The Disruptive Potential of Virtual Reality (VR) Technology in Sport Management Research

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The purpose of this conceptual research is to add a needed sport research foundation for the digital disruption conversation within emergent virtual reality (VR) experiences, broadcasts, trainings, and games across global sport. This study aims to be the first to lay a foundation on the characteristics of VR and the three methods of in-game advertising (IGA) through the literature for those who are not yet familiar or have not yet had the opportunity of a first-hand VR experience. These VR characteristics of immersion, interaction, and imagination are explored to showcase VR’s potential to increasingly engage users.

This research furthers the discussion on emerging technology in sport management research through VR technology. To provide this unique sport VR research foundation, the evolution of VR is identified through history leading us to several exploratory avenues for practical sport management research. The purpose in tracing the VR evolution within the sport industry to this point is so that a discussion of what is missing from the literature can be had for the advancement of this important technological and transformative line of research. In providing the history and context for future VR study, topical sport management research lines are suggested. As such, this paper focuses on areas that the research team believe will be digitally disrupted first in VR through marketing and advertising, management, sport video games, and eSports.

Sport consumers still primarily consume through traditional outlets such as television, radio, and the Internet. Streaming VR sport broadcasts are discussed as immersion media continues to grow in market share and marketing design must continue to evolve within these digital spaces that are no longer restricted to 2D. Sport is a unique space that creates emotional choice (Lee and Heere, 2018) where the personalization of offers is paramount (Abeza et al., 2019) and brands have an opportunity to create new value creation. This exploratory line of research has just become possible through VR eye tracking hardware now available to researchers (i.e. HTC Vive Pro Eye with built in Tobii eye tracking and available analytics software).

As an academic field, we must be ready at the forefront for a potential digital disruption through VR to current norms in all areas. Further exploration on advertising placement is critical for the success of the next evolutionary stage of digital marketing. Sport advertisement has long been held to a bottom up model within stadiums with the most expensive logo placement on the playing surface. Marketers must now search to understand if the traditional TV location-based pricing levels of stadium advertising spaces hold true in VR sport broadcasts. Future research is suggested and available for stadium managers based on the measurement of consumer glances of arena IGA within VR sport event broadcasts.

Limitations of social fandom drivers, VR environment isolation, institutional research resources, and industry partnerships are also discussed.