content creators can generate guidance for Twitch and other platforms. This will help them to provide operating features to help meet those motives and address users’ needs. In turn, this can encourage the continued development of this content and the growth of Twitch. Therefore, it is important to continue examining content creators and their motives alongside those of viewers.

Anderson et al. (2021) explored these motives using survey instruments developed for traditional sports such as the Motivation Scale for Sport Consumption and Sport Fandom Questionnaire. Yet Qian et al. (2019) asserted, “research directly adopting or adapting existing sport motivation scales might also fail to capture the idiosyncrasies associated with esports, leading to biased results and misleading findings” (p. 3). Studying exergames as similar but different from traditional sports could help identify new...
insights (Pizzo et al., 2022). The investigation of content creators alongside viewers, as well as searching for additional motives, could aid this discovery.

To date, few studies have investigated exergames (Viana et al., 2020, 2021; Bjärehed and Bjärehed 2022) most recently examined Zwift usage and the potential for cheating in competitive bicycling. Identifying motives for Twitch usage related to Zwift could lead to continued growth for exergames and the bicycling industry. In addition, discovering more motives for the participatory and physical fitness aspects of exergames (Roy, 2020) may be unearthed through this research. The IOC, UCI, and other bicycling organizations could benefit from learning more about current and future consumers in terms of what Zwift content they watch and why they watch this content. This research could also provide insights into how these behaviors might connect to activities like watching other bicycling events and buying bicycles and other related products (Anderson et al., 2021). Thus, research on Zwift and Twitch is merited. To address existing research gaps, the current study explored motives for watching and creating Zwift content. The purpose of this study was to investigate the motives of Twitch viewers and content creators in Zwift.

**Literature Review**

Researchers have described motives as reasons why individuals engage in certain behaviors (Anderson et al., 2021). Exergames represent a type of esports, and motives for esports participation include entertainment (Johnson & Woodcock, 2021), escape (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2016), interaction (Anderson et al., 2021), and knowledge (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2016). Motives can lead to behavioral intentions and actual behaviors such as playing video games, watching gameplay online and in person, purchasing related equipment and apparel, and using social media for related events and activities (Anderson et al., 2021). In addition, a connection exists between gameplay and Twitch where consumers use Twitch to watch and create content (Qian et al., 2019).

**Theoretical Foundations**

Researchers have used various theoretical frameworks to understand relationships and associated motives within this environment. Uses and Gratifications Theory has proven one of the most popular (Cheah et al., 2022; Reitz & Hallmann, 2022). The theory asserts individuals have needs, and they use media to meet and gratify those needs. Uses and Gratifications Theory includes five assumptions: (a) individuals have specific goals for why they use media, (b) this media usage allows them to address their goals, (c) variables—social and psychological—can influence media consumption, (d) these media offerings face competition as they try to become the selected option for meeting goals, and (e) individuals have more power over media than media have over individuals (Katz et al. 1973; Ruggiero, 2009; Shao, 2009). This theoretical approach provides an avenue for researchers to investigate the types of media individuals consume and why they consume it to meet their personal needs and desires.

Within esports, most studies grounded in Uses and Gratifications Theory focused on identifying motives related to watching content (Billings & Mikkilineni, 2022; Brown et al., 2018; Cabeza-Ramírez et al., 2020; Macey et al., 2020; Rogers et al., 2022; Sjöblom et al., 2017, 2020; Tang et al., 2022). Fewer studies used this framework to examine motives related to playing (Bonny & Castaneda, 2022; Tang et al., 2021) or creating content. Sjöblom and Hamari (2017) published one of the first studies involving uses and gratifications theory in this context, exploring why viewers watch livestreams of gameplay. Their study incorporated five gratification types: (a) cognitive: obtaining information or acquiring knowledge, (b) affective: experiencing an enjoyable occurrence, (c) personal integrative: improving esteem and status, (d) social integrative: sharing relationships with friends and family, and (e) tension release: reducing stress. The results highlighted a positive connection between these motives and hours watched as well as number of content creators watched, followed, and subscribed. Hilvert-Bruce et al. (2018) similarly examined Twitch usage with eight motives: entertainment, external support, information seeking, meeting new people, sense of community, social anxiety, social interactions, and social support. Their investigation centered on the relationships between these motives and levels of engagement experienced by viewers. Excluding social support and social anxiety, these motives shared significant relationships with emotional connectedness experienced by viewers as well as reported behaviors related to watching, subscribing, and making donations to Twitch content creators.

Reitz and Hallmann (2022) conducted a systematic literature review of this research to date. They found a reliance on uses and gratifications theory to understand motives related to playing and watching gameplay. Their list of motives identified in previous research included achievement, esthetics, arousal, autonomy, bonding, competitive nature, drama, enjoyment, enjoyment of aggression, escapism, fandom, friendship, interest in player, knowledge, novelty, pastime, peer pressure, physical attractiveness, player skill, relatedness, role model, self-esteem, skill improvement, social interaction, and tension release or entertainment. Cheah et al. (2022) completed similar analysis and listed escapism, goal orientation, gratification and affect, identification, immersion and flow, and social interaction as reported motives. The researchers also noted many of the existing studies adopted a quantitative approach and encouraged the inclusion of qualitative perspectives in future work. A comprehensive list of motives for viewers emerged from these studies.

**Motives of Viewers**

a. **Accomplishments**: fulfilling aspirations, completing tasks, using technical skills, achieving goals, and improving and advancing (Reitz & Hallmann, 2022; Sjöblom et al., 2020).

b. **Affective**: appreciating the game and its esthetics (Billings & Mikkilineni, 2022; Cheah et al., 2022; Reitz & Hallmann, 2022; Rogers et al., 2022; Sjöblom & Hamari, 2017; Xiao, 2020).

c. **Community**: building an environment perceived as safe, supportive, and creative (Hilvert-Bruce et al., 2018; Reitz & Hallmann, 2022).

d. **Competition**: watching others compete; enjoying the excitement, suspense, and dramatic nature of the event (Brown et al., 2018; Reitz & Hallmann, 2022).

e. **Escape**: watching as a diversion or a means to release tension (Billings & Mikkilineni, 2022; Cheah et al., 2022; Macey et al., 2020; Reitz & Hallmann, 2022; Sjöblom & Hamari, 2017; Xiao, 2020).

f. **Fandom**: having the ability to follow favorite content creators and demonstrate an interest in gameplay and specific games (Brown et al., 2018; Reitz & Hallmann, 2022; Rogers et al., 2022).
g. Interaction: developing parasocial relationships; having the ability to cheer content creators, socialize with others, and develop personal connections with other viewers, friends, and family in low-risk social activities (Brown et al., 2018; Cabeza-Ramírez et al., 2020; Cheah et al., 2022; Hilvert-Bruce et al., 2018; Macey et al., 2020; Reitz & Hallmann, 2022; Sjöblom & Hamari, 2017).

h. Knowledge: obtaining the opportunity to learn from content creators and other viewers, providing knowledge about gameplay to content creators and other viewers, and improving gameplay (Brown et al., 2018; Cabeza-Ramírez et al., 2020; Hilvert-Bruce et al., 2018; Macey et al., 2020; Reitz & Hallmann, 2022; Sjöblom & Hamari, 2017; Tang et al., 2022).

Motives of Content Creators

Moving from viewers to content creators, early Twitch research explored content creators’ identified motives for their activities (Johnson & Woodcock, 2017; Zhao et al., 2018). These researchers did not ground their studies in uses and gratifications. However, they did offer motives similar to those found among viewership studies employing this theoretical framework. Motives of content creators include the following:

a. Accomplishments: seeking challenges and fulfilling aspirations; enjoying tasks and advancement in gameplay (Johnson & Woodcock, 2017; Taylor, 2018; Zhao et al., 2018).

b. Brand: building a presence online, creating a professional identity, improving self-image and self-presentation, and gaining visibility and celebrity status (Hu et al., 2017; Johnson & Woodcock, 2017; Sjöblom et al., 2017; Taylor, 2018; Zhao et al., 2018).

c. Entertainment: providing entertainment for viewers through gameplay and conversation about games, gameplay, and general topics (Taylor, 2018).

d. Hobby to career: becoming professionalized and turning gameplay into a full-time career (Johnson & Woodcock, 2021; Sjöblom et al., 2017; Taylor, 2018).

e. Interaction: receiving social support from viewers, building and retaining an audience of viewers, encouraging and moderating chat, forming new relationships, and extending conversation to other platforms (Hu et al., 2017; Taylor, 2018; Zhao et al., 2018).

f. Knowledge: giving and receiving feedback, offering analysis of games and gameplay, serving as an influencer, and demonstrating knowledge and mastery of skills (Sjöblom et al., 2017; Taylor, 2018; Zhao et al., 2018).

g. Monetization: making money through subscriptions, donations, sponsorships, advertising, competitions and targets, integrated games, and merchandise sales (Johnson & Woodcock, 2017; Taylor, 2018; Zhao et al., 2018).

h. Broadcasting: developing and disseminating content through gameplay for an audience of online viewers (Qian et al., 2020; Taylor, 2018; Zhao et al., 2018).

Exergames and Twitch

Extending this research, studies have also compared motives for watching esports versus traditional sports. The results of this research remain less conclusive. Pizzo et al. (2018) found similarities with the motives acquisition of knowledge, esthetics, drama, enjoyment of aggression, entertainment value, excitement, interest in player, interest in sport, role model, skill of the athletes, social opportunities, and wholesome environment. The findings led them to conclude that esports and traditional sports are more alike than different. Billings and Mikkilineni (2022) reported high motive scores for arousal, entertainment, and passing time for both esports and traditional sports. However, motives for watching traditional sports proved higher for all motives except passing time. Rogers et al. (2022) examined the game NBA 2K and similarly found that traditional sports generated the highest motive scores, including for autonomy, enjoyment, and entertainment. Their research showed autonomy, entertainment, and fanship were most important for esports, but not to the same degree.

Conversely, Brown et al. (2018) reported higher motive scores for esports with fanship, Schwabism (“the desire to share knowledge/be right,” p. 429), and social sport. This suggests participants found value in activities like exchanging knowledge and interacting with friends and family over watching the competitive aspects of the sport. Competition represents a primary feature of sporting events and a key reason for why people watch sports (Reitz & Hallmann, 2022). Moving away from competition to other motives would be a significant change for producers of sports content. Additional research is needed to understand whether this holds true for exergames and Zwift more specifically. Sjöblom et al. (2020) found vicarious achievement correlated with watching live sports and watching esports. Physical attractiveness aligned with future intent to watch live sports, and novelty aligned with future intent to watch esports. The combined findings from these studies highlight potential similarities and differences between viewing exergames and traditional sports which requires further exploration. More specifically, this study attempts to compare the motives of consumers of exergame content to those of consumers of traditional sports content. This will help in learning whether differences exist and how to best address these motives to encourage creating and watching Zwift content.

Studying viewers and content creators of exergames may lead to additional and unique findings beyond those identified above. Anderson et al. (2021) used the Motivation Scale for Sport Consumption and the Sport Fandom Questionnaire to investigate consumption behaviors related to gameplay. The researchers did not include an existing item for athleticism “due to difficulty in translating the underlying meaning into a sports setting” (p. 14). Their decision assumes these participants do not display athleticism in their gameplay—or at least not in the same ways as traditional sports. This does not reflect the gameplay displayed with Zwift, where players must have a base level of athleticism to ride a bicycle to participate and compete. Anderson et al. (2021) suggested the need for additional research to determine what similarities and differences might exist and the potential effects of player demographics on the findings.

Researchers have spent considerable time investigating Twitch and gameplay (Pizzo et al., 2022). To date, no studies have explored the role of Twitch viewership and content creation for exergames. Twitch features a Zwift channel, which had 33,700 followers as of March 2023, according to Twitch.tv (2022). Interest shown by international organizations such as the IOC and UCI lends credence to the need to better understand the Twitch community of viewers and content creators developed around Zwift (Roy, 2020; Schlange, 2021). Findings from this study could help organizations learn more about their current and potential users, documenting what types of content users create, and watch, and why they do so. This research could also assist in identifying
potential relationships between watching and creating this content and other consumption behaviors such as participating in Zwift, watching bicycling, attending bicycling events, and purchasing related products (Anderson et al., 2021).

The current study sought to explore motives related to Twitch viewership and content creation in Zwift. This study was guided by two exploratory research questions (RQs).

RQ1: What motives explain why Zwift participants watch Zwift content streamed on Twitch?

RQ2: What motives explain why Zwift participants create Zwift content streamed on Twitch?

Methods

The purpose of this study was to investigate the motives of Twitch viewers and content creators in Zwift. The study attempted to document motives identified in previous studies as well as potentially new motives related to Zwift usage. Several bicycling exergames exist in addition to Zwift, which is recognized as the industry leader, and these include BKool, FullGaz, RGT, and Rouvy (Nehr, 2022). TwitchTracker (2022) reported that the Twitch Zwift channel had the most viewers with 33,700 as of March 2023. In comparison, the RGT channel had 334 viewers, and the other two games had no designated channels. This study utilized a qualitative method to investigate the motives of Twitch content creating and viewing. Exergames and Twitch are relatively new domains in the world of sport, with limited prior research. Therefore, a qualitative exploratory study was deemed an appropriate approach.

Study Participants and Recruitment

Related studies using qualitative data collection and analysis have examined populations such as professional and amateur content creators (Johnson & Woodcock, 2017, 2021). The current study interviewed participants who watched and/or created Zwift content on Twitch. They were identified as (a) individuals 18 years of age or older, who (b) used Zwift at least once per week for at least 1 year, (c) used Twitch to watch others use Zwift, and/or (d) used Twitch to create content of their own Zwift usage. Potential participants were contacted by posting messages on the social media platforms Reddit and Discord (Qian et al., 2019). Reddit has subreddits for game titles including Zwift (e.g., r/Zwift). Discord allows Zwift users to create servers for their individual communities (e.g., Dads Inside Riding Trainers Team, The Coalition). Recruitment messages soliciting participants were posted on these platforms.

Data Collection

Persons with an interest in participating were directed to a Website, where they viewed an unsigned consent document. If they agreed to participate, they were asked to answer initial screening questions used to determine their eligibility to continue in the study. These included “Do you create sports game content on Twitch?” and “Do you watch others play sports games on Twitch?” Once a participant was deemed eligible to continue, they were emailed a scheduled day and time for their interview. A total of 10 (N = 10) interviews were conducted (Table 1). Study participants ranged in age from 28 to 51 (M = 40.5, SD = 7.4). They used Zwift an average of 4 days per week (SD = 1.8) and participated for an average of 2.2 years (SD = 1.9). Participants spent more of their Zwift-related time on Twitch watching content (72.5%) versus creating content (27.5%). Interviews were conducted via Discord, Microsoft Teams, or Zoom with each interview lasting approximately 30–60 min. Semistructured interviews were employed. To develop the interview protocol, we examined survey instruments and interview questions used in other studies that were also grounded in Uses and Gratifications Theory and explored motives related to game-play (Cabeza-Ramírez et al., 2020; Macey et al., 2020). Most of the previous research used quantitative methods to measure content viewership and creation motives (Hilvert-Bruce et al., 2018; Rogers et al., 2022; Tang et al., 2022). A limited number incorporated qualitative methods to elicit motives for content viewership and creation (Qian et al., 2019, 2020) and content creation (Johnson & Woodcock, 2017, 2021). In the qualitative studies, researchers described their data collections as centered on understanding the “lived experiences” of respondents (Qian et al., 2019, p. 6). We adopted a similar perspective as we attempted to understand how and why participants used Zwift and Twitch to watch and create content, addressing their needs fulfillment. Our interview questions were as follows:

a. Why do you participate in Zwift? What is the primary or most important reason why you participate?

b. Why do you watch Zwift content on Twitch? What is the primary or most important reason why you watch? (Qian et al., 2019, 2020)

Table 1: Interview Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Zwift participation—days/week</th>
<th>Zwift participation—years</th>
<th>Create Zwift content on twitch</th>
<th>Watch Zwift content on twitch</th>
<th>Percentage of time creating content</th>
<th>Percentage of time watching content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alan</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4.9</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jill</td>
<td>51</td>
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<td>1.3</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kendall</td>
<td>36</td>
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<td>2.5</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenneth</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>80</td>
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<td>Kyle</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lincoln</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthew</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
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<td>40</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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c. On average, how long do you watch Zwift content on Twitch? Do you watch as much as you would like? Why or why not? (Qian et al., 2020)

d. How long have you created Zwift content on Twitch? (Zhao et al., 2018)

e. Why do you create content with Zwift on Twitch? What is the primary or most important reason why you create content? (Johnson & Woodcock, 2017; Zhao et al., 2018)

f. On average, how long do you create Zwift content on Twitch? Do you create content as much as you would like? Why or why not? (Zhao et al., 2018)

The first and fifth interview questions directly helped to answer RQ1 and RQ2, respectively. The other interview questions served to develop rapport with respondents and allowed them to elaborate on their answers. In addition, responses to these questions helped in building out the “lived experiences” of participants as they provided more expansive reasons for why they engaged in these activities (Qian et al., 2019, p. 6). These motives questions centered on the need fulfillment aspect of uses and gratifications theory, as they allowed respondents to describe their media needs from an individual perspective (Rubin, 2002). The questions also helped in documenting Zwift and Twitch as phenomena, particularly how they served to satisfy the needs identified by participants.

Data Analysis

Following transcription of the interviews, we engaged in a deductive thematic analysis. This approach allowed us to determine whether responses from participants aligned with existing motives gleaned from research within the realm of esports. This also created space for additional motives specific to exergames to emerge. The current study is one of the first to explore Twitch with exergame usage. The exploratory nature of our research warranted a more open approach to elicit pertinent motives related to this activity. Our interview questions and data collection also reflected techniques adopted by previous researchers, who used the similar tactics within the broader esports realm (Johnson & Woodcock, 2017, 2021; Qian et al., 2019, 2020).

Each response served as the unit of analysis. Due to the length of some responses, multiple motives could have been coded within one response. Any responses that did not align with existing research were set aside for further analysis. Each researcher independently coded nine transcripts (10 total participants, where two interviewees were set aside for further analysis). Each researcher independently coded nine transcripts (10 total participants, where two interviewees were set aside for further analysis). Each researcher independently coded nine transcripts (10 total participants, where two interviewees were set aside for further analysis). Each researcher independently coded nine transcripts (10 total participants, where two interviewees were set aside for further analysis). Each researcher independently coded nine transcripts (10 total participants, where two interviewees were set aside for further analysis). Each researcher independently coded nine transcripts (10 total participants, where two interviewees were set aside for further analysis).

Data Trustworthiness

Following the guidance of Lincoln and Guba (1985), we worked to ensure the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of our findings. Credibility asserts assurance in the results with the ability to believe them. We established credibility through investigator triangulation of the data by having each researcher review the transcripts individually and independently, followed by comparing categories and themes together as a research team. Transferability indicates the ability to apply the findings to other settings. We established transferability by providing detailed descriptions when discussing our findings. This will aid future researchers conducting similar studies to determine whether findings from our study could potentially be applied to theirs. Dependability suggests the results have repeatability and consistency. We established dependability through an inquiry audit. This involved taking extensive notes during the process, which documented decisions made by the researchers during data collection and analysis. Finally, confirmability indicates the results stem from participants and are not attributable to the biases of the researchers. We established confirmability through researcher reflexivity. This step involved considering our own researcher positionalities and how this might influence our analysis.

Results

The first RQ asked, what motives explain why Zwift participants watch Zwift content streamed on Twitch? The most salient motives for viewing Zwift content via Twitch were (a) community and building a safe and supportive environment online; (b) interaction, socializing with others, and developing relationships; and (c) knowledge, learning from viewers, and content creators. Comments are provided verbatim.

Motives of Viewers

Community

Community was mentioned consistently by the study participants. Previous motives research described community as building a space perceived as safe, supportive, and creative (Hilvert-Brue et al., 2018; Reitz & Hallmann, 2022). This resonated with participants who frequently mentioned the sense of community experienced using Zwift and Twitch. According to Kendall, “It (Zwift) just creates that community and makes people feel like they’re not alone in what they’re doing.” She elaborated, stating, “We’re not going out to watch sporting events live, we’re not going to races live anymore with 1,000 people signing up at a start line [during the COVID-19 pandemic]. But this is a way that 1,000 people can do it together, and build that community, and share it with their friends and family.” Alan described his community: “It just started as trying to research [Zwift], and then it developed into a couple of friendships,” which he defined as approximately 20 others using Zwift. Participants also discussed how Zwift created a safe community space to both workout during the COVID-19 pandemic. Maya stated, “I need to be with people. And Zwift allows me to still be with people, even though it’s all virtual. So, yeah, it’s, I think it’s the human connection thing.”

Interaction

Coupled with community, participants mentioned interaction as another motive for viewing Zwift content on Twitch. Previous researchers described interaction as developing parasocial relationships with content creators as well as having the ability to cheer content creators and socialize with other viewers (Brown et al., 2018; Hilvert-Brue et al., 2018; Sjöblom & Hamari, 2017). In this study, participants frequently mentioned the COVID-19 pandemic and how Zwift provided an outlet for socializing. Steve stated, “So when the pandemic started and you needed an outlet, this was a great way to still be social, and compete, and see the world.”

Matthew said, “I might jump on there (Twitch) and go and give them some words of encouragement, that type of thing.” He explained, “there’s nothing better than you’re doing this, you’re
putting yourself out there, and someone actually comments and says, ‘hey, great job, keep going.’” Zach compared his interactions while watching Zwift versus other livestreams: “It’s more of like an intimate watch session. In some other esports games, for the high-profile [content creators], they’re streaming hundreds of thousands of people at once.” He elaborated, “There’s such a disparity between the high-profile people and the everyday [content creators]. And it’s kind of nice to have that one-on-one where you can cheer for someone that’s going on a race or just chat.”

Knowledge
Knowledge was often discussed in terms of gaining insights into racing techniques or engaging in racecourse reconnaissance (“recon”). Researchers studying motives outlined ways to attain knowledge while using Twitch. These included the ability to learn from content creators and viewers, provide knowledge about gameplay to others, and improve personal game literacy and gameplay (Brown et al., 2018; Hilvert-Bruce et al., 2018; Macey et al., 2020). Zwift participants offered similar remarks. Jill said:

I generally like to watch before, it’s recon before I’m going to race, so I get to really hear all the ins and outs about the course and what they recommend. And not to say that I internalize all that, because on race day a lot of that goes out the window, but it’s good just to hear someone’s perspective and see what some of the pro cyclists are doing.

Lincoln said, “I found watching videos where people do the course recon makes me think a little bit more about how I’m going to race that course as opposed to just trying to keep up with a group and think more tactically.” Zach elaborated: “A lot of people who have their video on. I’m able to see [their] form, when they go into a sprint and they’re doing particularly well. Maybe I’ll be able to pick up some things.”

Additional Motives
Community, interaction, and knowledge emerged as the most prominent motives for Twitch viewership of Zwift content. Additional motives for viewing content appeared, including fandom and competition. Previous Twitch research described fandom as having the ability to follow favorite content creators and show an interest in gameplay and specific games (Brown et al., 2018; Reitz & Hallmann, 2022; Rogers et al., 2022). Matthew said, “There’s a couple of guys that are really good in engaging with their audience, and they’re talking about various things. Like GP Lama, for example, when he streams, I’ll watch him for the duration of whatever he’s doing.” Lincoln also mentioned content creator GP Lama and described this stream, “It’s like all these insider tips and tricks.”

Competition also emerged as a less prominent theme mentioned by participants. Previous research described this motive as watching others compete as well as enjoying the excitement and suspense related to events (Brown et al., 2018; Reitz & Hallmann, 2022). Lincoln explained, “We don’t have cable [television]. So, I don’t get to keep up with a lot of the pro peloton races anymore.” Instead, he uses Twitch to watch professional cyclists compete in this setting: “I feel like I know some of these guys now because I’ve raced against them before, so you have a connection.” Jill said, “Frankly, I just get anewestruck by watching the pros race.”

Multiple motives existed for viewing Zwift content via Twitch and these mirrored motives have been identified in previous research. In this study, knowledge, interaction, and community were most prominent, while competition and fandom appeared on the periphery. The second RQ asked, what motives explain why Zwift participants create Zwift content streamed on Twitch? The most salient motives for creating Zwift content via Twitch were (a) interaction and receiving social support; (b) knowledge, giving and receiving feedback, and/or offering analysis; and (c) accomplishments, showcasing the achievement of challenges, and advancing in the game. Comments are provided verbatim.

Motives of Content Creators
Interaction
Participants mentioned the support they received through interaction via Twitch, helping them persevere through difficult tasks. Previous research described interaction as receiving support from viewers, building and retaining an audience, encouraging others through chat, and developing relationships through Twitch (Hu et al., 2017; Taylor, 2018; Zhao et al., 2018). Steve, who creates Zwift content using Twitch, said, “It’s cool where they have all these extras on there, right? It’s not just the video feed, but it’s the audio, it’s the interaction, being able to chat with other people.”

Kenneth also said:

It’s not non-stop chatting, but occasional. It’s a little bit more focused. A little bit related to the teamwork and a little bit just to keep your mind off the suckier moments, right? When you feel like the race is wearing you down. It doesn’t hurt to have a little old chatter going on with the group.

Maya explained that this interaction “added human elements to a racing platform.” She said, “When I ride with my team, at the end, I’ll try to do a little bit of video. So, you can see a real person behind those avatars. I think it makes people connect a little bit better.” Interaction and community often worked in concert. Content creators enjoyed these interactions as they conversed with others while livestreaming. Viewers enjoyed the sense of community along with encouragement they received from other users through the game.

Knowledge
Knowledge emerged as another theme. Participants viewed knowledge as a reciprocal process in the sense that gaining and sharing knowledge were both vital to their participation in the Zwift community. Previous research documented the presence of knowledge through giving and receiving feedback, offering analysis, and demonstrating mastery of skills (Sjöblom et al., 2017; Taylor, 2018; Zhao et al., 2018). Matthew stated, “You pick up and you learn bits and pieces of information that maybe you didn’t know before, and that will make my experience better and maybe I might be able to share that experience with other people as well.”

Steve said,

You want to be able to capture or record your ride. Because when you go back and look at it again, you get to evaluate the analysis or analyze your ride and see like, ‘Oh, hey, I could have done this better. I could approach this better. This is where it all fell apart’. I think the biggest reason, the primary reason really is those post-race analyses.

Having this content also increased interaction and community. Maya said, “It’s fun for the team to have the videos of themselves in the race.” Likewise, Kenneth said, “It’s cool to have it there, so that...
we can go back see how things went or just kind of reminisce and have our fun.”

**Accomplishments**

Participants also discussed the ability to showcase their accomplishments via content creation. Previous studies articulated accomplishments from the perspective of content creators as seeking challenges and fulfilling aspirations as well as enjoying tasks and advancing in the game (Qian et al., 2019). Examples in this study included Lincoln who wanted to broadcast his racing “for general interest, for people back home, and then for me to better myself.” Matthew also wanted to show others what he could do and in turn encourage them to do the same:

The driving force is really to try and get other people motivated to get out there and try this and give it a shot and see how they go. As long as it is something that they can get healthy doing and stave off all the diseases and problems that we’re facing.

Kendall said, “I’m really proud of myself because I did this race. I came first, and I have it on video that I came first in this race.” Alan also remarked, “I started streaming solely just if I had a cool race.”

**Additional Motives**

In addition to the prominent motives of interaction, knowledge, and accomplishments, the motives brand and broadcasting also appeared. Previous research described the brand motive as building an online presence, creating a professional identity, improving self-image and self-presentation, and gaining visibility and celebrity status (Hu et al., 2017; Johnson & Woodcock, 2017; Sjöblom et al., 2017; Taylor, 2018; Zhao et al., 2018). Participants often referenced the team they raced with through Zwift. Kendall asked, “How do you help inspire other people to get involved? That’s my vision for setting it up and sharing with more people.” Kyle asserted these efforts could lead to larger goals:

I think its primary purpose should be how does it make the community better—better from a racing perspective, better for attracting talent perspective? I think that’s the way it should be used: as an education tool, not as a ‘look at me going for a ride’ tool.

Broadcasting also appeared in participant interviews. Previous studies identified broadcasting as developing and disseminating content through gameplay for an audience of online viewers (Sjöblom & Hamari, 2017; Taylor, 2018). Steve stated, “It’s just fun creating videos. It’s cool to be able to explore that creative side as well as your physical side.” Kenneth said, “When you live in a society where a lot of the day-to-day content you consume is made by regular people creators, you can’t help but get indoctrinated and interested.” Despite the potential benefits, Kyle cautioned, “I think that’s the challenge that we’ll have is you can end up diluting your brand because everybody’s streaming.”

Participants identified several reasons for creating content through their use of Zwift and Twitch. Similar to motives for viewership, participants expressed the desire to interact, exchange knowledge, and showcase accomplishments. They additionally made mention of branding and broadcasting as important aspects of their participation.

**Summary**

The findings revealed themes for using Zwift and Twitch as viewers and content creators, and these themes aligned with previous research examining motives for Twitch usage related to gameplay (Brown et al., 2018; Hilvert-Bruce et al., 2018; Sjöblom & Hamari, 2017; Zhao et al., 2018). In this study, participants indicated interaction, knowledge, and community were primary reasons for watching Zwift-related content on Twitch (Figure 1). Participants also shared that interaction, knowledge, and accomplishments were primary reasons for creating Twitch content. The findings showcased overlaps among viewers and content creators, leading to theoretical and practical implications outlined below.

**Discussion**

Research on Twitch and esports has increased significantly, and a subset of these studies have employed uses and gratifications theory to ground their work (Cheah et al., 2022; Reitz & Hallmann, 2022). Uses and Gratifications Theory suggests individuals use media to meet and gratify their needs. This provides a framework for exploring media consumed by individuals and why they consume it (Rubin, 2002). Five assumptions are offered with Uses and Gratifications Theory, and our study focused on two of them: (a) individuals have specific goals for why they use media, and (b) this media usage helps them meet their goals (Katz et al., 1973; Ruggiero, 2009; Shao, 2009). Previous uses and gratifications theory research centered on esports and multiple motives for watching this content (Billings & Mikkilineni, 2022; Brown et al., 2018; Cabeza-Ramírez et al., 2020). To date, researchers have not used this approach to understand why participants create related content. The current study extended the research to incorporate motives for watching and creating content, focusing on the undereexplored area of exergames (Bjärehed & Bjärehed, 2022; Viana et al., 2020, 2021). This study represents one of the first to investigate these motives through a qualitative approach and a uses and gratifications theory lens, aiding in better understanding Zwift participants, their Twitch behaviors, and potential outcomes related to these activities.

**Theoretical Implications**

Three theoretical implications emerged from the study: (a) confirmation of previously identified motives, (b) identification of shared motives for Twitch viewers and content creators, and (c) extension of previous exergame research.

![Figure 1 — Twitch motives for viewers and content creators.](image-url)
Confirmation of Previously Identified Motives

The findings from this study helped confirm the relevance and application of motives previously identified in uses and gratifications theory research within a new exergame context. Systematic reviews of uses and gratifications theory research related to esports reported motives like those found in this study with interaction, knowledge, and community for watching content (Cheah et al., 2022; Reitz & Hallmann, 2022). Interaction, knowledge, and accomplishments were identified as motives for creating content. These findings answer the uses and gratifications theory questions of what goals individuals have for using media (in this study, goals such as interacting with others, gaining knowledge, and building community) and how this media usage (in this study, Twitch and Zwift) helps them meet their goals through viewing and creating content. This aligns with previous uses and gratifications theory research that distinguishes between media usage in a ritualized way (e.g., diversion and escapism) versus an instrumental way (e.g., information and knowledge, Rubin, 2002). The results indicate that researchers have a solid base of motives for studying exergames and can work to extend this research by shifting their focus to other potential motives. As one of the first studies employing Uses and Gratifications Theory to understand content creation motives, the research highlights a continued opportunity to use this framework to understand what users want in this context and how they use platforms such as Twitch and exergames to meet their needs.

With the current study, less frequently mentioned motives appeared for viewers with competition and fandom as well as for content creators with brand and broadcasting. Previous studies, including Qian et al. (2019), identified competition and fandom as motives for viewers who have interest in watching others compete and following their favorite content creators. Similarly, research previously identified brand (Hu et al., 2017; Johnson & Woodcock, 2017) and broadcasting (Qian et al., 2020) as motives for content creators, as these individuals build an online presence and develop content through their gameplay. Qian et al. (2020) also included motives related to broadcasting such as chat room, livestream quality, and commentary features. No mention of these variables appeared in the current study. Thus, additional investigation is needed, particularly from the perspective of content creators, to ascertain the relative importance of these factors.

Identification of Shared Motives for Twitch Viewers and Content Creators

Previous research often looked at viewers or content creators separately, and studies grounded in Uses and Gratifications Theory focused solely on viewers (Cheah et al., 2022; Reitz & Hallmann, 2022). Few studies combined the two groups into one investigation (Sjöblom & Hamari, 2017). The current study collected data from individuals who both created and viewed content, seeking to document potential overlapping media usage needs and goals, and demonstrating the interplay between the two activities. The findings helped to confirm shared motives for viewers and content creators through the lens of uses and gratifications theory and underscored the advantages of including viewers and content creators in one analysis. Qian et al. (2019) noted viewers who watched Twitch livestreams frequently played the same games. Zhao et al. (2018) emphasized the need to understand these interactions, as they could create a virtuous cycle where content creators develop content, and viewers watch this content, which encourages more content creation.

Earlier research also separately identified motives for Twitch viewers that aligned with motives for Twitch content creators, including interaction, knowledge, and accomplishments (Taylor, 2018; Zhao et al., 2018). The current study found the same by studying both groups simultaneously, where interaction and knowledge proved most salient for viewers and content creators. This study represents one of few to collectively examine the groups together and one of the first to do so through uses and gratifications theory. Focusing on understanding the media goals and needs of users, the study found participants used Twitch to engage in conversation and share information, most notably about race reconnaissance and game techniques with one another. They indicated a desire to create their own content after watching and learning from the content of others. Doing so allowed viewers to benefit from a shared community and content creators to focus on their brand and broadcasting activities. A symbiotic relationship exists between content creators and viewers, who may potentially be one and the same. Thus, it may become prudent to examine them together within the same study rather than creating artificial delineations between the two, which could lead to the loss of information about these interactions. Combining groups could also unearth shared motives (e.g., information and knowledge) to help expand understandings about media usage and need fulfillment (Rubin, 2002).

Extension of Previous Exergame Research

The results from this study also highlight the importance of treating consumers of exergame content as similar to but separate from consumers of traditional sports content (Billings & Mikkilineni, 2022; Brown et al., 2018; Rogers et al., 2022). Previous studies found similarities between watching esports and traditional sports for motives such as acquisition of knowledge, esthetics, and drama (Pizzo et al., 2018), as well as autonomy and fandom (Rogers et al., 2022). Their research also revealed differences such as higher levels of arousal and entertainment for traditional sports in one context (Billings & Mikkilineni, 2022), and higher levels of fandom, Schwabism, and social sport for esports in a different context (Brown et al., 2018). The current study aligned with Brown et al. (2018) in that sharing information and interacting with others were important reasons for watching Zwift content. Popular motives such as arousal, entertainment, and passing time identified in other uses and gratifications theory studies were not mentioned by participants in the current study. This finding underscores the notion that sport consumers do not represent a monolithic group and require segmentation and individualized treatment when examining their motives. Continuing to explore emergent comparisons and contrasts between the consumption of traditional sports and exergames through a uses and gratifications theory lens could yield additional insights and explanations for these outcomes.

The current study represents one of the first to examine the relationship between exergames and Twitch usage. The most reported salient motives from previous sport studies included arousal (Billings & Mikkilineni, 2022), autonomy (Rogers et al., 2022), entertainment (Billings & Mikkilineni, 2022; Rogers et al., 2022), fandom (Brown et al., 2018; Rogers et al., 2022), interaction (Brown et al., 2018), knowledge (Brown et al., 2018), and passing time (Billings & Mikkilineni, 2022). From this list, achievement, fandom, interaction, and knowledge were also important for participants in the current study. This finding aligns with previous uses and gratifications theory research indicating exergames and traditional sports share similarities. The results also suggest further
investigation to better understand the differences—why they occur and whether they demand additional consideration.

Anderson et al. (2021) asserted that salient motives can drive behavioral intentions and actual behaviors such as playing games, watching the gameplay of others, and buying related equipment and apparel. Sjöblom et al. (2020) also found vicarious achievement correlated with watching live sports and watching esports; physical attractiveness aligned with future intent to watch live sports, and novelty aligned with future intent to watch esports. Participants in the current study did not discuss specific behavioral intentions despite reporting perceived benefits from their activities. Additional research centered on this aspect could help to unearth potential connections with watching and creating Twitch content and other activities such as watching competitive bicycling and purchasing bicycle trainers and apparel. Uses and Gratifications Theory focuses on why individuals use media and how this media usage helps them address specific goals (Rubin, 2002). Combining content creation and viewership goals with goals related to purchasing products could help in advancing our understanding about Twitch and exergame participation.

The current study also did not compare exergame to traditional sports consumption, so we cannot make a judgment about the relative levels of importance or saliency of watching Zwift content on Twitch versus watching a traditional bicycling event such as the Tour de France or the Giro d’Italia. However, Zwift is a bicycling exergame. Comparing bicycling exergame consumption to that of individuals who ride and race bicycles outdoors and/or watch bicycling during the Olympic Games or other major events could shed greater light on this topic. This would help in better understanding what drives individuals to take part in exergames and what consumption behaviors might emerge from this engagement.

**Practical Implications**

Documenting motives for why current consumers use Twitch to view and create content could help Zwift, the company, with retaining its current customers and attracting new ones. In addition, organizations such as the IOC, UCI, and others within the bicycling industry could benefit from learning what drives this customer base as it relates to participating in Zwift and engaging with the resulting content. Practical implications emerged from this study. They included: (a) comparison of motives for watching Zwift versus traditional sports, (b) support of content creation through Zwift and Twitch, and (c) promotion of additional viewership.

**Comparison of Motives for Watching Zwift Versus Traditional Sports**

Rather than simply watching sporting events unfold on Twitch, Zwift viewers sought to obtain more from their viewership—whether learning new skills to improve their own performances or connecting socially with others. Given this desire for interaction, strategies used for broadcasting Zwift content might be different than those used for traditional sports, where the emphasis falls more on providing entertainment used to help viewers pass time. Zwift viewers have some interest in watching bicycle races for competition and fandom, but mostly want to use this viewership to improve or enhance their own personal performances rather than focusing solely on the performances of others.

This finding is notable for the IOC and UCI, which used Zwift and Twitch to broadcast the Olympic Virtual Series. These and other organizations who want to create and showcase similar events should look for ways to market and highlight favored motives of Zwift viewers. Rather than employing the same approaches used for their network content, their Twitch broadcasts might include smaller segments where professional racers discuss their Zwift racing strategies or offer tips about the various racecourses, content Zwift viewers currently seek through various livestreams. Broadcasters could also recognize and promote amateur teams from the Zwift community and have individual team members join the livestream in special interest features. They could also encourage viewers to use the Twitch chat function. Viewers posting questions and comments could stimulate interaction with the commentators and other viewers throughout these broadcasts.

**Support of Content Creation Through Zwift and Twitch**

Zwift viewers want to receive knowledge, and content creators want to share knowledge. Zwift and Twitch as organizations could benefit from focusing on this knowledge dissemination motive. Opportunities might include integrating Twitch features into the Zwift game or providing Zwift users with tutorials and other information on using Twitch as a resource for communicating and connecting with one another. Leaders from both organizations could encourage individuals to follow the Zwift channel, add their own content, and watch content provided by others. Promotional activities encouraging these behaviors might include offering rewards to content creators who attract the most viewers and to viewers who demonstrate the most engagement on Twitch. Zwift viewers in this study cited content creator GP Lama as someone they watched on Twitch. Leaders from Zwift and Twitch could leverage this individual and other influential users to help provide content, market their platforms, and offer other assistance or programming, particularly for those who might be new to riding or racing and seeking information about how to navigate the game and sport.

**Promotion of Additional Viewership**

If more Zwift users view Twitch as a viable sport channel, an opportunity exists to market the platform as such. The Zwift channel currently has 33,700 followers on Twitch, yet Zwift the company reported having 2.5 million subscribers (Roy, 2020). An opportunity exists for Twitch to capture more of this audience. Organizational leaders from Twitch and Zwift could create a partnership that allows Twitch to promote its platform in the game. During a special Virtual Tour de France event series, in-game signage and banners for official sponsors were featured (Schlange, 2020b). Twitch could do the same by hosting a series event, which could involve signage around courses, virtual bicycling kits for avatars, and real-life giveaways such as free Twitch subscriptions, upgrades, and promotional products with the Twitch colors and logo. This would increase the visibility of the company and provide an avenue for promoting its offerings.

Much of the Zwift content mentioned by participants fell into two of the three livestream categories identified by Sjöblom et al. (2017): (a) gameplay of a competitive nature and (b) informational with how to play. The entertainment category was not mentioned, and this aligns with the finding that entertainment did not represent a salient motive for Zwift viewership. Therefore, content creators should continue their focus on the other two categories to meet the needs of viewers. Producers of bicycle-related goods and services should look to influential content creators to help promote their products. Zwift users seek knowledge. Having content creators share information about the latest products that could aid their participation would address this motive and appeal to viewers.
These companies could also create their own Twitch channel and promote their content to Zwift viewers. They could also develop segments for content creators to broadcast on their own channels. Creating partnerships with Zwift to provide content for viewers, while helping content creators produce their own ancillary programming to support and promote these relationships, could provide unique spaces for everyone involved.

Limitations and Future Research

Limitations exist with the current study. First, the study examined 10 individuals who used Zwift and Twitch to augment their participation by watching others, creating content, or both. We reached data saturation with these 10 individuals, but an opportunity exists to gather data from a larger sample to continue the investigation of this exergame. This could include a wider array of users in terms of demographic variables such as age, gender, and race and ethnicity. Most of the respondents were middle-aged, White women and men. An expanded sample could include younger and older, non-White, and nonbinary participants. Second, the individuals interviewed in this study used Zwift for a relatively long period of time and had experience using Twitch. The motives of these individuals may differ from those of individuals with less expertise in Zwift and/or Twitch. Third, the study focused on one exergame, Zwift. Collecting data from users of other exergame titles and sports might provide different insights and perspectives about exergames.

Future research could address these limitations through expanded survey usage. Studies could collect data through surveys to reach a larger segment of the population and increase the generalizability of the findings. Survey instruments developed by Qian et al. (2019) and Qian et al. (2020) could assist with this collection. Future research could additionally involve developing a more comprehensive survey instrument that (a) incorporates content creators and viewers with their shared emphasis on interaction and knowledge, while allowing for (b) greater investigation of exergames. This would include the integration of additional motives specific to exergames. In addition, future studies should continue to incorporate a qualitative perspective to address the dearth of studies employing this approach (Cheah et al., 2022). A two-pronged mixed-methods study with follow-up interviews and focus groups could provide additional findings potentially missed by using only quantitative or qualitative methods.

The use of surveys could help with gathering information from a wider variety of participants and ranges of expertise with Zwift and Twitch. This would aid in determining whether differences in motives occur based on experience and other variables. Participants in the current study ranged in age from 28 to 51 years, with an average age of 41 years. In 2022, a reported 532 million esports users existed globally; 64% were males and 36% were women, with the largest percentage of both genders in the 21–35 years age range (Newzoo, 2022). Pizzo et al. (2022) noted the potential advantages relatively older consumers bring with more time and disposable income. “This is an untapped market extending to a much broader and larger portion of the population” (p. 233). Yet, to date, few studies have centered on relatively older participants. Examining these participants in the current study provided a unique look at how a different group of consumers engage with Twitch, an important perspective as we seek to expand this research.

Finally, studying exergames in isolation could assist with better understanding this phenomenon. This could prove similar to the approaches taken by previous researchers, who argued the need for survey instruments to reflect the uniqueness of esports compared to traditional sports. For example, Anderson et al. (2021) used the Motivation Scale for Sport Consumption to study esports consumption but did not include the variable of athleticism. Physical skills were motives noted by Reitz and Hallmann (2022) and Pizzo et al. (2018). Zwift participants must ride a bicycle while playing the game. Content creators can show themselves riding their bicycles, and viewers can use this content to learn more about the game and improve their individual performances. Thus, these factors could become more relevant to exergames, and we encourage their inclusion in future studies of exergames and as a potential part of updated or new survey instruments.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to investigate the motives of Twitch viewers and content creators in Zwift. The study documented the presence of shared motives between viewers and content creators with interaction and knowledge. In addition, viewers noted the motives of community, fandom, and competition. Content creators discussed the motives of accomplishments, brand, and broadcasting. The motives reflect those documented by previous research grounded in Uses and Gratifications Theory, supporting the previously asserted need to investigate sport motives specific to esports. The study adds to the extant research base by offering an exploration of exergames. The study also lays the foundation for additional research regarding exergames and the role they can play within this realm.

References


