A Case Study of Factors Impacting Aspiring Esport Athletes in South Korea

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the structural relationships of factors like attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behavioral control (PBC), and career pursuit intentions among aspiring esport athletes using the theory of planned behavior, and exploring the moderating influence of athletic identity on these relationships. We assessed the measurement scale's validity and reliability with confirmatory factor analysis, Cronbach's alpha coefficients, and correlational analysis. Structural equation modeling evaluated the effects of three factors – attitudes, subjective norms, and PBC – on career pursuit intentions. Additionally, a hierarchical regression analysis was performed to confirm the moderating effect of athletic identity. The results revealed positive impacts of attitudes ($\beta = 0.300$, $p < 0.001$), subjective norms ($\beta = 0.414$, $p < 0.001$), and perceived behavioral control ($\beta = 0.274$, $p < 0.001$) on career pursuit intentions. However, athletic identity did not moderate the relationships among the research variables. We confirmed that subjective norms were the most influential factor in improving career pursuit intentions; and, although PBC has been considered as a moderating variable, our study found that PBC was a direct determinant of career pursuit intentions.

Keywords: esport, theory of planned behavior, athletic identity, career pursuit intentions, perceived behavior control

INTRODUCTION

According to Hamari and Sjöblom (2017, p. 211), esport, that is "electronic sports," may be defined as "a form of sports where electronic systems facilitate the primary aspects of the sport; the input of players and teams, as well as the output of the esport system, are mediated by human-computer interfaces." These are becoming popular with the younger generation today due to the proliferation

of high-speed internet and smartphones. However, there are significant academic debates about whether esport can be considered as "real" sport. Recently, Park (2020) argued that esport is a real sport since it includes a competition to determine winners and losers, rules for fair play, various skills, and team strategies for victory, endurance, and concentration. Due to their increasing global popularity, esport will be an official event at the 2022 Asian Games in Hangzhou, China. Moreover, many professional sports clubs in the U.S. and Europe, and sportswear companies – such as Nike and Adidas – are actively investing in esport to create new business opportunities (Choi, 2020).

Although it is not the birthplace of esport, South Korea created the early boom of esport and is now considered the capital and suzerain of esport (Jin, 2020). The reason behind Korea's emergence as an esport powerhouse is related to the 1997 financial crisis. The Korean government has laid the foundation for esport to grow by focusing on telecommunications and Internet infrastructure as a response to the crisis (Jin, 2020; Lee, 2019). Thanks to the widespread high-speed Internet and PC bang (a LAN gaming center), Korean esport has won the biggest esport tournaments such as Korea StarCraft League, League of Legends World Championship, and Overwatch World Cup. Lee Sang-Hyeok, a League of Legends esport athlete, became a teenage idol for youngsters in Korea, and more and more teenagers hope to become famous professional esport athletes (Park, 2020).

However, due to the deep-rooted negative perception of esport among adults in Eastern Asia and South Korea's social preference for professional occupations, such as judges, prosecutors, lawyers, doctors, and professors, a large number of esport aspirants are rethinking their pursuit of esport careers. Many Korean parents desire their children to engage in professional occupations instead of pursuing professional esport careers. Moreover, as the National Assembly and Ministry of Gender, Equality and Family – in response to some women's groups –approved and implemented the controversial "shutdown law" in 2011 that banned younger teens from playing esport after midnight (Lee et al., 2017), minors with talent in esport have been labelled as addicts, which is discriminatory, and they have difficulty practicing esport. Thus, to develop the Korean esport industry, it is important for esport coaches, investors, and interested parties to create an encouraging environment for aspiring esport athletes to pursue their career aspirations.

Thus, it seems essential for researchers to explore factors that positively influence aspiring esport athletes, either in high school, college or on an amateur esport team. Thus, the current study applies the theory of planned behavior (TPB) (Bosnjak et al., 2020), an extension of the theory of reasoned action (TRA), which is one of the most widely recognized social-psychological models for understanding human behavior (Ulker-Demirel and Ciftci, 2020). Since its publication in 1991, many researchers in a multitude of behavioral domains, such as healthy eating behavior, education, green consumerism, tourism, online retailing, and sports marketing, have used the theory to explore determinants of intentions and behavior (Ajzen, 2020; Ulker-Demirel and Ciftci, 2020). There are three main attributes in the TPB: attitude toward the behavior, subjective norms concerning the behavior, and perceived behavioral control (PBC), which are likely to influence the intention to perform the behavior (Ajzen, 2020). Additionally, to fill previous TPB studies' gaps and deeply understand aspiring esport athletes' psychology and behavior, the present study examines the moderating effect of athletic identity – that is, the degree to which an individual equates to the social role of an athlete. Intuitively, athletes with strong athletic identity are more likely to pursue

athletic careers than athletes with low athletic identity because the former could help athletes avoid burnout by fostering motivation (Martin and Horn, 2013). If athletic identity moderates the relationships among the TPB variables, then esport instructors can segregate aspiring esport athletes according to the level of athletic identity using different strategies.

Accordingly, this study examines the structural relationships between attitudes, subjective norms, PBC, and career pursuit intentions by applying the TPB in a sample of aspiring esport athletes. Furthermore, to address gaps in the previous studies, this study analyzes the moderating effect of athletic identity.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

The Theory of Reasoned Action and Theory of Planned Behavior

The TRA proposed by Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) has long been recognized as the most widely used social-psychological approach for predicting human behaviors. In the TRA, the intention is viewed as an individual's cognitive motivation to utilize the effort in performing a specific behavior (Ajzen, 1985; Han et al., 2010). According to TRA, because most specific human behaviors are under complete volitional control of intention, the behaviors are determined by intention (Azjen, 1980). People have a high degree of willingness or readiness in their decision-making process, thus obtaining positive outcomes among several alternatives (Han et al., 2010).

In the TRA model, there are two major variables to predict behavioral intentions: attitude toward performing the behavior and subjective norms (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975). Attitudes can be described as "the degree to which a person has a favorable or unfavorable evaluation or appraisal of the behavior in question" (Ajzen, 1991, p. 188). An individual's attitude towards a behavior is favorable when the predicted outcomes of participating in behavior are positive (Kim et al., 2020). Attitude toward a behavior is a function of one's salient belief concerning the possible consequences of the behavior, termed behavioral beliefs (Ajzen, 2020). Thus, it is viewed as one's subjective probability that performing a behavior will have certain consequences (Ajzen, 2020). For example, esport customers could perceive participating in an esport tournament as positive by experiencing the clean and well-maintained facilities and stadium, receiving unexpected kindness or hospitality from event volunteers or staff, and engaging with a variety of events and performances such as prize and ticket giveaway events. In the TRA, subjective norms are posited as a second predictor of behavioral intentions. Ajzen (1991, p. 188) views subjective norms as "the perceived social pressure to perform or not to perform the behavior." In other words, subjective norms denote the individual's perceived social expectation from a given referent individual who influences their decision-making (e.g., family, friends, relatives, spouse, coworkers, supervisor, colleagues, associates, or business partners) (Park, 2000). Subjective norms can be affected by normative beliefs described as "the probability of whether significant referents would approve or disapprove the behavior" (Han et al., 2010, p. 327). In our case, as many aspiring esport athletes are young and not financially independent, they are likely to rely on the perceptions of family or close friends about their pursuit of esport careers.

In contrast, if a family does not financially support an aspiring esport athlete, the athlete is in the hospital for a long time or the government tightens restrictions of teenagers playing esport,

or the athlete does not have enough time to practice a game because of a part-time job, injury, or the restriction, this can have a negative influence on the athlete. As a result, many researchers have realized that the applicability of the TRA has some limitations to understand the variety of individuals' behavior (Ajzen, 2020). Therefore, heeding researchers' arguments that the TRA is needed to produce a broadened version of the TRA, Ajzen (1991) developed the TPB that includes an additional important construct, that is PBC. PBC can be defined as "the perceived ease or difficulty of performing the behavior (Ajzen, 1991, p. 122). Precisely, PBC evaluates a people's perceptions of how one can control factors that may bound the actions needed to deal with a specific situation (Verma and Chandra, 2018); that is, when people have enough time, resources, and chances to overcome the problematic situation, PBC should be the highest (Madden et al., 1992). It is believed that PBC is determined to be a function of control beliefs that refer to an individual's perceived requirements of the opportunities and resources to perform a specific behavior (Chang, 1998). Many studies have indicated that individual's behavioral intention is positively influenced by PBC to act in a particular way (Han et al., 2010; Verma and Chandra, 2018).

Athletic Identity

Identity is a key concept in social sciences and has received much attention in social psychology and sports psychology. Researchers studying identity in social psychology have a different approach and focus on group affiliation and social roles (Ronkainen et al., 2016). Two important theories, identity theory and social identity theory, seem quite similar, but there are differences more in terms of emphasis than contradiction (Stets and Burke, 2000). Originated in the discipline of sociology, identity theory "deals with the structure and function of people's identity as related to the behavioral roles they play in society" (Hogg et al., 1995, p. 265). While, originated in the discipline of psychology, social identity theory "deals with the structure and function of identity as related to people' membership in groups" (Hogg et al., 1995, p. 265). In other words, identity theory concerns the relationship between the roles individuals play as members of a social group and the multiple identities that such roles confer (Hogg et al., 1995), whereas the social identity theory first introduced by Tajfel (1978) concerns the relationship between the person's identification and a particular social category, such as a fan base of a particular pop band or a fan community for sport teams, with an emphasis on the generative role of identity in group (Fink et al., 2009).

The study of sports psychology on athletic identity appeared in the 1990s (Ronkainen et al., 2016). Brewer et al. (1993) first systematically conceptualized athletic identity. According to them, athletic identity refers to the degree to which the identity of "I" as an athlete matches the identity of "athletes" in society, and could be considered as an aspect of a multidimensional self-concept (Brewer et al., 1993). That is, they viewed athletic identity as a cognitive structure that "guides and organizes processing of self-related information" (Brewer et al., 1993, p. 238) as well as a social role, which means that the identification primarily stems from feedback from other people (e.g., coaches, teammates, team employees, spectators, and agents) (Ronkainen et al., 2016). Individuals with high athletic identities attach great significance to their success or failure in the athletic realm and may be able to attribute much of themselves to these achievements (Martin and Horn, 2013). Additionally, athletic identity was developed in its own construct but may be deeply related to the passion construct. According to

previous studies suggesting a dualistic model of passion (Lafrenière et al., 2008; Vallerand et al., 2003), individuals who have a solid either harmonious passion or obsessive passion for an activity perceive the said activity as an essential aspect of their identity. If an elite Taekwondo player is hard at training with the goal of an Olympic gold medal, he or she is likely to feel a strong identity as a Taekwondo athlete.

Research Hypotheses development

A vast amount of literature is dedicated to the positive relationship between attitude and behavioral intention. Seonwoo and Jeong (2021) examined the structural relationships among mentoring, attitudes, subjective norms, PBC, and career pursuit intentions by applying the TPB among elite Taekwondo athletes in South Korea, and indicated that attitudes positively affected career pursuit intentions. To identify the determinants of academic entrepreneurial intention, Feola et al. (2019) investigated a model on a sample of young Italian researchers with the TPB. The findings showed that the attitude toward entrepreneurial behavior is relevant in predicting academic entrepreneurial intention. Kim et al. (2020) explored potential factors that affect audience's intention to watch LPGA tournaments, and the result revealed positive influence of attitude on intention. Based on these research findings, the present study proposes that:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Attitudes will positively influence career pursuit intentions among aspiring professional esport athletes.

Empirical evidence in many studies has indicated that subjective norms is a key antecedent variable of behavioral intention. A study conducted by Jeong et al. (2021), investigated the process behind the decision of sports fans to attend sports matches at stadiums amid the COVID-19 pandemic using the TPB, and the findings displayed the positive influence on attendance intention from the perspective of subjective norms. Verma and Chandra (2018) challenged to extend the social-psychological behavioral model (i.e., the TPB) by including two additional constructs to predict young Indian consumers' green hotel visit intention, and reported that subjective norms led to a green hotel visit intention. In a similar context, to explain Chinese college students' intention to travel to Japan et al. (2017) tested a structural equation model using the extended the TPB, demonstrating that subjective norm positively affected travel intention. These findings led to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Subjective norms will positively influence career pursuit intentions among aspiring professional esport athletes.

The significant role of PBC as a determinant of behavioral intention is well documented in various contexts. Schuster et al. (2016) explored factors that affect walk-to-school behavior through application of the TPB among 512 caregivers, and showed that PBC had a positive effect on caregivers' intentions to increase. Chu and Chen (2016) investigated e-learning technology adoption by extending the TPB, suggested that PBC presented significant positive correlation to e-learning intention. Teng et al. (2015) empirically examined how individual characteristics of the TPB model influence traveler intention to visit green hotel, and the findings found that PBC positively affect customer intention to visit a green hotel. Therefore, to assume that PBC influences career pursuit intentions under the following hypothesis is reasonable:

Hypothesis 3 (H3): Perceived behavioral control will positively influence career pursuit intentions among aspiring professional esport athletes.

Furthermore, there is another important question concerning whether athletic identity exerts a moderating effect on the relationships between attitudes, subjective norms, and PBC each with career pursuit intentions among aspiring esport athletes. As mentioned previously, based on previous studies, attitudes, subjective norms, and PBC are likely to directly influence career pursuit intentions (Jeong et al., 2021; Schuster et al., 2016; Seonwoo and Jeong, 2021). Concerning the relation between identity or identification and behavioral intentions, Suh et al. (2013) examined the impact of team identification, e-service quality, and satisfaction and behavioral intention to revisit sports websites, and revealed that identification had a positive effect on revisitation. Moreover, some researchers have challenged the moderating role of identification in sports contexts. For example, Theodorakis et al. (2009) tested the moderating role of team identification on the link between service quality and repurchase intention among spectators attending a professional soccer game in Greece, and indicated that identification was shown to moderate the effect of between service quality on repurchase intention. While Seonwoo et al. (2021) showed that team identification was not found to moderate the relationships of attitudes, subjective norms, and PBC with career pursuit intentions. Therefore, we propose the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 4 (H4): Athletic identity will moderate the relationship between attitudes and career pursuit intentions among aspiring professional esport athletes.

Hypothesis 5 (H5): Athletic identity will moderate the relationship between subjective norms and career pursuit intentions among aspiring professional esport athletes.

Hypothesis 6 (H6): Athletic identity will moderate the relationship between and perceived behavioral control and career pursuit intentions among aspiring professional esport athletes.

Based on the preceding thorough review of previous studies, we proposed the conceptual model shown in Figure 1.
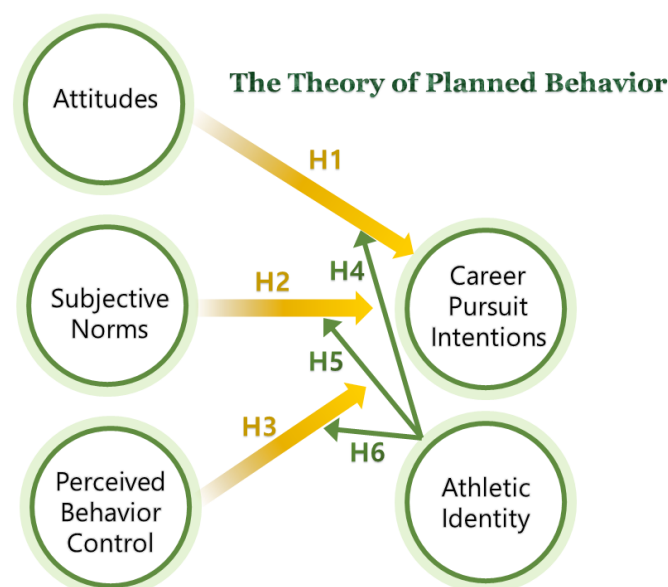

Figure 1. Research framework and hypotheses

METHOD

Participants

The present study utilized a purposive sampling technique. The author and two trained research assistants, who were enrolled in a doctoral course, distributed the survey to aspiring esport athletes, each of whom was attending one of three major esport academies in Korea from 3 March 2021 to 2 April 2021. The major purpose of this private institution is to cultivate talent professional esport athletes. The surveys were not carried out through a visiting survey because of the spread of the COVID-19 in Korea. Instead, they were administrated by e-amil or Kakao Talk (the most widely used messaging app for smartphones and personal computers in Korea) using Google or Naver (the largest web search engine in Korea) surveys. The author contacted the presidents of esport academy, and the questionnaires were distributed to the employees' email or Kakao Talk IDs after obtaining mutual consent. The questionnaire was answered using a self-administration method. We asked a total 240 athletes to take part in the survey. Of these, 229 respondents completed the survey, yielding a response rate of 95.4%. We eliminated data for 14 athletes due to repetitive response patterns; thus, we analyzed 215 usable responses. We gathered demographic information including sex (male: 91.2 %, n = 196; female: 8.8 %, n = 19), age (10s: 89.3 %, n = 192; 20s: 10.7 %, n = 23), and esport experience (less than 2 years: 3.3 %, n = 7; more than 2 years and less than 4 years: 31.2 %, n = 67; more than 5 years and less than 7 years: 42.8 %, n = 92; 8 years or more: 22.8 %, n = 49).

Measurement

The survey instrument was modified and adapted using scales from previous studies. The questionnaire consisted of six main sections: (a) attitudes, (b) subjective norms, (c) PBC, (d) career pursuit intentions, (e) athletic identity, and (f) demographic information. We assessed attitudes using four items adopted from Ajzen (2011), Han et al. (2017), Kim et al. (2020), and Seonwoo and Jeong (2021). We measured subjective norms with four items adopted from Ajzen (2011), Jeong et al. (2021), and Kim et al. (2020). We derived our measure of PBC from Ajzen (1991), Han et al. (2017), and Perugini and Bagozzi (2001). We utilized three items from Davis et al. (1989), and Seonwoo and Jeong (2021). Finally, for athletic identity, we used four items from Lee (2012) and Martin et al. (1994). The response format was a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). A panel of three sociology of sport professors reviewed the instrument's content validity. Based on their feedback, we modified the preliminary questionnaire before distributing it to participants.

Validity and Reliability

We employed confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) with maximum likelihood estimation to assess the dimensionality of the measurement model using AMOS (version 24). The goodness-of-fit indices for the CFA {X^2/df=1.568, Normed Fit Index (NFI)=0.952, Relative Fit Index (RFI)=0.942, Turker-Lewis Index (TLI)=0.978, Comparative Fit Index (CFI)=0.982, and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA)=0.052} were all within the recommended ranges (Hair et al., 2010; Hooper et al., 2008). Next, to confirm the convergent validity based on the measurement model, we calculated the factor loadings, construct reliability (CR), and average variance extracted

(AVE). As shown in Table 1, all factor loadings were greater than 0.698 and significant (p < 0.001), with t values exceeding the critical value of 3.29 (Kline, 2005). All CR values (0.800–0.893) exceeded the recommended minimum value of 0.7 and all AVE values (0.552–0.675) exceeded the minimum of 0.5, establishing the scale's convergent validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

Table 1. Summarized results for validity and reliability assessments

Scale items	Standardized Loadings	CR	AVE	Cron-bach's α
Attitudes				
Practicing elite e-sports is				
Extremely unattractive … Extremely attractive	0.911			
Extremely worthless … Extremely valuable	0.928	0.893	0.675	0.967
Extremely boring … Extremely exciting	0.911			
Extremely harmful … Extremely beneficial	0.910			
Subjective norms				
People important to me (e.g., family / friends) would approve of me pursuing my career as an elite e-sports athlete	0.813			
People important to me (e.g., family / friends) would support me pursuing my career as an elite e-sports athlete	0.889	0.866	0.619	0.906
People important to me (e.g., family / friends) would encourage me pursuing my career as an elite e-sports athlete	0.744			
People important to me (e.g., family / friends) would cheer for me pursuing my career as an elite e-sports athlete	0.901			
Perceived behavioral control				
I can do elite e-sports whenever I want	0.949			
I have enough time to do elite e-sports	0.919	0.873	0.633	0.939
I get enough money from my parents to do elite e-sports	0.895			
It is entirely up to me to do elite e-sports	0.808			
Career pursuit intentions				
I will try to continue elite e-sports as my career	0.870			
I intend to continue elite e-sports as my career	0.905	0.800	0.572	0.923
I am willing to devote money and time to continuing elite e-sports	0.909			
Athletic identity				
I think of myself as an athlete	0.698			
I have a clear goal about the sports I am practicing now	0.849	0.830	0.552	0.903
Sports is the most important part of my life	0.855			
I think I will be very depressed if I cannot play because I am sick	0.909			

X^2/df=1.568, NFI=0.952, RFI=0.942, TLI=0.978, CFI=0.982, and RMSEA=0.052

Table 2. Correlations among the constructs

	AT	SN	PBC	CPI	AI
AT	**0.822**				
SN	0.355**	**0.787**			
PBC	0.287**	0.632**	**0.800**		
CPI	0.494**	0.669**	0.591**	**0.756**	
AI	0.426**	0.593**	0.435**	0.438**	**0.743**

AT: Attitudes, SN: Subjective norms, PBC: Perceived behavioral control, CPI: Career pursuit intentions, AI: Athletic identity. $**p < 0.01$

For the satisfactory discriminant validity, the diagonal elements in Table 2 should be greater than the off-diagonal elements. Comparing all correlation coefficients with the square roots of AVE displayed a satisfactory discriminant validity. In terms of the survey instrument's reliability, the Cronbach's alphas for the five factors ranged from 0.903 to 0.967, all of which exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.7. These results show that the measures were sufficiently reliable (Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

RESULTS

Structural model and Hypothesis Testing

We conducted structural equation modeling (SEM) to investigate the impact of attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behavioral control on career pursuit intentions via AMOS 24. All goodness-of-fit indices for the structural model indicated an acceptable model fit (X^2/df=1.591, GFI=0.926, NFI=0.964, RFI=0.955, CFI=0.986, and RMSEA=0.053) (Hair et al., 2010; Hooper et al., 2008). We utilized this model to examine Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3. As shown in Figure 2, attitudes positively affected career pursuit intentions (β=0.300, p<0.001, t-value=5.862), supporting Hypothesis 1. Subjective norms also positively affected career pursuit intentions (β=0.414, p<0.001, t-value=6.189), which supported Hypothesis 2. PBC significantly affected career pursuit intentions (β=0.274, p<0.001, t-value=4.144), supporting Hypothesis 3.
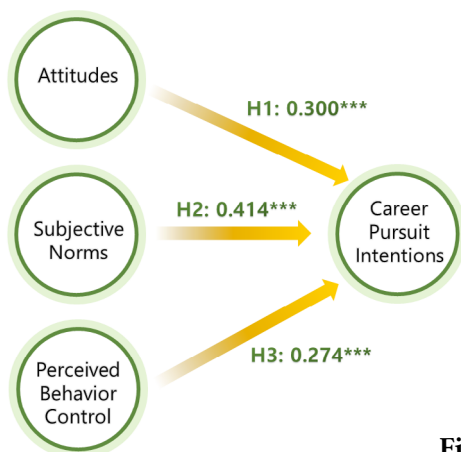

Figure 2. Structural model results. $***p < 0.001$

We used a hierarchical regression analysis to examine the moderating effect of athletic identity. As shown in 3, in Model 1, the regression was significant ($F = 89.710$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.554$). Attitudes ($\beta = 0.275$, $t = 5.618$, $p < 0.001$), subjective norms ($\beta = 0.413$, $t = 6.814$, $p < 0.001$), and PBC ($\beta = 0.251$, $t = 4.245$, $p < 0.001$) had significant impacts on career pursuit intentions. In Model 2, the regression was also significant ($F = 67.461$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.554$). When entering athletic identity into the model, the variable was not found to be significant. Finally, in Model 3, the regression equation had a significant effect ($F = 39.254$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.556$), and the Durbin-Watson statistic value of 2.055 indicated zero autocorrelation in the sample. When entering three interaction variables (i.e., attitudes X athletic identity, subjective norms X athletic identity, and PBC X athletic identity) into the model, these variables did not emerge as significant predictors of career pursuit intentions. Therefore, athletic identity did not moderate the relationships between attitudes, subjective norms, and PBC with career pursuit intentions each; thus, Hypotheses 4, 5, and 6 were not supported.

Table 3. Moderating effects of athletic identity

Model	Variable	Standardized Coefficient	Std. Error	t	F	R² (Adjusted R²)
1	(Constant)		0.074	41.942***	89.710***	0.561 (0.554)
	Attitudes	0.275	0.079	5.618***		
	Subjective norms	0.413	0.098	6.814***		
	PBC	0.251	0.096	4.245***		
2	(Constant)		0.074	41.929***	67.461***	0.562 (0.554)
	Attitudes	0.289	0.083	5.654***		
	Subjective norms	0.438	0.108	6.593***		
	PBC	0.255	0.096	4.301***		
	Athletic identity	-0.056	0.096	-0.935		
3	(Constant)		0.088	35.115***	39.254***	0.570 (0.556)
	Attitudes	0.300	0.086	5.638***		
	Subjective norms	0.470	0.111	6.839***		
	PBC	0.257	0.097	4.313**		
	Athletic identity	-0.075	0.098	-1.236		
	Attitudes X athletic identity	0.085	0.084	1.657		
	Subjective norms X athletic identity	-0.100	0.114	-1.398		
	PBC X athletic identity	0.041	0.115	0.595		
	Durbin Watson = 2.055					

**p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001

DISCUSSION

Theoretical implications

While examining the relationship between attitudes and career pursuit intentions, this study considered the argument advanced by existing sports studies that attitudes can improve behavioral intentions. For example, Wang et al. (2021) explored what affects college students' behavioral intention towards sports gambling using the TPB, and found that attitude was the most important antecedent of behavioral intentions. Bae et al. (2020) examined adolescents' participation behavior in new sports through the extended TPB, demonstrating that attitude positively influenced subjects' participation intention. Braksiek et al. (2021)' study drew on the TPB to investigate the effects of attitudes, subjective norms, and PBC on intentions of environmentally friendly behavior in community sports clubs, and the results showed that attitude led to intention. Likewise, Han et al. (2017) emphasized that a volitional factor, such as attitudes, plays an essential role in increasing individuals' intention in the context of sports. Therefore, esport coaches should consider the crucial role of attitude towards practicing esport when developing aspiring esport athletes' career pursuit intentions.

Unlike existing studies that approached the TPB, the present study found that subjective norms was the most influential factor in increasing career pursuit intentions. According to recent previous studies, attitude was the most influential factor in predicting behavioral intention. For example, to explain eco-friendly behavioral intention formation, Kim and Hwang (2020) attempted to merge two theories, the norm activation model and TPB, and reported that the attitudes was the most predictor of the behavioral intention. Based on the TPB, Wang et al. (2020) investigated the dimensions of tourists' environmental behavior and the mechanisms of different types of tourists' environmental behavior, and showed that attitude was the most influential factor in building environmental behavioral intention. In the context of sports literature, the present study found that subjective norms had the highest effect size, which was aligned with other recent research in sports (Jeong et al., 2021). This result means that family and close friends support play a vital role in the decision-making process related to the sports setting. Thus, esport coaches should have an excellent relationship with aspiring esport athletes' families and explain esport academy's goal, dream, and visions, contributing to increasing career pursuit intentions.

The current study contributed to a debate about the role of PBC in the TPB model. Ajzen (2020), a pioneer of the TPB, has indicated that theoretically, PBC can be considered as a moderating variable. Indeed, he argued that PBC was assigned the role of a moderator in the 1980s (Ajzen, 1985), which is line with several studies (Castanier et al., 2013). However, the majority of previous studies viewed PBC as a direct determinant of intention. For example. Rahaman et al. (2019) explored the antecedents of ethical leadership intention by drawing on the TPB, and the results demonstrated that PBC was a direct determinant of ethical intentions. Similarly, Park et al. (2017) tested a structural equation model using the extended TPB to explain Chinese college students' intention to travel to Japan. They found that PBC was a direct antecedent of intention to travel. Thus, aspiring esport athletes' decisions about continuing to pursue their careers can partly depend on their ability. In other words, if aspiring esport athletes have enough money, time, knowledge,

and skills, they are more likely to foster their career pursuit intentions, which means that family and coaches should provide the athletes with support or sensible solutions.

Contrary to our predictions, the results failed to support the moderating effects of athletic identity on the relationships among the "attitudes and career pursuit intentions," "subjective norms and career pursuit intentions," and "PBC and career pursuit intentions." This result can be explained. The characteristics of the sample in the current study were different from those in previous studies. Testing the moderating role of team identification concerning the relationship between service quality and repurchase intentions among 257 spectators attending a professional soccer game, Theodorakis et al. (2009) collected data from various age groups. However, the present study collected data from teenagers and early 20s. Furthermore, the present study focused on aspiring esport athletes in South Korea. Although South Korea is an esport powerhouse, the nation will not be representing an entire esport. Analysis of the moderating effects with samples from other countries can lead to different results. In sum, esport coaches do not have to segregate aspiring esport athletes according to the level of athletic identity using different strategies. Thus, esport coaches should increase attitudes, subjective norms, and PBC using same effective coaching strategies to improve career pursuit intentions.

Practical implications

The role of esport coaches is crucial to increase the positive attitude of aspiring professional esport athletes towards practicing elite esport, which means that mentoring can play a key role in improving the positive attitudes. Mentoring is the most cooperative at-will relationship among a senior and junior to improve the mentee's growth and career development. In South Korea, aspiring professional esport athletes are worried about fierce competition, negative perceptions of esport, and college entrance. Some give up on their career because of experiencing severe internal conflict. Therefore, esport coaches should be highly interested in the athletes and actively help them by various mentoring programs. The best mentoring type is to deliver the coach's success stories consistently. Through the coach's success story, athletes can see what they lack and prepare for future success.

For improving the subjective norm, esport coaches should have amicable relations with the athletes' parents. This is because aspiring professional esport athletes can decide whether to continue to pursue their elite esport career on their parents' opinions. Therefore, esport coaches should report the athletes' current skill level, explain their educational philosophy to the athlete's parents and establish trust. These efforts will help the athletes to pursue their career. Additionally, parents' economic support is also a non-negligible factor in improving career pursuit intentions. Even if aspiring professional esport athletes show outstanding abilities in esport, they cannot pursue their careers unless they receive financial support from their parents or esport institutions since they are young. Thus, parents or institutions must try to offer financial aid to any athletes who cannot afford the expenses for esport academy so that the athletes can focus on practicing esport.

CONCLUSION

The objective of this study was to explore the structural relationships among attitudes, subjective norms, PBC, and career pursuit intentions among aspiring esport athletes, by applying the TPB and

assessing the moderating effect of athletic identity. The results demonstrated positive impacts of attitudes, subjective norms, and PBC on career pursuit intentions. However, it was found that athletic identity did not moderate the relationships between the given factors and career pursuit intentions. The findings have significant implications: (1) the present study considered the argument advanced by previous sports studies that attitudes can lead to behavioral intentions; (2) subjective norms were the most influential factor in building career pursuit intentions; (3) although PBC has been considered as a moderating variable, our study found that PBC was a direct determinant of career pursuit intentions.

Despite these meaningful findings, this study has some limitations. First, our study did not extend the TPB. Hence, future studies could add variables in the research model to extend the TPB. Second, the TPB may not have had sufficient explanatory power. Hence, it is worth applying the model of goal-directed behavior, which has been considered as a limitation of the TPB, for future studies. Third, we did not explore the behavioral, normative, and control beliefs influencing attitudes, subjective norms and PBC, respectively. Thus, future research must examine the antecedents of attitudes, subjective norms and PBC to understand them better. Finally, more research is required to explore the impact of educational service quality on attitudes, subjective norms, and PBC, as it plays a vital role in this context.

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