

Why people use mixed-reality sports platforms

June 17 2021, by Matt Shipman



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New technologies allow users to do things like race their real bikes against other real people in a virtual world, and a new study outlines what motivates people to use these online platforms. The findings offer insights for future iterations of these technologies—and how to market them.

At issue are "mixed-reality sports": augmented reality platforms that incorporate virtual, online elements and real-world athletic endeavors. For example, Zwift is a platform that allows users to ride their real bicycles, but transfers their efforts to a virtual space depicting real-world courses—allowing them to race against other cyclists who are not physically present.

"We know that mixed-reality sports are attracting a lot of users," says Bill Rand, co-author of the paper and an associate professor of marketing in North Carolina State University's Poole College of Management. "We want to know what benefits people see in these technologies. What about risks? And how do those risks and benefits affect their actual use?"

"This matters because once we understand why people are using, or not using, these technologies, we can figure out how to make the technologies for appealing for users—and also how to market them more effectively."

For this study, the researchers conducted a survey of 284 Zwift users in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. The survey collected data on each study participant's background, their motivations for using Zwift, any concerns they had about the platform, and the extent to which they felt they would continue using Zwift in the future. The researchers were then able to review each study participant's use of Zwift for 30 days after taking the survey. The [study design](#) allowed the researchers to identify any relationships between a study participant's motivations, perceived risks, their expectations for using Zwift, and their actual use of Zwift.

One of the things researchers found surprising was that users were simply not motivated by competing against other users within the game environment itself.

"The Zwift platform is designed specifically to enable competition, either informally amongst friends, or in formal races involving many competitors," Rand says. "However, we found that even the people who take part in the formal races are not strongly motivated by these in-game contests."

Instead, researchers found that four other drivers were associated with Zwift use: health consciousness; using Zwift to train for real-world competitions; socializing with others; and the ability to customize and upgrade their gaming experience by modifying their jerseys, "earning" access to new bike styles, and so on.

"To provide a more profound explanation of the quantitative results, we also conducted 14 interviews with platform users," says Daniel Westmattmann, corresponding author of the paper, an assistant professor of sports management at the University of Münster and a former professional cyclist. "It was fascinating to see that even [elite athletes](#) who have won Tour de France stages, for example, are strongly motivated to use the platform more intensively because of customizing or socializing elements."

The researchers also found that study participants who had privacy concerns about Zwift engaged with the [platform](#) less frequently.

"There are a variety of these mixed-reality sports platforms out there, such as Peloton, with varying ratios of virtual elements to real-world elements," Rand says. "And this field is likely to grow. Our work gives us insight into what may be motivating participants on these platforms."

"For example, the ability to customize your avatar appears to be important. Social interaction and online communities are important. Health and fitness are important. Privacy concerns are important."

"Understanding the things that are important to users can help developers of next-generation mixed-reality sports technologies design more appealing products," Rand says. "And can help marketers determine which aspects of these products to highlight for consumers."

The paper, "Apart we ride together: The motivations behind users of mixed-reality sports," appears in the *Journal of Business Research*.

More information: Daniel Westmattelmann et al, Apart we ride together: The motivations behind users of mixed-reality sports, *Journal of Business Research* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jbusres.2021.05.044](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2021.05.044)

Provided by North Carolina State University

Citation: Why people use mixed-reality sports platforms (2021, June 17) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://techxplore.com/news/2021-06-people-mixed-reality-sports-platforms.html>

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