



*Commodity Fetishism in Computer Games: In-Game Item Consumptions of Counter Strike: Global Offensive Players **

Aykut Tamir¹

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Abstract

This research aims at exploring what is the motive behind computer game player's specific in-game item consumptions because game companies sell some in-game items which are not functionally helping the player. In older games like World of Warcraft, Knight Online, players would buy the in-game items to make their game characters stronger. Namely, those items had function in terms of better game playing. However, players of the Counter-Strike: Global Offensive buy some in-game items that are not useful for any purpose in the game. Thus, I wanted to conduct a research on the relation between commodity fetishism and consumption motives of gamers towards these items. In-game items became a significant case because digital markets in some games brought new in-game consumption cultures along. Some of these consumption cultures are examples to commodity fetishism approach. There are few studies exploring in-game items with no function in literature. This study explores these items in detail and uses a method that was not used for this purpose before. That is why this study is important and original. The qualitative descriptive analysis method was conducted to find out players commenting about in-game items on Steam&Reddit forums. As a result, I detected that game companies make more profit through these digital markets and gamers' consumption motives correlate with commodity fetishism. In the comments the players stated that in-game items provide them psychological boost, self-confidence and feeling better, and they even have associated items with the placebo effect.

Keywords: Commodity Fetishism, Game Studies, Culture Industry, Digital Media

Article Type: *Research*

* This article is based on the master's thesis of author which was published in 2019 and named "Computer games within the context of commodity fetishism: Counter-strike: Global offensive example".

¹ Erzurum Teknik Üniversitesi, Erzurum, Türkiye, aykut.tamir@erzurum.edu.tr, Orcid: 0000-0001-7659-1167



Bilgisayar Oyunlarında Meta Fetişizmi-Counter Strike: Global Offensive Oyuncularının Oyun İçi Eşya Tüketimleri

Özet

Bu araştırma, bilgisayar oyuncularına ait oyun içi eşya tüketim güdülerinin ardında yatan nedenleri ortaya çıkarmayı hedeflemektedir. Bu amacı benimsemişim, oyun şirketlerinin oyuncuya işlevsel olarak herhangi bir katkısı olmayan bazı oyun içi eşyaları satmasıdır. World of Warcraft, Knight Online gibi oyunlarda, oyuncular oyun karakterlerini daha güçlü hale getirmek için sanal eşyaları satın almaktaydı. Yani, bu eşyalar oyunu daha iyi oynama açısından bir işleve sahipti. Ancak, Counter-Strike: Global Offensive oyuncuları, oyunda herhangi bir amaca hizmet etmeyen bazı oyun içi eşyaları satın almaktadırlar. Bu yüzden, meta fetişizmi ile oyun içi eşyalara yönelik tüketim güdüsü arasındaki ilişki üzerine bir araştırma yapmak istedim. Bazı oyunlardaki dijital pazarlar yeni oyun içi tüketim kültürlerini beraberinde getirdiğinden, oyun içi eşyalar önemli bir durum haline gelmiştir. Bu tüketim kültürlerinden bazıları meta fetişizmi yaklaşımına örnek teşkil etmektedir. Literatürde işlevi olmayan oyun içi öğeleri araştıran az sayıda çalışma vardır. Araştırma, bu öğeleri ayrıntılı olarak incelemekte ve daha önce bu amaç için ele alınmamış bir yöntem kullanmaktadır. Bu açıdan çalışmanın önemli ve özgün olduğu düşünülmektedir. Steam & Reddit forumlarında oyun içi öğeler hakkında yorum yapan oyuncuları bulmak için pasif analiz yöntemi, oyuncu yorumlarının hangi temalar altında toplandığını belirlemek için nitel betimsel analiz yöntemi kullanıldı. Sonuç olarak, oyun şirketlerinin bu dijital pazarlarda daha fazla kar elde ettiği ve oyuncuların tüketim güdülerinin meta fetişizmi ile ilişkili olduğu tespit edildi. Yorumlarda, oyuncular oyun içi eşyaların kendilerine psikolojik destek, özgüven ve daha iyi hissiyat sağladığını, hatta eşyaların plasebo etkisi oluşturduğunu ifade etmişlerdir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Meta Fetişizmi, Oyun Çalışmaları, Kültür Endüstrisi, Dijital Medya

Makale Türü: *Araştırma*



1. INTRODUCTION

Media owners use media to influence the society for their own purposes (Qin, Strömberg and Wu, 2017) This situation is discussed not only through management and sovereignty, but also through many fields such as management, marketing and communication studies. Firat and Vankatesh (1995) argue that the effect of the media increased and the products that were not needed were imposed on the consumers through the media, especially in the late capitalism period. The difference between true needs and false needs disappeared, especially in the consumer society emerged after the birth of postmodernism (p. 249-250). The media can present some products and services as a prestigious tool and even though consumers do not need any products or services, they may have a tendency to buy them (Bergman, 2009: 17). Örmeci (2008) indicates that in such an environment, companies use the media and offer products that consumers are convinced they should buy even if they do not need them, and thus plays an important role in the increasing trend of consumption frenzy (p. 39). Today, computer games have become another media tool used for creating consumption cultures. Computer games were developed and spread all over the world as they have been advanced over years. Big game companies established and produced their world renowned games. However, that new generation games required big budgets was an important problem. The bigger budget means the less profit for companies. Even, this issue caused bankrupt of some companies. To survive, the game companies seeked a solution and they have come up with selling downloadable contents or in-game items for better profit. This study aims to explore in-game items are whether true needs or not. Thus, the motive behind consumption of these items is a matter of curiosity.

One of the content that attracts the attention of individuals who spend their time sitting at the computer usually, is computer games. In parallel with the latest developments in the field of computer software technologies, the consumption level of computer games has increased rapidly (Hadzinsky, 2014). With 3D technology, game companies produced much more realistic and costly games, and these games engage attention of many people across the world (Overmars, 2012). For example, a survey of America in 2019 showed the distribution of people playing computer games by age: 21% are 18 years old and under, 40% are between 18-35 years old, and 18% are 36 years old or older. Last %21 includes the players over the age of 50 years (Statista, 2020). The computer game that I consider in this study belongs to a large company called Valve, which has a voice in the game market. Founded in 1996, the company reaches millions of players worldwide today (Valve, 2020).

Companies started to make money not only by selling the game but also by selling virtual in-game items. This is an important development in the game industry. Now, the in-game items are valued as if they are real goods, they are sold to the players by the company that produces the game, and they are traded between the players for exchange or money (Yamamoto and Arthur, 2015). For example, Steam which is a game library (applications and websites where games can be bought and stored) has its own tab called "Steam Community Market" where



virtual games items for many games are traded (e.g. [Steam Community Market, 2020](#)). Under this tab, if a player wants to buy a virtual item, he/she will need to enter his/her credit card information and make purchases from the virtual market in the game. There are some strong effects that motivate consumers for some of these purchases ([Greene and Joseph, 2015: 9](#)). In the games, which have become a habit almost at the level of addiction (e.g. Teng, Li and Liu, 2014, p. 94), the players are motivated to purchase the expensive in-game items in the virtual markets offered to them, and thus the behavior that emerges can drag the individual to the consumption frenzy. Luxury spending is valid not only for the real market but also for games belonging digital universe. In this study, the expenses made for a computer game and the reasons why the players make this expenditure will be discussed within the framework of commodity fetishism of Adorno by considering the "Counter-Strike: Global Offensive" (CS:GO) pc game as an example. The aim of this study is to explore Adorno's theoretical approaches to the concept of commodity fetishism, to reveal whether the players of CS:GO tend to be affected by commodity fetishism. Adorno (2001) describes the commodity fetishism as false "happiness" created by the products of popular culture; These products are not needed actually; the consumers are forced to think that they are necessary by media owners.

In the study, I used passive analysis method to pick the comments of players of CS:GO. Passive analysis method allow researcher to collect data over internet, tv and web technologies ([Dholakia ve Zhang, 2004](#)). Then, the personal comments were analyzed on Reddit and Steam platforms by using the descriptive analysis technique. Descriptive codes were assigned to the "user comments" analyzed with descriptive analysis. After that, I determined in which themes the users tend to affected by commodity fetishism. While the findings indicate that users have commodity fetishism motives behind their consumptions, conclusion is that they feel privileged and special in "Psychological Boost", "Self Confidence" and "Feeling Better" themes. In this context, I can state that digital game platforms position the players as consumers, the in-game simulative universe is used as a profit making market by game developer, and in this simulative universe, the "existing setup" creates a need of feeling privileged in the players. The results of this study show us that the players were influenced by commodity fetishism in their in-game consumption. Commodities, which are a reflection of popular culture, hit stores in digital market of the game. In this regard, the phenomenon of "commodity fetishism", which constitutes the conceptual basis of the study, should be mentioned and in-game items should be explained with this phenomenon.

The study consists of five main sections. In the first section, there is the explanation of commodity fetishism approach by Adorno. Second section describes the CS:GO game and the market inside it. Third section includes the correlation between in-game items and the commodity fetishism. In the fourth section, I indicated the research method used for analysis, then stated the findings. In fifth section, I discussed the findings with regards to past studies in literature. Finally, I gave my suggestions and concluded the study.



2. COMMODITY FETISHISM THROUGH THE LENS OF ADORNO

Although fetish is a psychological concept that was primarily examined by anthropologists, it has also taken its place in the approaches put forward by economists (Uçar, 2012). Adorno, one of the representatives of the Frankfurt School, explained the commodity fetishism together with the culture industry concept that he formed. Adorno mentioned that the individual who purchased commodities offered to him/her sees himself as a king in society (Adorno and Rabinbach, 1975). Based on the definition of Adorno (2001), the concept has been used for observing consumer behavior. I discussed the subject in this study with the approach of Adorno since it contains the fetishist relationship between the individual and the products.

For the detailed background of the culture industry concept, I can say the following;

The foundations of this concept were laid in the article of Adorno's *On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening* in 1938. However, the work called *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, written by Horkheimer and Adorno, is considered to be the first time that the concept of culture industry was handled historically and philosophically. In this work, Horkheimer and Adorno see the culture industry of the capitalist society as an important factor in the self-betrayal of enlightenment and the social life of people is captured by an instrumental logic (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002).

“The economic organization of modern capitalist society provides for this final realization of instrumental reason and self-destruction of Enlightenment. Under capitalism all production is for the market; goods are produced not in order to meet human needs and desires, but for the sake of profit, for the sake of acquiring further capital. While production for exchange rather than use is a feature of most economic forms, what uniquely characterizes capitalist economies is the tendential universality of production for exchange rather than use. This too is a procedure for making and treating unlike things as identical, for displacing the intrinsic properties of things for the sake of ends (capital accumulation) extrinsic to them. The domination of use value by exchange value thus realizes and duplicates the tendencies of enlightened reason: as enlightened rationality occludes ends-oriented rationality, so capitalist production occludes production for use; and as enlightened rationality subsumes particulars under universals indifferent and insensitive to sensuous particularity, so capitalist production subsumes the use value of things under exchange value. Enlightened rationality and capital production preclude reflection; Enlightenment’s irresistible progress in the domination of nature and the securing of the means for the possible realization of happiness come, in fact, to entail an irresistible regression.” (Adorno 2001: 6).

Horkheimer and Adorno (2002) used the concept of the culture industry to indicate the cultural forms entering into the process of commodification after the growth of monopoly capitalism. The culture industry plays a central role in linking its target audience to the status quo and turned the culture itself into the ideological media of sovereignty. However, culture has not served such a purpose from the very beginning, the meaning and function of art have changed in the historical context. In their work, they compare the libertarian potential of what they call 'autonomous' or 'genuine' with products produced by the culture industry for the opposite purpose. By addressing the social conditions that shape these two forms of art, they try to



explain the effect of commodification on art itself, and hence the impact on society and our consciousness as a whole (Klinger, 2012). According to Horkheimer and Adorno (2002), the culture industry is the main event of late capitalism. From Hollywood movies to boring music playing in big shopping malls, all products are produced as light entertainment products. All these forms of popular culture are designed to satisfy the needs of the capitalist consumer group that needs the entertainment industry. While explaining the reason of using the concept of "culture industry" instead of "mass culture", Adorno mentioned that culture is not a culture that is naturally developed by the masses, but an artificial culture offered to them. The concept of 'culture industry' means the culture produced and presented to the audience (Adorno 2001). The products of the culture industry do not attempt to challenge our existing normative assumptions. Instead, it strengthens the status quo by showing the status quo in the society in a completely natural and unquestionable way. This is a kind of false reality and prevents the questioning of the existing social and economic order (Craib, 1992, p. 213). This false reality has reached to a point that "where it controls institutions, behaviour and class formation in such a way that it prevents the formation of any independent and critical consciousness" (Rose, 1978, p.48).

The representatives of the Frankfurt School (e.g. Horkheimer and Adorno, 2012), which adopted the Marxist critical structure, not only added a new interpretation to the political critique of the economy, but also addressed the concepts of alienation and commodity fetishism. Commodity fetishism is also an issue addressed with the culture industry (Kara, 2014, p. 52). Culture functions as an alienated world of commodities created to integrate, dominate and break the influence of subjectiveness mentally. While Adorno theorizes this, he examines the fetish theories of Freud and Marks and tries to formulate that the fetish character of commodities makes individuals to buy what is expensive rather than what they need (O'Kane, 2013, p. 131). This change of preference is a change that provides individuals in society to integrate, not differentiate and oppose existing social order.

Witkin (2004) points out that Adorno criticized all the art products produced by the culture industry very seriously. The media he criticized found his criticism excessive or claimed that his opinions do not have a firm basis or foundation. As mentioned before, he preferred the concept of "culture industry" instead of concepts such as "popular art", "popular culture", "mass culture" because in other concepts, the meaning of 'naturally coming from the human' lies. Adorno argues that the culture industry products do not come from people; these products do not correspond to an expression or appearance in the life processes of individuals or societies. Instead, these are products of interest that are produced and distributed to meet the needs of manufacturers and the market, they have been created to dominate mass consciousness and to manipulate this consciousness when necessary (p. 2).

Exchange value and use value of goods are the reasons why consumers buy them (Keen, 1993). Örmeci (2008) explains that the true needs which should be creativity and effective use of mind are prevented by the concepts of 'commodity fetishism, popular culture and standardization' coming with the culture industry: In the capitalist system, this is achieved by bringing the



exchange value of the objects to the forefront more compared to their use value. “Use value refers to the specific qualities of the product perceived by customers in relation to their needs...Exchange value refers to price. It is the monetary amount realized at a single point in time when the exchange of the good takes place” (Bowman and Ambrosini, 2000). In the free market economy, the value of people and commodities is determined by the principles of cost, constraint and popularity. While the water, which is the basic material required to sustain our lives, is sold at very cheap prices due to its excessive availability, the diamond used for showing is a rare material, so it can find buyers at rather fancy prices (Örmeci, 2008, p. 39). The reason why the difference between diamond and water is so high is due to the exchange value in the capitalist market. What is important in the eyes of the person is the price rather than the qualities of what she wants to have. “Nothing is more useful than water; but it will scarce purchase anything; scarce anything may be had in exchange for it. A diamond, on the contrary, has scarce any value in use; but a very great quantity of other goods may frequently be had in exchange for it.” (Smith, 1976). While a movie that has millions of dollars, although not of a quality, is watched in the cinema by a lot of people, films that are artistically beautiful are preferred by a small elite group. Popular culture is not shaped by criterias such as, creativity and artisticness, but by prices and balances in the market. The high-priced and popular products that we are forced to consume, although we do not need, are increasingly being brought into our eyes through the media. Consumers, who think that they can choose what they will consume in such an environment, are “like laboratory mice, whose personal rights have been taken away and acting in accordance with mandatory frameworks”. This understanding, dictated to the person who is happy by having the expensive things, causes the individual to see the commodity fetishism as a relief method (Örmeci, 2008, p. 40).

Deceiving consumers through the products it offers is the main concern of the culture industry. The delight promised by the images with glitzy plots is delayed like a promissory note having its maturity constantly extended: This show is treacherously a promise that will never be fulfilled. The people who want to escape from the stress and monotony of everyday life will suddenly forget about the escape plans when they see this promissory note. The praise of the colorless everyday life that they want to escape is put in front of the people in the desires evoked by all those bright names and images (Adorno, 2001, p. 72). The false “happiness” products produced by the culture industry keep people's perception constantly and prevent them from thinking differently. This happiness is related to the feeling of commodity fetishism that the individual feels in his inner world while consuming the products. In line with this idea, in-game items that have the urge to buy in computer games should also be handled. After all, virtual in-game items presented in the CS: GO game universe are items that do not promise any function, have no use value, and are consumed only because of their popularity and rareness.

Before moving to in-game items, introducing the game and steam community market is necessary. Explanation of the game details and the market allowing the game developer and players to trade in-game items are in the following section.



3. CS:GO AND STEAM COMMUNITY MARKET²

Counter-Strike: Global Offensive or mostly known with its short name, the *CS:GO*, is a first-person shooter game released in 2012 by Valve and the continuation of *Counter Strike* series. First game of the series was released as a mode for the *Half-life* game in 1999 but later continued as a series on its own. The game, which generally includes team-based armed struggle, also includes game modes where players fight individually for specific duties ([Counter Strike Blog, 2020](#)).

Based on June 2020 data, number of all-time peak players (monthly) belonging to CS:GO players is over 1 million ([Steamcharts, 2020](#)). The game has made a name for itself with the records it broke in 2020. Firstly, by reaching the number of 916,000 peak players, the game broke its own peak player count record in February 2020, and this number increased to 1.1 million in March breaking February's record. However, the highest record for CS: GO came with 1.3 million in April, and long-standing 1.29 million peak player record of Dota 2 (another popular Valve game), was broken. Thus, CS: GO took the second place after the PUBG game, which is in the first place with a record of 3.2 million peak players ([Pcgames, 2020](#)).

In the competitive mode of the game, it includes the battle of two teams of five and there are national, international tournaments and leagues of this mode. These events are organized by companies related to computer games such as ESL (Electronic Sports League), Dreamhack. In the tournament held in the city of Los Angeles in March 2020, winning team has been awarded with the prize of \$1,000,000 ([Liquipedia, 2020](#)). These matches can be watched from within the game by clicking GOTV panel or can be watched live on some websites ([Hltv, 2020](#)).

Online shopping feature has been added to the game unlike the old ones. In the previous games of the series (such as *Counter Strike Source*, *Counter Strike 1.6*) there was no such opportunity. CS:GO has a button that says "marketplace" at the top right in the inventory section, when clicked, it connects players to steam community market tab -it can also be reached through steam platform directly without opening the game- so that they can sell or buy the items they choose. (e.g. [Steam Community Market, 2020](#)). It should be noted that this game is opened with a separate program called Steam that requires internet connection. Steam is a digital distribution platform developed by Valve Corporation and offers services such as digital rights management, multiplayer gaming, video streaming and social networking. Many games, add-on packages and programs related to games are sold on Steam and can be downloaded directly to the computer (e.g. [Steam About, 2020](#)).

Steam community market tab is not only specific to CS: GO game, it also includes the market sections of other games which has online shopping feature. There is a list of games on the right side of community market tab and players can connect the specific game markets that they want to shop from (e.g. [Steam Community Market, 2020](#)). The weapons and armors in CS:GO are

² This section is based on mostly steam website datas and researcher's observations.



made on the basis of real life, except for some of the gloves and knives. In fact, anti-terrorist teams are special forces or police units belonging to real-life states. When players buy the game, all items (except extras like stickers, or gift boxes) can be found as defaults in player's inventory in their original form. However, if players enter the market, they will be confronted with colored versions of these items. They are called *skins*. That is to say, the colored versions of the items are sold with money and this is where our study's problem begins.

Apart from that, there are stickers that can be adhered on these items, cases that contains *skins* but you do not know which of them to come out, the keys which are required to open these cases, "souvenir packages" that are presented with the name of past tournaments and contains different types of items related to the tournament, music kits which allows you to listen unique songs in game etc. are other items sold in this market. In addition, things like "operation pass" which allows players to play custom missions on the new maps or "name tags" to use for naming weapons are the items which appear on the main menu page of the game itself. If you want to buy any of these items mentioned, it is possible by adding money in your Steam wallet or by having them purchased directly from your credit card.

Some of these items serve a function visibly. For example, music kits let you listen extra songs that are not placed into original game that is why they have a price. However, *skins* do not serve a visible purpose. They do not add any bonuses to player in any manner. Only feature of the *skins* is their appearances being different from the default items that player already has in his/her inventory at the beginning. Therefore, I discussed that, in this digital market, there is a commodity fetishism case like in real-life market and I associated it with Adorno's approaches. This is because what drives the player to buy the *skins* is not the function of the item, but its rareness, its charm and its expensiveness. Having the rare item and becoming happy with it, the player ensures that the *skins* added to the market by game manufacturers serve their purpose. The market system of capitalism that Adorno mentioned and the products of happiness that capitalist system presents to people are the same system and products in the game.

In this context, it is necessary to understand the relationship between skins and commodity fetishism in detail. For this reason, I demonstrated the specific features and prices of skins and correlated them with the approach of Adorno in the next section.

4. THE CONCEPTUALISATION OF SKINS AND FETISHISM IN GAME STUDIES

Skins are exactly the same as the shape and function of the weapons that players already have as default; it only has a pattern on it. Only knives and gloves on the market have a different shape comparing to the existing knife and glove that the game originally gave you, but again these knives and gloves are no different from the default knife and glove functionally. What I mean by function is the damage these items inflict on enemy team because the goal in this game is to win the rounds by eliminating your enemies. *Skins* come out of the cases, they are not directly put on the market by Valve. These cases are released in the summer and winter periods, and tens of different cases have been introduced starting with "Arms Deal" update back in



August 13, 2013. There were no *skins* at the beginning of the game. Each cases contain one of the 15 or 18 items mentioned in its description. One of 15 or 18 different items, comes out of each of cases, surprisingly. It is essential to state that the cases can sometimes be given to the players randomly, when all rounds are over during the game modes as a gift. Normally, they are sold on market by Valve directly. Thus, those who play the game can get cases as a gift and then they can sell the cases on market or open them via keys to obtain skins. The interesting part is that *skins* are belong to certain quality categories.

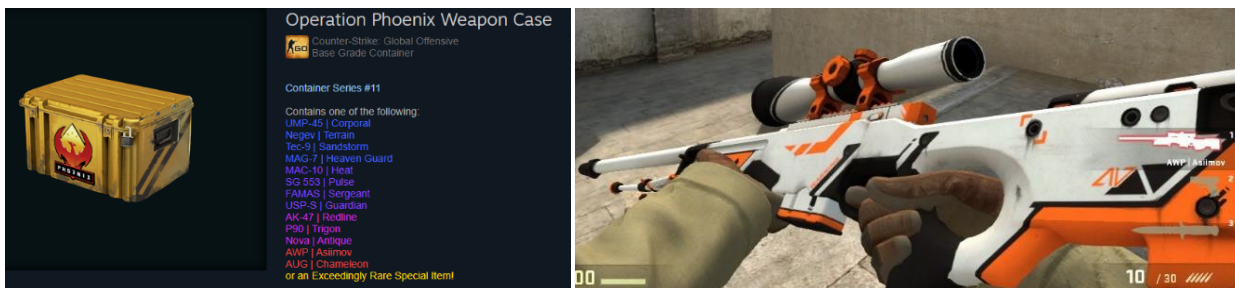
I can explain quality categories without mentioning their names as follows: 5 of the 15 different items within cases have blue colored name, 4 of them have purple colored name, 3 of them have pink colored name, 2 of them have red colored name and 1 of them have yellow colored name (in cases containing 18 different items, there are 6 blue name, 5 purple name, 4 pink name). This coloring is seen in the details of the cases and in the description of the guns located at the bottom right of the screen, while the gun is in the hands of the character in gameplay. This distinction has been the factor that determines the price of items in the market of this game. The rarity of items varies by color. While blue is the most common item, the yellow is the least common item in the game market. Even, yellow items' name written as "or an Exceedingly Rare Special Item!" in yellow color in case descriptions (see, [picture 3.2](#)) Rarity order is from least to most; yellow, red, pink, purple, blue. This means that when you open a case, the blue is more likely to come out rather than others. That's why most of the weapons on the market are blue. Almost one third of the weapons in the case, which consists of five different colors, have blue names. By the way, default weapons in the inventory has white colored names.

In addition to this distinction, there are two other features that affect market prices. These are how worn the weapon is (exterior feature) and the counter embedded on weapons that shows the total number of enemies eliminated by the player. This counter is called Stattrak and if there is this word at the beginning of a weapon name, it means that weapon has it. The worn level of the *skins* are categorised as follows: "Factory New", "Minimal Wear", "Field-Tested", "Well-Worn", "Battle-Scarred". These expressions are located in parentheses next to the weapon names shown on market. In other words, if the item coming out of a case is yellow, factory new and has a counter, I can say that it is a candidate to be the rarest item in the game.

We see that one of the most used weapons in the game is the sniper rifle named AWP ([Weplay, 2020](#)). The default version, which is dark green when you first buy the game, is available in our inventory. However, when we open the market tab and type to search bar, for example "StatTrak™ AWP | Asiimov", it is possible to see that there are orange-white colored AWP weapons are on the purchase list with prices above \$100. This weapon belongs to the red category mentioned above and is a rare item in the game (see, [picture 3.4](#)).



Picture 3.1. AWP weapon with its white icon on right side of screen, given to the player at the beginning



Picture 3.2 Operation Phoenix Case that includes AWP Asiimov & In-game display of AWP Asiimov (small AWP icon on the right indicates that it belongs to the red category skins)

As the picture 3.4 shows, the number in the quantity part of *field-tested Asiimov* is 33, that is, only 33 players out of hundreds of thousands sell this item. There is also a sales chart for this weapon, and since it has been released, it marks every moment it was sold as a point of its life time, indicating how many dollars it was on which day and at what time. For example, while it was sold for \$413 on March 14, 2014, the price decreased to \$265 by May 25, 2020 (see, [picture 3.3](#)). This means that every day, players are putting the AWP Asiimov which they obtained from the cases and put it on the market. Thus, the price of an item decreases in direct proportion to its rareness. This price decrease happens in the same way as the real-life market system. Exchange value of the items are determined by their rareness.



Picture 3.3 Sales chart of AWP Asiimov in the market (Showing the prices of March 14 2014 and May 25 2020)



Showing results for: Counter-Strike: Global Offensive "StatTrak™ AWP | Asiimov" Clear all

NAME	QUANTITY	PRICE
 StatTrak™ AWP Asiimov (Field-Tested) Counter-Strike: Global Offensive	33	Starting at: \$174.05 USD
 StatTrak™ AWP Asiimov (Well-Worn) Counter-Strike: Global Offensive	19	Starting at: \$117.81 USD
 StatTrak™ AWP Asiimov (Battle-Scarred) Counter-Strike: Global Offensive	45	Starting at: \$100.88 USD

Search for Items
StatTrak™ AWP | Asiimov
Show advanced options...

Picture 3.4 When you search for StatTrak™ AWP | Asiimov in the CS:GO's market (the price list and the quantity number of the weapon available on market).

As I mentioned before, the default items given to the player at the beginning serve the exact purpose as same as *skins* that can be purchased from the market. So, they have the same use value. The weapons with *skin* or without *skin* inflict the same damage upon the enemies. Gloves with *skin* do not give any extra bonuses to player. However, having these side features that have nothing to do except showing off - having a *skin*, having a counter - and rareness in the market arouses the desire of players to obtain it. In fact, the *skin* do not matter too much, it is the feeling of having rare items in the game that evokes the desire. The feeling of the woman who has the diamond in daily life is similar to the feelings of the players who have the rare items in the game.

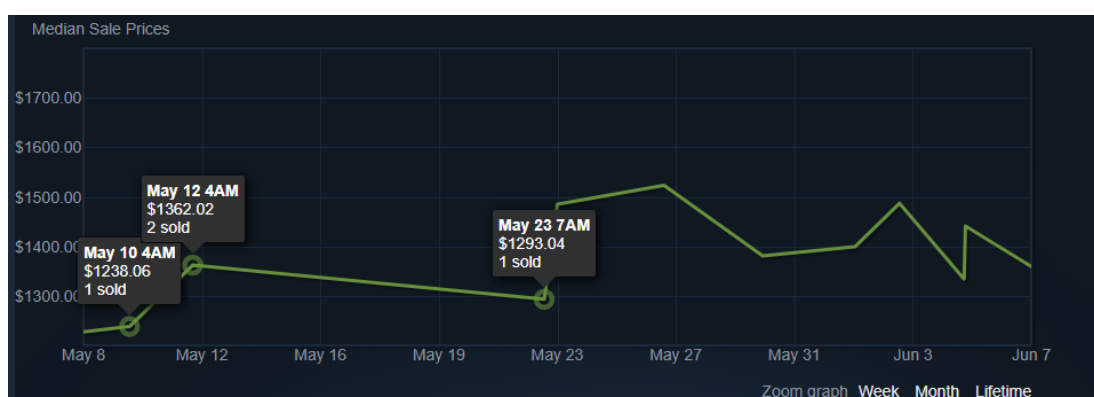
In terms of use value, diamond has no vital importance. But what is imposed on women who want to get married through the media and advertisements is that they must have a big and expensive diamond. The more expensive a diamond is, the more it will be envied by others. Adorno (2001), who put forward the concept of the culture industry, talks about how media owners impose buying popular and expensive goods upon people through media. A person who is unhappy in his monotonous life is believed to be happy only when he has popular and expensive things. The same situation goes for CS: GO. While **media** is the computer game, players are **consumers** who are directed to the consumption frenzy and Valve is the **media owner** who creates the consumption culture in the game³. The success achieved in 2012 in the *Team Fortress* game (another Valve series) with the in-game items that did not have use value but have *skins* were sold with the prices in steam market, later adapted to the CS: GO. Therefore, the firm aimed for making profit with not only selling the game, but also with the in-game items. Valve sells items through steam market itself and also collects the mandatory fee from every transaction made between players (Varoufakis, 2012). One of the reason for this issue is that computer games have fought against pirated purchases for years, especially expensive games have been bought only by a certain percentage of players. The most impressive method

³ see, Witkin's thoughts page 4.



of companies that want to prevent this was in-game items and additional packages for games (Lizardi, 2012). Valve company designed the in-game market similar to the market in late capitalism period. It introduced market-oriented products and enabled them to be consumed as soon as possible.

In addition to these, the game has another feature that I have not mentioned so far, and it distinguishes the game from the old series. If player presses the "F" key on keyboard while playing the game, the game character performs the action of looking at the weapon and then examines it by showing from different angles (see, [picture 3.2](#)). The purpose of putting this action into the game is clear. It is to constantly inspect the items and create admiration in the player. Most of the players perform this action usually while moving on the map alone, except in moments of conflict, and constantly examine the item they have. Also in competitive mode, which is the most preferred game mode, when players die, they automatically enter the spectating mode in which they watch the alive team mates from their first person view. They stay dead until the round ends. This is an opportunity to show the weapon in hand to the viewer. In fact, players with a very rare and highly priced weapon are asked by other players about the price of that weapon or the rate of wear (factory new, field-tested etc.) in gameplay times. At the end of these questions, there is sometimes a demand for exchange or purchase. Even though the price of these rare items in the game increases above \$1000, they always find a buyer (see, [picture 3.5](#)). The researcher played the game for 1800 hours and also closely followed the international tournaments. The expositions mentioned are ultimately supported by participant observations of researcher (e.g. [Steam User Profile, 2020](#)). In qualitative researches, the researcher is the person who spends time in the field, knows the field closely, shares what is happening in the field and establishes a close relationship with the participants. In this case, the researcher's observations and comments can become important factors determining the results of the research (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2016).



Picture 3.5 Minimum 3 prices of “AK-47 | Wild Lotus” so far (\$1238, \$1293,\$1362)

The popularity of *skins* has reached such high levels that players without purchasing power can be happy even if they at least temporarily acquire a popular *skin*. The player with *skins* has the



opportunity to give it to other teammates during the match or the *skin* of a dead player can be picked up and used. However, these uses are valid only for that match, weapons obtained in these ways are not added to the player's inventory. Still, there are players who want to reach such a temporary use. An example of this situation is the excitement of a Russian player in a video uploaded to youtube, when he notices his teammate has AWP Dragon Lore *skin* (a rifle with a price over \$1000 in steam market) in the warm-up round. In the video, it is seen that he shouts through his microphone saying, “Dragon Lore! Please give it to me! Dragon Lore!” and he follows his friend for this reason. The player who owns the item also enjoys this interest a lot (Youtube, 2020).

5. RESEARCH METHOD

5.1. Research Design

The research is designed as a *holistic single-case study*, one of the qualitative research methods. Qualitative Case Study approach explores a “bounded system” or case over time. QCS method uses detailed, comprehensive information gathering including various sources of knowledge. In other words, it is the disclosure of a case with the data obtained from the themes of a current situation. Scholars formed the QCS as a notionally related to tradition; it is difficult to distinguish the case from the context in which it occurs (Boblin, Ireland, Kirkpatrick and Robertson, 2013). The type of case study should be determined by the size of the case or the purpose of the research (Creswell, 2013). QCS has been the choice of scholars in many disciplines to contribute to the knowledge of individuals, groups, processes and relationships (Yin, 2009). Case studies aim to deeply analyze a situation or case that the researcher cannot control according to how and why questions (Yazan, 2015, p. 13; Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2016, p. 289).

In the case studies, the boundaries between the contexts related to phenomenon and phenomenon itself cannot be clearly separated. Therefore, the case to be studied is handled within the framework of the real life it belongs to (Yin, 2009). The main purpose of case studies is to demonstrate the results of an existing case without changing anything (Hancock and Algozzine, 2006). In holistic single-case study designs, there is only one case (an individual, an institution, etc.) to be analyzed. (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2016, p. 300-301). In this study, I used passive analysis method to get the comments written by CS: GO players on internet forums (steam and reddit) will be examined.

5.2. Study Group

In order to investigate the subject thoroughly in case studies, the researcher should identify a small geographical area or a very limited number of people as samples (Margaret, 1995; Zainal, 2007, p. 1-2). Therefore, the study group of this research consists of individuals who leave comments on Reddit and Steam forums. Participants were selected considering the characteristics of individuals who are parties to the research problem within the *maximum*



variation sampling method. According to Margaret (1995) in the *maximum variation sampling*, which is one of the purposeful sampling types, the aim is to reflect the variety of the individuals to the maximum extent by creating a small sample group among the people who can be a party to the problem.

5.3. Analysis of Data

The data were collected from related forums using passive analysis method. In passive analysis method, data are collected over internet, tv and web technologies (Dholakia ve Zhang, 2004). The collected data were analyzed by descriptive analysis method. In the descriptive analysis method, collected data are summarized and interpreted according to the previously determined themes. Thematic analysis and qualitative content analysis are the categories of qualitative descriptive design. These techniques are the tools for elucidating theme and analysing textual data (Forman & Damschroder, 2008). The data can be determined in accordance with the researcher's initiative and the purpose of the study according to the themes corresponding to the research problem or questions (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2016, s. 239).

6. FINDINGS

The comments were gathered under 2 categories by reviewing the comments in the relevant forums. These categories were named as positive and negative comments. As there are three themes under the positive category, the negative comments category consists of only one theme. Theme names were chosen in a way to cover all comments in line with the purpose of the research. Accordingly, under the category of positive comments; There are Psychological Boost, Self Confidence and Feeling Better themes.

6.1. Psychological Boost

There are player comments on a topic with the title "Skins make you play better" in the Steam forum (e.g. Steam Discussions, 2020). The person who opened the title stated that the *skins* affect the players psychologically and make them concentrate better. The player's comments and questions are as follows,

"Skins make you play better. Of course they do not effect your gameplay, but maybe its something psychological. When you have a nice skin you have a better feeling while playing and can maybe concentrate more (or something like this) and more concentration makes you play better. Or do they distract more? What do you think?" (llink007)

In the answers following the question, some players wrote comments in support of the psychological effect. One of them stated that he focusses on doing their best in order not to lose the *skins*, while another stated the *skins* give the player a feeling of pride and courage or there is player saying he turns into a monster while playing with the *skin* they love, that is, he plays



much better. There are even players who compare the psychological impact of these items to placebo. The comments are as below,

“when i play with someone elses asiimov i do my best because i want to keep the weapon :D” (SHAKY SHOOTER)

“Having a custom skin does give you a sense of pride and encouragement when playing although I can't make any claim that they may actually improve your overall performance. In fact, they may actually hurt your performance. There has been several occasions when I recalled noticing the barrels of people hiding in spots only because they were using some bright camouflage that did not match their surroundings. Defaults and camo's that match the type of maps they are used on are the only REAL possibility of gaining any sort of edge.” (\\'1do\\'M4keR)

“Confirming the psychological thing the OP said. Ever since I got my StatTrak AK Blue Laminate i've been a beast with it. Or maybe I learned to control it much better.. I don't know.” (mutzila20 Mercedes F1 AMG)

“Placebo effect man so sad.....” (WolfWallace)

“Bright colors have a phsycological effect on players and yes can make you play or perform better.” (henji)

A similar topic found on the Reddit forum, and there are comments showing similarities with those on the Steam platform (e.g. [Reddit, 2020](#)). The title is “Do skins really have an impact on performance in CS: GO?” and the page contains dozens of player reviews. The player who opened the title shared his feelings about the *skins* and mentioned that thanks to the *skins*, he became twice as much focused while playing the game. The comment of the player who questions whether he is alone or not to think that is as follows,

So playing Counter Strike for about 2 years now, I have never owned a knife, or any decent skins for that matter. However, I have had a knife and a couple nice skins that I was borrowing from a friend. Playing with these has made me realize that I feel 2X as focused when I have anything but default. I don't know how to explain it, I guess I feel like skins actually do improve you gameplay, even if they aren't supposed to. Is this normal? I don't desire expensive knives for flashy skins like some do, I just feel like if you want to become better/more focused, buying skins might not be a bad idea. Am I in the minority for thinking like this? (Kefjeuh)

Among the players who answered the question, there were those who indicated that this is a psychological factor. The placebo effect was also expressed on this forum. Below are the comments of the participants who accept the *skins* are affective in terms of psychological / mental aspects,



“This is a highly psychological issue, power of suggestion, sometimes power of your own fucked up mind, if you convince yourself, even without realizing it, that a nice skin makes you more comfortable whilst playing, you will play better, no denying that, but it is only ever mental.” (FuryanEU)

“Mentally, it might have. I'm so used to my skins that when i'm playing with the default ones for some reason i feel i'm a bit off. But i think it's just in my head, nothing actual tbh.”(kazakhh)

“It's a placebo. So technically you are playing better with skins because it's in your head that they are makong a difference, but in reality they don't do anything.” (JMS230)

6.2. Self-Confidence

In the answers reviewed on the Steam community forum, it was noticed by players that the *skins* increase the self-confidence and that is why they are preferred. As in all areas, self-confidence is an important factor in games. The increased self-confidence of the players affects their performance in the games. Therefore, I can say that some of the players who prefer *skins* use this way to increase their self-confidence. These types of players have expressed their views as indicated below,

“If you like the way your weapon looks, it may offer some minor boost in confidence which will result in better performance. Maybe.” (Sugoi)

“if i have good item it gives me confidence which makes me play betta” (Dougy)

“Skins can have a psychological effect in the sense of you enjoy them, this increases your enjoyment of the game and allows you to do better because you're in that zone and enjoying yourself. It will not directly affect your skill but it's kind of like getting something to really help you get on your game in some way. Like if you go bowling and actually get your own balls or shoes you'll feel better and typically do better because you enjoy it more and gives a boost of confidence and ♥♥♥♥ like that.” (Luftwaffle)

“i dont think it makes you play better but maybe more confident about playing but then i guess the hype of your new skin just wears of after a while”(わがままバカ)

There are similar answers to the question on Reddit forum. Players noted that they find the increase in self-confidence with the use of *skin* in direct proportion. The comments of the players who think that they are performing much better with the increased self-confidence provided by *skins* are given below,

“Skins can give you confidence and make you feel bad ass when i got my howl i became a much better player”(Jakeskics)



“I can't even shit you on this. I noticed every time I played. If there was an aquamarine revenge on the ground I'd pick it up and go off with it. Got a field tested one and I feel like I play better.”(acequake91)

“Illusion. Only thing skins might do is somehow giving you a confidence boost which plays a HUGE role in performing well.” (Sphexator)

6.3. Feeling Better

The players who commented on Steam question stated that playing with *skins* makes them feel better and comfortable. The statements of the players who thinks that they feel the effects such as increased motivation and better aiming with the *skins* are as below,

“I moisturise my skin a lot. It makes me more comfortable when playing.”
(KaMing)

“When you hold something you like.. you'll aim better.. xD haha... looking forward for new skin / Gun” (Roronoa Ray)

“You might tend to use it more and get better with it, imo.” (Bullela©™®)

“i tend to do better with camos(skin)”(Sippin' sake with my posse)

“its wierd but true when i use someones howl i do great but when i use mine or a default i do bad.” (notwaffle)

“Skins substantiate your position to play, can have a positive effect on motivation and social processes but can be looked upon as total useless at the same time. But i has a giant influence on the whole progress.” (Rampensau)

Some of the participants who answered the question on Reddit also expressed the case of feeling better that comes with the *skins*. Their comments are as follows,

“People will play placebo and write you off like your post is worthless, but I've noticed the same thing. It just feels better to have a nice looking skin rather than a crappy or default one. It doesn't give a huge improvement, but it does change my game a bit...” (AmChayChay)

“Purely placebo- maybe stattrak skins give you more incentive to get frags?”
(TopHatsAreRad)

“When u pick up that dlore you feel like a monster” (ankadia)

“maybe when you use a skin that you like you feel more motivated and therefore play better ? but i think its a placebo :)” (HalpImNoob)



“It kinda does for me. I awp / have better movement with certain knives, guess it just makes it more fun to play.” (xPekerim)

6.4. Adverse Comments

Although there are players who praise the *skins* in terms of psychological boost, self-confidence and feeling better themes, there were also participants who did not feel these effects on them and even commented that the *skins* decreased the performance of their gameplay because *skins* might distract them. Comments of these players as noted below,

“Skins makes you play worse. You'll spend more time looking at your e-peen than the angle you're supposed to hold.” (fluffy)

“skin != skill

All they make you do is waste time inspecting them.

CT 1 : "He's behind that wall, be careful!"

CT 2 : "LOOK AT MY COLORFUL GUN! LOOK AT IT!" (Keba)

“never used skins. still rekt most ppl..” (did he dead?)

“I have an asiimov and still suck /thread”(BananaMan)

“Oh please you silvers...Please quit CS if you can't perform better without pixels.”
(Cat)

“I can see where you are coming from but if the player is good they will play good no matter what skin is on the gun” (deez-Rand)

“Some make worse. The ones with 4 stickeers I always drop them for default guns. I can't look at it.” (МММ, тортик v2.0)

Similarly, in adverse comments on Reddit, it was emphasized that the *skins* cause players to play worse, and between the *skins* and the weapons given at the beginning to player are no different from each other. Moreover, a comment indicates that the players tend to play with *skins* because of the professional CS: GO players prefer playing with them. Thus, this is a free advertising campaign for the Valve company. Comments on these issues are as follows,

“Im opposite of that. When i had normal awp skin I would do good but when I got my man o war I tried doing stuff noone could do and i started playing more stupid.”(FadezGaming)

“A Dragon Lore is still just an AWP man.”(xynnnn0r)



“Maybe because pros play with nice skins, so if you play with nice skins you play like a pro. Free ads for valve” (deleted user)

7. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This study explores the underlying motives for the in-game item consumptions of CS: GO players. Within the context of in-game items, only items called "skin" have been handled, other in-game items have been excluded from the research. By adhering to the purposeful sampling method, the comments that were appropriate for the purpose of the research were collected from the related forums using passive analysis method, and lastly the comments were analyzed by the descriptive analysis method. Findings have shown that psychological boost, self-confidence and feeling better themes are effective for in-game item consumption.

The *skins* I handle in terms of “use and exchange” value within the scope of the study were examined with Adorno's approach of commodity fetishism. There is no benefit that these products add to the player in terms of use value. The *skins* and the default weapons given to players at the beginning free are functionally same because they have the exact same property values (damage, recoil control, armor penetration etc.). However, in the game market created by Valve, a capitalist market system similar to real life has emerged by determining the prices of *skins* according to their quality (color classes), wear (exterior classes) ratios and having counters. All of these features serve to item's rareness in the market. The items that reach high prices and become popular in terms of exchange value have turned into items that players dream of owning. Past research also emphasizes that the steam community market has turned into a capitalist marketplace (e.g. [Greene and Joseph, 2015](#)) and additional packages of the game as well as in-game items are consumed with the motive of commodity fetishism ([Lizardi, 2012](#)).

Greene and Joseph (2015) explained the steam market with Marxist crisis theories and Harvey's spatial fix theory. They interpreted the desire of the capital to spread to different geographies due to economical crisis via digital markets, namely the Steam market. With digital server-based markets, they associated the annihilation of time by space and the ability to reach anywhere in the world simultaneously with the spatial fix theory. In addition, by explaining the tax collected from the trades between players with Marx's theory of ground rent, they compared Valve to the capitalist farmer and the players to the workers who worked under them and paid taxes.

Lizardi (2012) similarly examined the DLC (downloadable content) of the games in terms of the commodification process. After purchasing the game, consumers are constantly offered DLC packages and the game continues to be sold in pieces. The game companies determine this as their new strategy and thus the players enter into the perpetual cycle of commodification. In this respect, my study findings support the research of Lizardi (2012).

Yamamoto and Arthur (2015) have examined the steam community market section of CS: GO in their studies and explained how players try to make money through these *skins* through Real



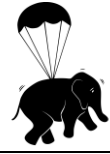
Money Trade method or betting websites. They also emphasized that there was a significant change in the in-game economy with the StatTrak counters. The researchers, who associate the economy of game with the real life economy, stated that there is a serious difference between them and that is the Valve company can change the in-game economy any way it wants. Accordingly, it is thought that my current research findings will contribute to the literature in terms of revealing the emotional factors related to in-game purchasing behavior. All in all, past studies have generally designed their studies by making comparisons over the real market and the steam market or they explored player's way of making profits through betting websites or trade in steam market. However, they did not include the emotional in-game item consumption motives of the players.

It is necessary to open a parenthesis about player's way of making profits through betting websites or trade using in-game items. The player can bet the *skins* in his hand and earn more of them in return. This is the reason why some players buy *skins*. Websites like CSGO Empire, CSGOFast, CsgoBounty, CSGO-Case are just a few of these dozens of these betting sites. There is also the opportunity to make a profit by purchasing the items in the market and then selling them more expensively. So these consumption types are out of this study's scope. It is obvious that not all purchases of items will be with a fetishistic consumption motive.

The players, who purchased *skins* in order to satisfy their motives of commodity fetishism, built a culture of consumption within the game. Therefore, in order to understand the consumption culture within the game, the conceptual basis of the study, Adorno's culture industry concept should be mentioned. Adorno (2001) considered commodity fetishism as the imposition of products produced by the culture industry to people, and that people think they will be happy by consuming these products. Advertising of expensive products and directing towards the expensive is the basic point in the culture industry theory. Of course, this expensiveness means that there rare and popular goods in the market. This has been seen in the *skin* comments of the players I have discussed above. The players who questioned why they spend money on these *skins* have put forward ideas such as psychological boost, self-confidence and feeling better, and have associated it with the placebo effect.

The design-oriented items without any use value (function) that Valve company first introduced with Team Fortress game (e.g. Greene and Joseph, 2015, p. 236) and then adapted to the CS: GO game, served their creation purpose (making profit). The fact that some *skins* are rare compared to other items and therefore become popular did not prevent them from being purchased regardless of their prices. As I reviewed in the Steam market, some *skins* found buyers at very high prices (see, picture 3.5).

This is an example of Adorno's (2001) mentions considering popularity and rarity affect people. The happiness of the woman who has an expensive gold bracelet in real life is the same as the happiness of the player who has an expensive *skin* in the game. While there is no use value for the universe where both items are located, the high exchange values are the strongest reason for their preference for their purchase. As Adorno (2001) stated, the criterion that now affects



people to consume is not the use value of objects but their rarity and popularity which serve exchange value.

I think research findings will contribute to the literature and to practitioners. Under the title of "Game Studies", there are a lot of works in the international studies, while there are few ones in some (e.g. Turkey) local studies. Thus, I can say that researches about game studies are also important for local practitioners and researchers. The game sector, which can now have serious effects on the national income of countries, should be the subject of more works in local ones. In fact, popular computer games have even turned into a sports branch under the title of "eSports" and have their own leagues and tournaments (see, pro.eslgaming.com). Even the world cup tournament of the CS: GO game was organized, and in 2017, CS:GO Turkish national team defeated Argentina in the final and brought the cup to Turkey. For this reason, the development of the games until today and their integration to our lives are undeniably important. Famous professional game players are now considered like football players. Their fan pages are built, their signature T-shirts and hats are sold and they even appear on television. For example, the Steam profile of team *Big* and Turkish national team player named Can "Xantares" Dörtkardeş has comments of 4,655 pages. In most of comments, fans insist that Can write comments on their profiles (e.g. [Steam Xantares Profile, 2020](#)).

Mount & Blade computer game series, which is a local game of Turkey and developed by Tale Worlds company residing in METU Technopolis, is important in terms of its contribution to the country. The company, which is famous for its old games, has reached 248.000 peak players in April 2020 with the the latest game they released (e.g. [Steamcharts Bannerlord, 2020](#)). This number is a very serious success for domestic games. This game has tournaments in Europe and Turkey with prize and therefore can be analyzed for game studies. In addition, social media accounts of TaleWorlds are followed by thousands of players; It has 65,600 followers on Twitter and 17,598 on Facebook (see, Mount & Blade Twitter and Facebook official account pages). It is argued that the Valve makes huge profits by means of trades in Steam community market. It is a method that should be tried by local game producers by applying this way. Developing a market for the game can provide serious profits for game developers as Valve achieved.



Picture 3.6 2012-2021 Global Games Market

Finally, the chart above shows the value of the global game market (Newzoo, 2020). Developed countries are now investing heavily into game sector. Discussing this sector using Game Studies literature in various specific contexts provides a source for understanding consumer behavior of players and offering local entrepreneurs the opportunity to get to know the sector closely. Since the local academic field is quite insufficient in this regard, I think that it will be valuable to study the game studies on a wide axis. Conducting intensive academic research in the fields named as game culture, game studies or ludology in the world literature emphasizes the importance of this situation. This study can provide valuable data for future researches because it contains the motives of players behind their in-game consumptions. Even in international literature, there are few researches focusing on player thoughts about in-game items. I analyzed their comments on Reddit & Steam forums but future studies can analyze their thoughts using depth interview technique. Therefore, player's in-game consumption motives can be demonstrated in details.

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Picture 3.1 AWP weapon with its white icon on right side of screen, given to the player at the beginning, Captured in CS:GO game directly by researcher himself (Accessed: 6 June 2020).

Picture 3.2 Operation Phoenix Case that includes AWP Asiimov & In-game display of AWP Asiimov (small AWP icon on the right indicates that it belongs to the red category skins), Available at: <https://steamcommunity.com/market/listings/730/Operation%20Phoenix%20Weapon%20Case> (Accessed: 6 June 2020).

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Picture 3.5 Minimum 3 prices of “AK-47 | Wild Lotus” so far (\$1238, \$1293, \$1362), Available at: <https://steamcommunity.com/market/listings/730/AK47%20%7C%20Wild%20Lotus%20%28Field-Tested%29> (Accessed: 6 June 2020).

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