A FRAMEWORK OF HOW SPONSORING ESPORTS BENEFITS BRAND IMAGE

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to identify the elements that facilitate or lead brands to acquire an improved brand image as a result of sponsoring esports. A conceptual framework was created and then improved by empirical data. This exploratory and quantitative research analysed 1,611 esports fans who were sampled through a non-probability purposive heterogeneous method. Empirical data was gathered through an online and closed-ended survey. Data showed that esports sponsorships provide seven main elements that benefit the sponsors' brand image. The field of esports sponsorships has been largely ignored by academia. Hence, this research provides the first step in better understanding the benefits of sponsoring esports and creates a foundation for future studies to base themselves on. Knowing the main brand image-related benefits of sponsoring esports will promote the confidence of brands that are still reluctant about entering this new market.

Key Words

Esports; sponsorship; brand image; marketing; branding.

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INTRODUCTION

Markets are plagued with so many similar brands that it is difficult for companies to find a main selling point (Belch & Belch, 2018). Here, it is common for brand image to be the only, or main, distinguishing element (Chaffey & Smith, 2013). According to Belch and Belch (2018), brands that build the best image will have the competitive edge and reap the most ROIs. In this regard, one of the best tools for building brand image is advertising (Belch & Belch, 2018), and from its various types, sponsorships are the most effective as they seem far less commercial (Bennett, 1999).

Regarding where to sponsor, sports are considered to be amongst the best areas to improve brand image (Winnan, 2016), but the new phenomenon of esports has also proven to be very attractive (Bouaoui, 2016; Franke, 2015; Ströh, 2017), especially due to its large audience of 454 million fans (Newzoo, 2019) and a strong annual growth of 14% (Ströh, 2017). However, esports' accelerated growth means there is a high lack of knowledge about this industry, and even less is known about its sponsorships (Korpimies, 2017). As reported by Ströh (2017), the still prevalent negative public perception over videogames may lead brands to not sponsor esports to avoid being associated with its supposed negative aspects. But esports provide sponsors with several opportunities to improve their brand image. Unfortunately most brands are not aware of this (Ströh, 2017). Therefore, this research aimed at exploring and identifying which elements of esports benefit the sponsors' brand image. Particularly, which elements prevent the brand image from being negatively affected and which improve the brands' image. This objective is justified by the large gap of scientific research on the esports market (Chalmet, 2015; Kozachuk et al., 2016) and, especially, its sponsorships (Korpimies, 2017; Ströh, 2017). To achieve this goal, a literature review is first presented on the most discussed elements that benefit the esports sponsors' brand image and eight hypotheses are raised. A conceptual framework of these hypotheses is introduced at the end of the literature review and in the conclusion chapter an empirical framework is presented which improves on the conceptual one.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It is very difficult to persuade people into accepting advertisings (Belch & Belch, 2018). In this sense, sponsorships always bring forth the risk of the brand being perceived as too intrusive (Crompton, 1994). However, a research by Nielsen Esports (2017) found that esports fans have a high acceptance of sponsorships. Their study indicates that more than half (i.e. 55%) of esports fans accept the presence of sponsors in esports, while a significant group (i.e. 38%) has no opinion, and only a small percentage (i.e. 7%) does not like the presence of esports sponsors (Nielsen Esports, 2017). This high acceptance is because fans know that esports cannot survive without sponsors as the large majority of revenue comes from them (Ströh, 2017). Moreover, research has shown that between 58% (Nielsen Esports, 2017) and 95% of all esports sponsors are endemic brands and one of the reasons for this discrepancy is because non-

endemic brands are uncertain of how well fans will accept them as esports sponsors (Ströh, 2017). But, research has found that most fans also accept non-endemic sponsors in esports (AEVI, 2018; Lokhman et al., 2018). In fact, Ströh (2017) states that 70% of fans want even more non-endemic sponsors. This is attracting increasingly more non-endemic companies (Ströh, 2017), like PokerStars (Shabir, 2017), El Corte Inglés, Domino's (AEVI, 2018), Coca-Cola, Audi, Visa, and Gillette (Lokhman et al., 2018). Thus, we hypothesize the following:

H₁: Most esports fans enjoy the presence of endemic esports sponsors.
H₂: Most esports fans enjoy the presence of non-endemic esports sponsors.

Cause-related marketing is a form of ethical marketing that provides high visibility and attractiveness to brands (Eastman et al., 2019; Lee & Rim, 2017). According to Eastman et al. (2019), this marketing strategy has been gaining a lot of attention in the recent years. This is because millennials, and the new generation, are cause-driven individuals (Eastman et al., 2019). Hence, and as stated by Shabir (2017), since most esports fans belong to a young demographic, the infancy of the esports market, and its dependence on sponsors, makes it a cause for them. In this sense, sponsoring esports will show fans that the brand is supporting the industry they love and will lead to positive publicity (Shabir, 2017). Therefore,

H₃: Sponsors that support esports beyond the expected monetary exchange obtain an improved brand image.

Esports fans are very passionate (BI Intelligence & Elder, 2017; Nielsen Esports, 2017). They cheer, watch 5 to 10 hours of esports content per week (Ströh, 2017), follow pro-gaming news (Franke, 2015), wear their favourite team's attire, wave flags, etc. (Winnan, 2016). Tickets of important tournaments often sell out in less than an hour (Stivers, 2017) and 98% of esports-related messages on social platforms have a positive sentiment, a significant contrast to general social media texts (AEVI, 2018). Furthermore, Ströh (2017) indicates that roughly two-thirds of fans perceive esports as a vital hobby and that some even describe it as their passion. This is very attractive for sponsors (Ströh, 2017) as highly attached fans tend to perceive their favourite team's sponsors more positively (Tsiotsou & Alexandris, 2009). If a passionate audience perceives sponsors more positively, we expect the following:

H₄: Sponsors that show fans that they are also passionate about esports obtain an improved brand image.

As stated by Winnan (2016), pro-players are the celebrities of esports. Roughly 76% of fans have a favourite team and follow them on social networks (Winnan, 2016). Guys tremble and ask for autographs and girls throw themselves at them (Li, 2016), which means that famous pro-players are vital influencers (Ströh, 2017). This provides sponsors with the opportunity of

benefiting from the celebrity status of these players (Franke, 2015) at a relatively low cost (Ströh, 2017). Thus, we hypothesize the following:

H₅: The celebrity status of esports personalities improves the esports sponsors' brand image.

Esports excel at providing increased engagement opportunities (Seo & Jung, 2016). Brands can directly communicate with esports fans (AEVI, 2018) because they are very prone to interactivity (Lieberman & Esgate, 2002). According to Stein and Scholz (2016), the online essence of esports makes it possible for pro-players and fans to have direct and bilateral conversations in real-time, which allows the audience to connect with them at a much more intimate level than with any other sports personality. Moreover, pro-players are constantly online streaming their training sessions (Stein & Scholz, 2016) or creating content for their fan-base (Nielsen Esports, 2017), which means they are constantly interacting with the community (Stein & Scholz, 2016). This is a unique strength of esports (Ströh, 2017). The global interactivity has attracted numerous brands seeking to also connect with this community (Seo & Jung, 2016). Even the Olympic committee has stated that esports could be useful to engage the worldwide youth with the Olympic movement (Shabir, 2017). Therefore,

H₆: The high engagement of esports fans improves the esports sponsors' brand image.

Esports have a vivid energy (Stein & Scholz, 2016) and an enthusiastic public just like sports (Shabir, 2017). This has led esports to be associated with positive images and feelings (Jin, 2010) and has attracted several brands looking to capitalize on its positive atmosphere (Winnan, 2016). Moreover, although sponsor fit can influence the effects of brand image transfer (Lacey & Close, 2013), a study by Ströh (2017) found that most esports fans perceived the non-endemic main sponsor of the 2016 ESL Frühlingsmeisterschaft, Wüstenrot Bausparkasse AG, to be a more likable brand due to sponsoring esports. According to the author, this seems to indicate that sponsoring esports may lead to positive brand image transfer of both endemic and non-endemic brands. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H₇: Brands benefit from positive brand image transfer as a result of sponsoring esports.

People aged between 18 and 24-years-old are the most relevant demographic to build brand loyalty because they are initiating their lives as independent consumers (Wesley & Barczak, 2010). Interestingly, the large majority of esports fans are very close to this age group (Mooney, 2018; Nielsen Esports, 2017; Shabir, 2017; SuperData, 2015). Hence, if brand loyalty is cultivated, there is a very high probability that these individuals will continue using the brand for the rest of their lives (Wesley & Barczak, 2010). Loyalty can be built through sponsorships (Smith, 2004), especially if the brand sponsors something

that the consumer loves or is loyal to ([Quester & Farrelly, 1998](#)) and esports fans have shown to have strong positive feelings for competitive gaming ([Shabir, 2017](#); [Ströh, 2017](#); [Winnan, 2016](#)). For instance, SK Telecom, an esports sponsor, has stated that fans often seem to even want to thank the brand for sponsoring, showing relevant signs of love and loyalty for the sponsor ([Taylor, 2012](#)). Thus, we have the following hypothesis:

H8: Brands benefit from enhanced brand loyalty as a result of sponsoring esports.

The review analysed the literature's most widely mentioned elements that positively affect esports sponsors' brand image. In total, eight main elements were identified. Figure 1 presents a conceptual framework summarizing the findings of the literature review.

Figure 1: The benefits of esports sponsorships on the sponsor's brand image (conceptual framework)

Source: Own survey.

METHODOLOGY

The great lack of scientific research on esports sponsorships and the fast pace at which this industry is evolving means that the conceptual framework may not be precise and up-to-date. Moreover, there is not enough data in the literature to include in the model a justification of why the aforementioned elements benefit the sponsors' image. Hence, more accurate and updated empirical data was gathered to enhance the quality, reliability, and detail of the conceptual framework. Particularly, special attention was given to identifying the intricacies that lead the aforementioned elements to benefit the sponsors' brand image. In order to create the empirical framework, this research's purpose was

exploratory and the approach was quantitative. The time horizon was cross-sectional and the study setting was non-contrived with the researchers taking an overt stance.

Population and sampling

The sample was composed of esports fans (N = 1,611) and the sampling method was non-probability purposive heterogeneous. Specifically, there was a deliberate attempt to select a varied group of esports fans. This was done to ensure that the sample covered the largest possible spectrum of fans from all esports video games. To achieve this, a database that included the 10 most-watched esports video games of each month of 2019 (from January to August) and the 100 esports games that have awarded the highest amount of prize money until now was created. The monthly top 10 list was based on data from Newzoo (2020) which, every month, exhibits a list of Twitch and YouTube's 10 most-watched video games in esports. Newzoo is a web platform that provides various esports-related statistics and is used by multiple researchers, like Chao (2017), Dubois and Gibbs (2018), Funk et al. (2018), etc. The list of the 100 esports titles that awarded the most prize money over the years was acquired from Esports Earnings (2020). This is a popular website for esports data and widely used by a large number of researchers, including Brickell (2017), Menasce (2019), Owens (2016), etc. Table 1 exposes the list that resulted from crossing the 10 most-watched esports games from January to August 2019 and the 100 esports titles that have awarded the most prize money. Requests to fill out the online survey were posted in esports-related forums whose main topic was focused on one or more of the games from Table 1. In addition to these, participation requests were also posted in forums focused on general esports, popular esports tournaments, and pro-players and teams.

Table 1: Most-watched and highest prize money awarded esports videogames

Doom 3	Point Blank
PLAYERUNKNOWN'S BATTLEGROUNDS Mobile	Super Smash Bros. Ultimate
Brawlhalla	FIFA 17
Blade & Soul	Age of Empires II: The Age of Kings
World in Conflict	ShootMania Storm
Gears of War	Teamfight Tactics
Battlefield 4	Project Gotham Racing 3
Counter-Strike	League of Legends
Call of Duty: World War II	Counter-Strike Online
CrossFire	Halo 2
Attack on Titan Tribute Game	WarCraft III
StarCraft: Brood War	Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare
Rocket League	Street Fighter V: Arcade Edition
Heroes of Newerth	Tekken 7
Halo 4	Quake III Arena
Shadowverse	Halo: Combat Evolved
Arena of Valor	Madden NFL 2013
World of WarCraft	Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare
Paladins	Magic: The Gathering Arena
Gears of War 4	Street Fighter V

NBA 2K18	Halo 3
H1Z1	Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3
Halo 5: Guardians	Mortal Kombat X
Guild Wars 2	Pro Evolution Soccer 2017
SMITE	Quake Champions
Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six: Siege	Hearthstone
Super Smash Bros. Melee	Team Fortress 2
Apex Legends	Dota 2
FIFA 18	Call of Duty: Ghosts
Madden NFL 2017	Counter-Strike: Source
Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare	FIFA Online 4
iRacing.com	Defense of the Ancients
FIFA 19	Turbo Racing League
Halo 2 Anniversary	Super Smash Bros. Brawl
Call of Duty: Black Ops III	FIFA Online 3
World of Tanks	Injustice 2
Ultra Street Fighter IV	Counter-Strike: Global Offensive
Realm Royale	PLAYERUNKNOWN'S BATTLEGROUNDS
Painkiller	Magic: The Gathering Online
Vainglory	Call of Duty: Black Ops
Forza Motorsport 7	Quake 4
Quake Live	Super Smash Bros. for Wii U
Dead or Alive 4	Old School Runescape
Call of Duty: Black Ops 4	Madden NFL 2018
rFactor 2	FIFA 13
KartRider	Overwatch
Clash Royale	Gwent
StarCraft II	Halo: Reach
Heroes of the Storm	Super Street Fighter IV Arcade Edition
Call of Duty: Black Ops 2	Fortnite

Source: Table based on Esports Earnings (2020) and Newzoo (2020).

Since this research is looking to identify what factors can lead esports sponsors to have an improved brand image, esports fans (i.e. the individual) were used as the unit of observation and esports sponsors (i.e. the organization) were used as the unit of analysis. The reason why esports fans were used as the unit of observation was because they are the ones whom the brand must please and the ones who will ultimately form the positive or negative mental perceptions of the brand and its sponsorship actions. Hence, knowing what factors are most likely to create positive perceptions of the sponsor on the fans' minds will be vital to improve the brand's image. As Kotler and Armstrong (2018) state, brands must study their consumers in order to understand their intricacies, their mentalities, their wants and wishes, and what elements can lead to an improved brand image. Table 2 presents the sample's demographics.

Table 2: Esports fans' demographics

Variable	n					
Attribute	Valid	No answer	Valid %	Mean	SD	Mode
Gender	1,588	23				
Female	116		7.3			
Male	1,472		92.7			
Age	1,533	78		24.2	6.5	18

	Valid	SD	Valid %
Marital status	1,567	44	
Single	1,128		72
Cohabiting	254		16.2
Married	170		10.8
Divorced	14		.9
Widowed	1		.1
Education	1,571	40	
6th grade or less	3		.2
7th to 12th grade	551		35.1
Bachelor degree	702		44.7
Master degree	167		10.6
PhD	27		1.7
Post-doctorate	8		.5
Other	113		7.2
Employment status	1,582	29	
Student	711		44.9
Employed	714		45.1
Homemaker	14		.9
Unemployed	95		6
Retired	6		.4
Other	42		2.7
Region	1,592	19	
Africa	8		.5
Asia	80		5
Europe	576		36.2
North America	844		53
Oceania	45		2.8
South America	39		2.4
Ethnicity	1,549	62	
American Indian or Alaska Native	27		1.7
Asian	233		15
Black or African American	37		2.4
Hispanic, Latino or Spanish origin	115		7.4
Middle Eastern or North African	31		2
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	12		.8
White	1,220		78.8
Other	66		4.3

N = 1,611; SD = Standard deviation; Valid = number of esports fans that selected an option; Valid % = percentage of esports fans that selected an option. For ethnicity, participants were able to select more than one option.
Source: Own survey.

Data collection tool, application method, and data analysis procedure

The data was collected through a closed-ended online structured survey (the only open-ended question was regarding the participant's age). The questionnaire was created through Google Forms, an online survey platform recommended or used by multiple authors, including Cohen et al. (2018) and Luján (2017). The survey was applied through self-recruitment and self-administration. The requests for filling out the survey were placed on esports-related forums with a link that redirected fans to the online survey webpage. To
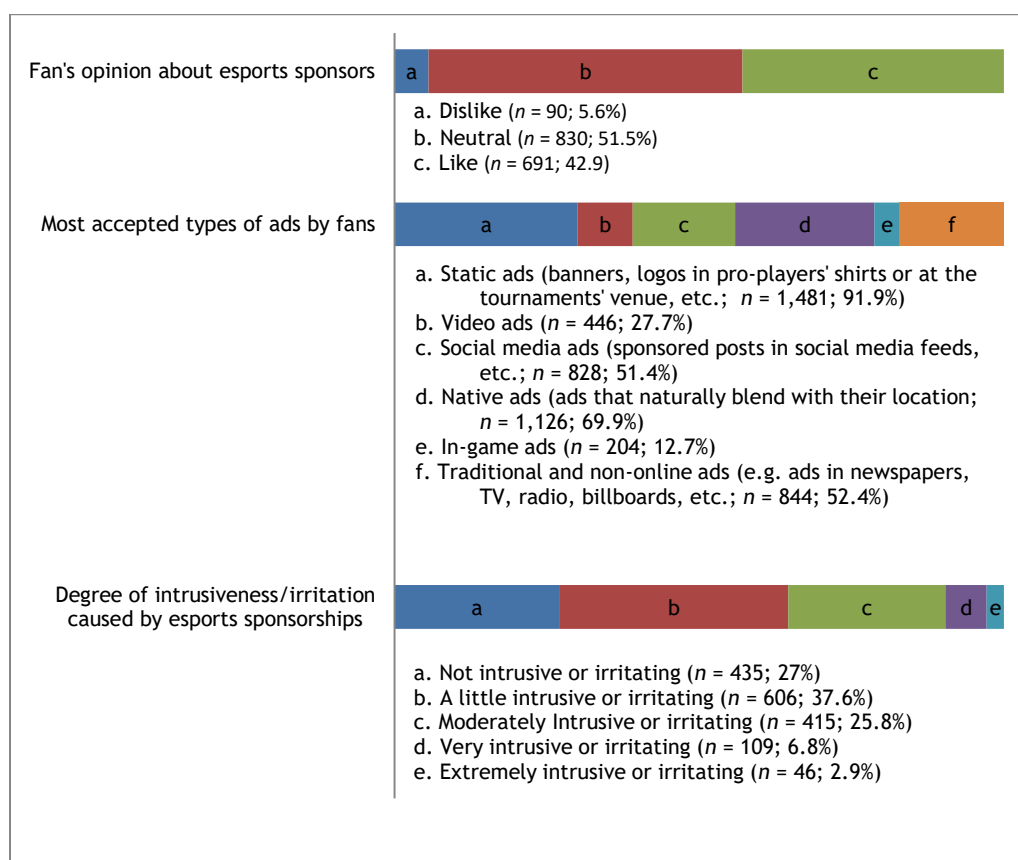
avoid non-esports fans from filling out the survey, the first item of the questionnaire was a filter question which asked if the participant regularly watched or participated in esports. Those who selected "No" were not able to complete the rest of the survey and were not included in the sample. Prior to starting the empirical data collection, the questionnaire was pretested on 62 individuals (i.e. 58 esports fans and 4 researchers). The pretest subjects were not included in the sample and their data were not included in the analysis. The data collection began on 17 September 2019 and ended on 7 October 2019 (i.e. 21 days). Participation requests were put on 252 sub-forums from the Reddit website and on 79 channels of the Discord website. According to Lee (2017), Reddit and Discord are the two most used social media networks by gaming fans. Only one request was posted by sub-forum or channel. Data were analysed through IBM SPSS Statistics 25.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Audience accepts both endemic and non-endemic sponsors

The data confirmed H_1 and H_2 that most esports fans enjoy the presence of both endemic and non-endemic esports sponsors, respectively. As Figure 2 points out, the large majority of esports fans are not bothered by esports sponsorships. In fact, a very considerable percentage actually likes to see sponsors in this area. Only a very minor portion indicated they did not like to see sponsors in competitive gaming. This large acceptance of sponsorships is further cemented by the data in Figure 2 which shows that most fans (i.e. 64.6%; $n = 1,041/1,611$) considered these sponsorships to be only a little irritating or not irritating at all. Still, attention must be called to the fact that a significant percentage perceived them as moderately irritating. Furthermore, one-tenth of participants (i.e. 9.7%; $n = 155/1,611$) see these sponsorships as very or extremely irritating. Although this is not a large group, and there will always be some who dislike sponsorships, it is still important to ensure that this percentage is as low as possible to avoid the potential spreading of negative word of mouth.

Figure 2: Audience acceptance of esports sponsorships

Fan's opinion about esports sponsors

| a | b | c |

a. Dislike (*n* = 90; 5.6%)
b. Neutral (*n* = 830; 51.5%)
c. Like (*n* = 691; 42.9)

Most accepted types of ads by fans

| a | b | c | d | e | f |

a. Static ads (banners, logos in pro-players' shirts or at the tournaments' venue, etc.; *n* = 1,481; 91.9%)
b. Video ads (*n* = 446; 27.7%)
c. Social media ads (sponsored posts in social media feeds, etc.; *n* = 828; 51.4%)
d. Native ads (ads that naturally blend with their location; *n* = 1,126; 69.9%)
e. In-game ads (*n* = 204; 12.7%)
f. Traditional and non-online ads (e.g. ads in newspapers, TV, radio, billboards, etc.; *n* = 844; 52.4%)

Degree of intrusiveness/irritation caused by esports sponsorships

| a | b | c | d | e |

a. Not intrusive or irritating (*n* = 435; 27%)
b. A little intrusive or irritating (*n* = 606; 37.6%)
c. Moderately Intrusive or irritating (*n* = 415; 25.8%)
d. Very intrusive or irritating (*n* = 109; 6.8%)
e. Extremely intrusive or irritating (*n* = 46; 2.9%)

N = 1,611. For the item on most accepted types of ads, participants were able to select more than one option.
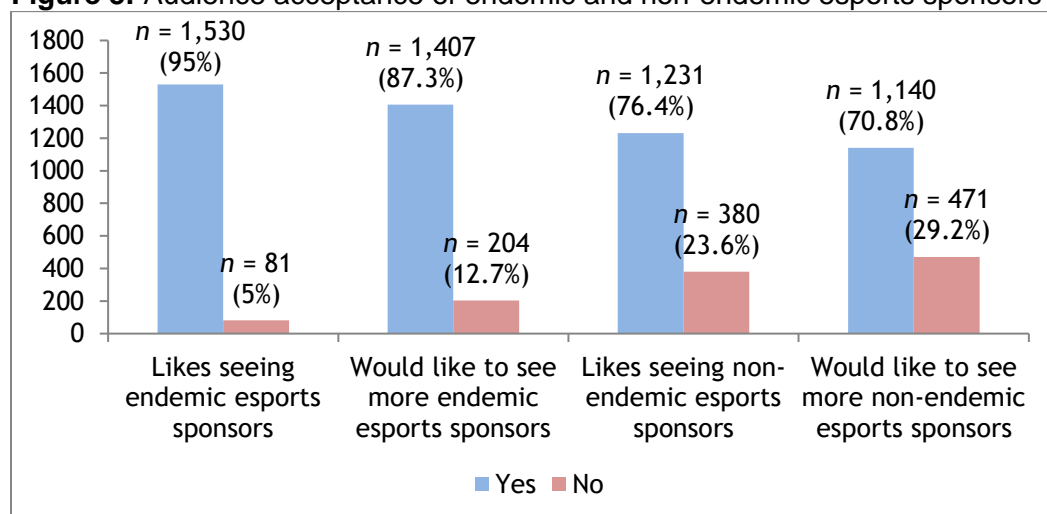*Source*: Own survey.

To help and guide esports sponsors on how to ensure that their sponsorships are widely accepted and not perceived as irritating or intrusive, the types of ads esports fans are more prone to accept were identified. Interestingly, video and in-game ads, which are the most dynamic types of ads from the list of possible answers, were the least accepted by fans. The dislike for in-game ads could be due to fans not wanting publicity inside the videogames they love, which could break their sense of immersion. The aversion towards video ads may be because they are more distracting than simple image or text-based ads. Another unexpected finding was that only half of the sample indicated to accept social media ads and that almost the same amount of people accepted traditional and non-online ads. Since we live in the age of social media, with traditional mass communication channels continuing to quickly lose popularity, it was very surprising to see social media ads have the same level of acceptance as traditional and non-online ads. Although esports fans are known not to make much use of traditional mass communication channels, the acceptance by half of the sample could be due to them wanting to see esports content (including esports-related ads) being featured in the more traditional and mainstream channels. This could also provide fans with a sense that esports, and gaming in general, are being more recognized and accepted by the masses. Lastly, static

and native ads were the most accepted. This could be due to them being among the least distracting types of ads as they tend to manifest themselves as simple images or text. Furthermore, they are not as intrusive as social media ads which fans may see when not searching for esports content.

According to Figure 3, almost every esports fan likes seeing endemic brands sponsoring esports, only a very minor percentage disagreed. Furthermore, the vast majority would like to see more endemic brands sponsoring esports. In the same vein, the bulk of fans like seeing non-endemic brands sponsoring esports, but approximately one quarter do not like seeing them. Moreover, most fans want more non-endemic brands to sponsor esports. Yet, a considerable percentage stated to not want more non-endemic brands sponsoring esports. Curiously, as can be seen in Figure 3, as the topic moves from liking and wanting more endemic sponsors to liking and wanting more non-endemic sponsors, the percentage of acceptance steadily decreases and higher resistance is met against non-endemic sponsors. Although the unacceptance percentage never reaches more than 30% in any of the topics, this is still a clear indication that endemic sponsors are favoured over non-endemic ones. In this sense, non-endemic brands must develop more captivating and interesting sponsorships to overcome the higher acceptance barriers that are presented to them. Even so, Figure 3 does show that, despite not being evenly matched, the large majority of esports fans accept both endemic and non-endemic sponsors.

Figure 3: Audience acceptance of endemic and non-endemic esports sponsors

N = 1,611.
Source: Own survey.

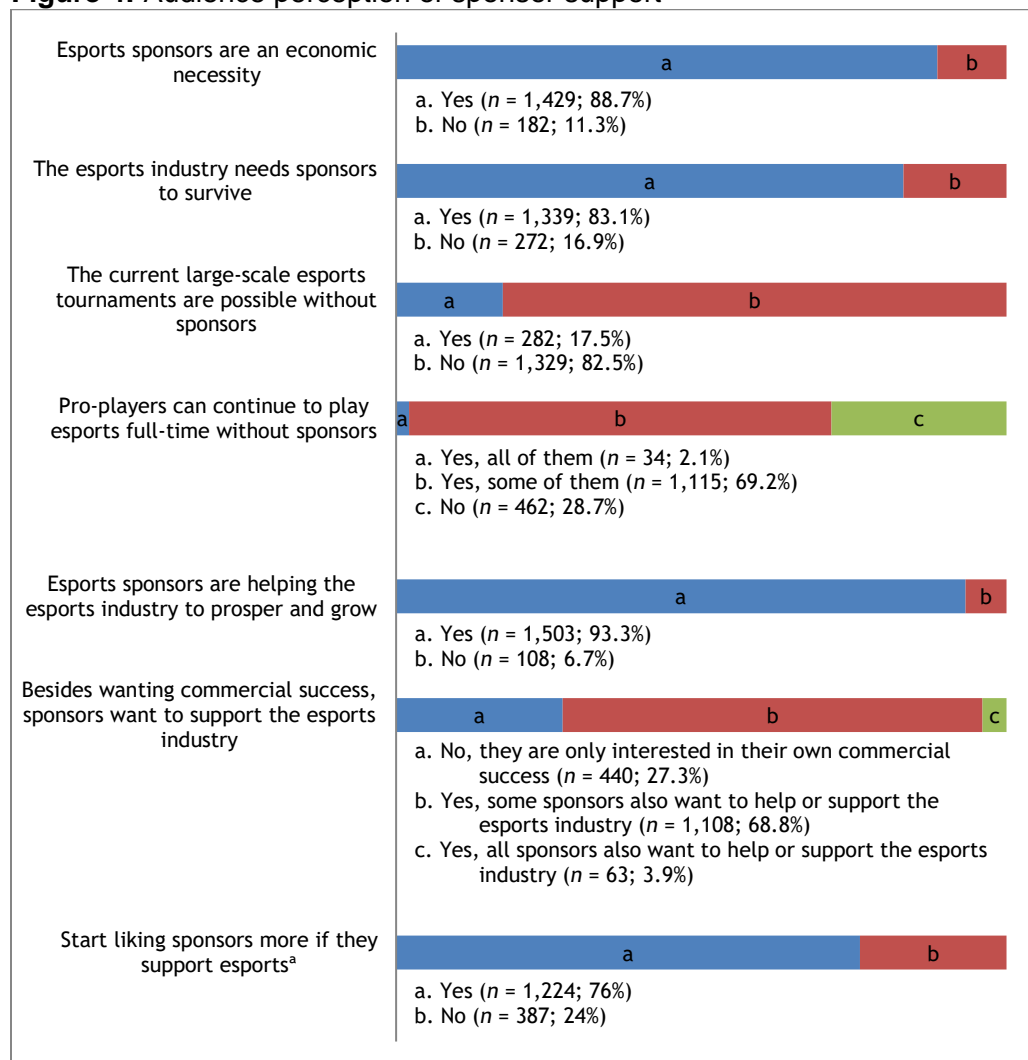## Supporting esports

The data confirmed H_3 that sponsors that support esports beyond the expected monetary exchange obtain an improved brand image. As Figure 4 indicates, esports fans are very aware that, by sponsoring esports, brands are greatly supporting the competitive gaming industry. The overwhelming share of fans understands that esports sponsors are an economic necessity, that the

esports market needs sponsors to survive, that sponsors are helping esports industry to prosper and grow, and that, if all brands stopped sponsoring esports, this market would not be able to continue organizing such large-scale tournaments. Moreover, roughly three-quarters of the sample believe that some or all sponsors, besides wanting commercial success, have an authentic desire to help and support the esports market. Still, a considerable minority stated that esports sponsors are only interested in their own commercial success. Lastly, an important aspect was that the large majority of fans indicated to start liking sponsors more when they go beyond the simple monetary offers in exchange of brand visibility and actually help and support esports (e.g. creating tournaments and activities, promoting esports, etc.). This last finding shows the importance of sponsors playing a more active and intimate role in esports, particularly by bringing relevant-added value to esports.

Figure 4: Audience perception of sponsor support

Esports sponsors are an economic necessity
a. Yes (*n* = 1,429; 88.7%)
b. No (*n* = 182; 11.3%)

The esports industry needs sponsors to survive
a. Yes (*n* = 1,339; 83.1%)
b. No (*n* = 272; 16.9%)

The current large-scale esports tournaments are possible without sponsors
a. Yes (*n* = 282; 17.5%)
b. No (*n* = 1,329; 82.5%)

Pro-players can continue to play esports full-time without sponsors
a. Yes, all of them (*n* = 34; 2.1%)
b. Yes, some of them (*n* = 1,115; 69.2%)
c. No (*n* = 462; 28.7%)

Esports sponsors are helping the esports industry to prosper and grow
a. Yes (*n* = 1,503; 93.3%)
b. No (*n* = 108; 6.7%)

Besides wanting commercial success, sponsors want to support the esports industry
a. No, they are only interested in their own commercial success (*n* = 440; 27.3%)
b. Yes, some sponsors also want to help or support the esports industry (*n* = 1,108; 68.8%)
c. Yes, all sponsors also want to help or support the esports industry (*n* = 63; 3.9%)

Start liking sponsors more if they support esports[a]
a. Yes (*n* = 1,224; 76%)
b. No (*n* = 387; 24%)

N = 1,611.
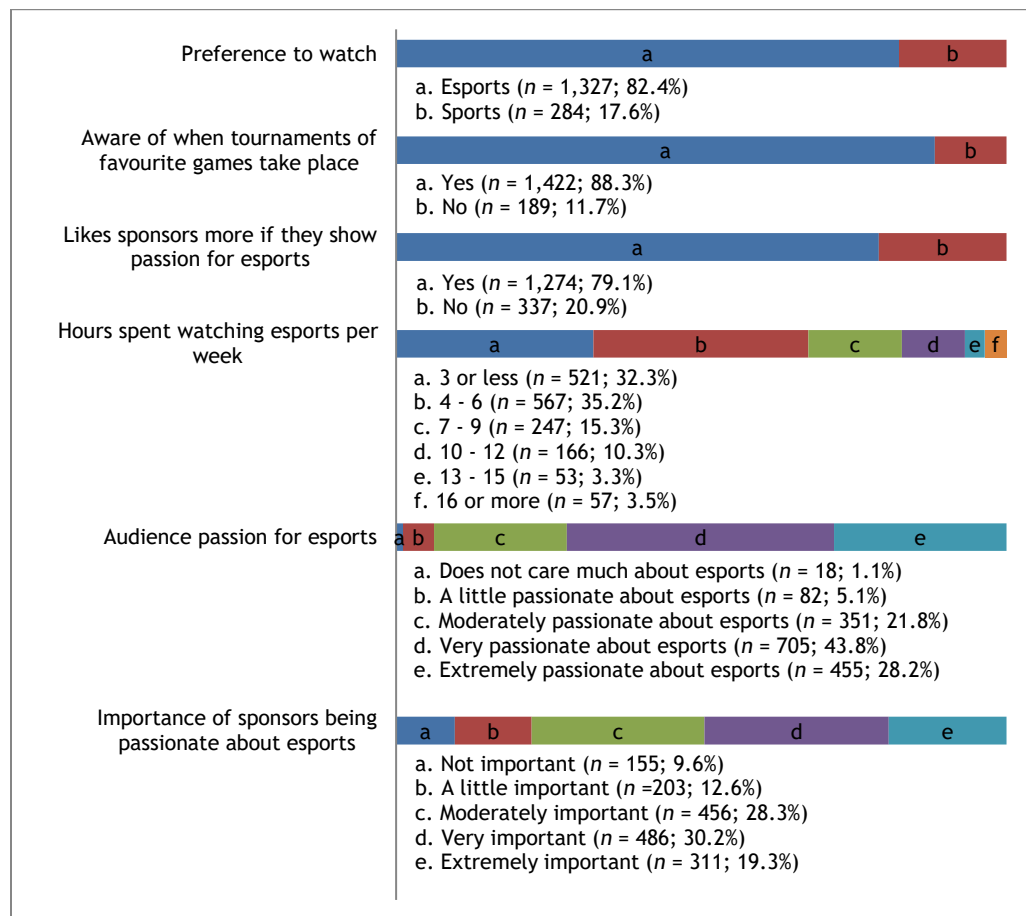
The only instance where the sample indicated that sponsor support could not be as important was regarding the pro-players. The vast majority of fans considered that some pro-players would be able to continue dedicating their entire lives to esports even without sponsors. This is probably because, as Li (2016) indicates, some pro-players and teams have reached such high levels of popularity that they even became brands themselves and some pro-players make enough money just through YouTube and Twitch. Still, a considerable percentage of fans stated that pro-players would not be able to focus just on esports without the monetary help from sponsors. The fact that esports fans are aware that sponsors are crucial elements for the sustainability and strength of the esports industry means that fans are more prone to appreciate their presence and perceive them, not as mere intrusive and commercially predatory brands, but as welcoming entities that are promoting and supporting the wellbeing of esports.

Passionate audience

The data confirmed H_4 that sponsors that show fans that they are also passionate about esports obtain an improved brand image. The results showed that esports fans are very passionate about competitive gaming. According to Figure 5, the vast majority of fans prefer to watch esports over sports. Although this may be expected at first sight since the sample is composed of esports fans, it must be kept in mind that general sports are much more known and have a much wider appeal than esports so it would be expected that more than 17.6% of the sample preferred general sports. Bearing in mind the long history and deep love for sports, the fact that such a large bulk of fans feel a stronger passion for esports is proof of just how engaged they are with this new market. Most fans also know when tournaments of their favourite games take place, which is an indication that this is not just something that they watch when they come across. Fans actually take notes of when matches take place and follow these happenings just like other avid sports fans.

Figure 5: Audience passion for esports

Preference to watch
a. Esports (*n* = 1,327; 82.4%)
b. Sports (*n* = 284; 17.6%)

Aware of when tournaments of favourite games take place
a. Yes (*n* = 1,422; 88.3%)
b. No (*n* = 189; 11.7%)

Likes sponsors more if they show passion for esports
a. Yes (*n* = 1,274; 79.1%)
b. No (*n* = 337; 20.9%)

Hours spent watching esports per week
a. 3 or less (*n* = 521; 32.3%)
b. 4 - 6 (*n* = 567; 35.2%)
c. 7 - 9 (*n* = 247; 15.3%)
d. 10 - 12 (*n* = 166; 10.3%)
e. 13 - 15 (*n* = 53; 3.3%)
f. 16 or more (*n* = 57; 3.5%)

Audience passion for esports
a. Does not care much about esports (*n* = 18; 1.1%)
b. A little passionate about esports (*n* = 82; 5.1%)
c. Moderately passionate about esports (*n* = 351; 21.8%)
d. Very passionate about esports (*n* = 705; 43.8%)
e. Extremely passionate about esports (*n* = 455; 28.2%)

Importance of sponsors being passionate about esports
a. Not important (*n* = 155; 9.6%)
b. A little important (*n* =203; 12.6%)
c. Moderately important (*n* = 456; 28.3%)
d. Very important (*n* = 486; 30.2%)
e. Extremely important (*n* = 311; 19.3%)

N = 1,611.
Source: Own survey.

The fans' passion for esports is also clearly shown in the number of hours they watch esports per week, and especially when compared to general sports' weekly viewership hours. Specifically, as Figure 5 shows, 32.4% (i.e. *n* = 523/1,611) of esports fans spend 7 or more hours per week watching esports. By comparison, and according to Statista (2019), only 15% of the U.S. population spend the same amount of time watching, reading, or listening to sports. This means that, when compared to sports, more than double the percentage of esports fans are heavy consumers of esports.
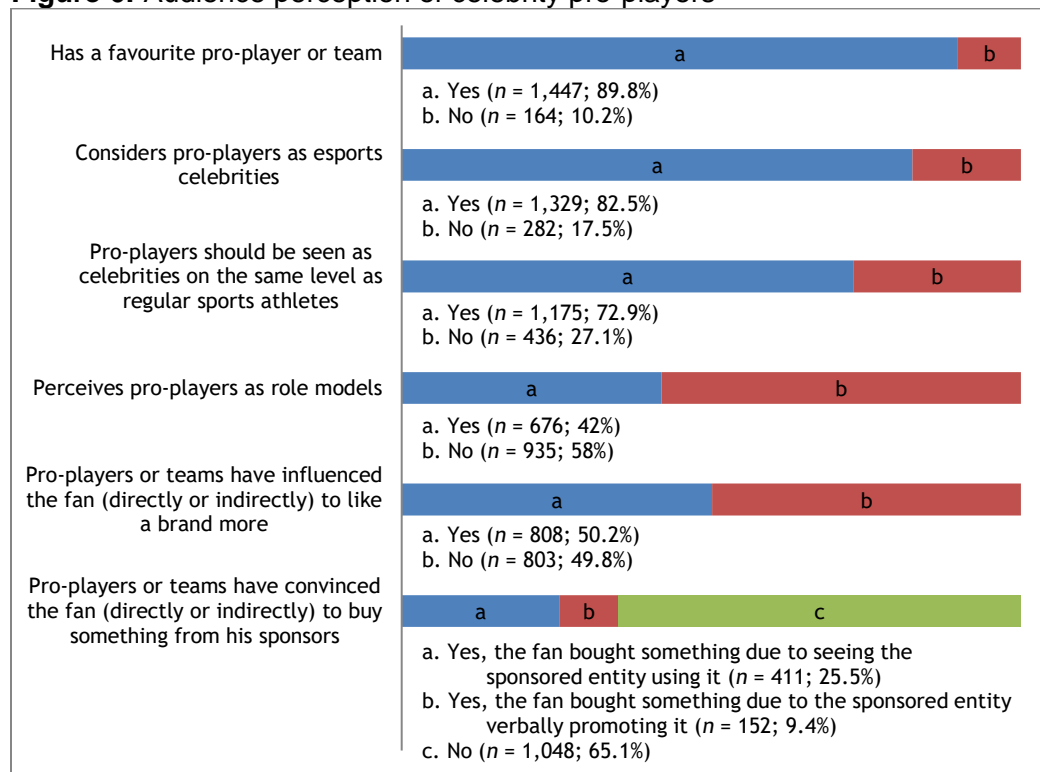
Regarding how passionate fans are about esports, and as indicated by Figure 5, the large majority of fans (i.e. 72%; *n* = 1,160/1,611) are very or extremely passionate. A considerable percentage has a medium level of passion. And only a very minor percentage (i.e. 6.2%; *n* = 100/1,611) is a little passionate or does not care much about esports. Similarly, in Figure 5, it is possible to see that most fans (i.e. 49.5%; *n* = 797/1,611) believe it is very or extremely important for sponsors to be passionate about esports. Still, a considerable percentage thinks that it is only moderately important for sponsors to be passionate and another considerable group (i.e. 22.2%; *n* = 358/1,611) believes this is just a little or not important. Interestingly, the similarities between Figures

5 and 6, make it very clear that the more passionate fans are about esports, the more they wish for sponsors to share that same level of passion. This is a strong indicator that esports brands must create sponsorships that connect with esports fans and show a high level of passion for competitive gaming. This finding is further proven by another data from Figure 5 which shows that the large majority of fans start liking sponsors more when they demonstrate that they are passionate about esports.

The celebrity status of esports personalities

The data confirmed H_5 that the celebrity status of esports personalities improves the esports sponsors' brand image. The results in Figure 6 show that the overwhelming majority of fans have a favourite pro-player or team, consider pro-players as esports celebrities, and believe that pro-players should be seen as celebrities on the same level as any other sports player. Still, and despite this, it is important to point out that a small majority of fans do not see pro-players as role models. This indicates that, although they recognize the high reputation of pro-players, they do not perceive them as inspirational figures. However, there is still a considerably high percentage of people who view pro-players as role-models. So it cannot be said that this is a general rule.

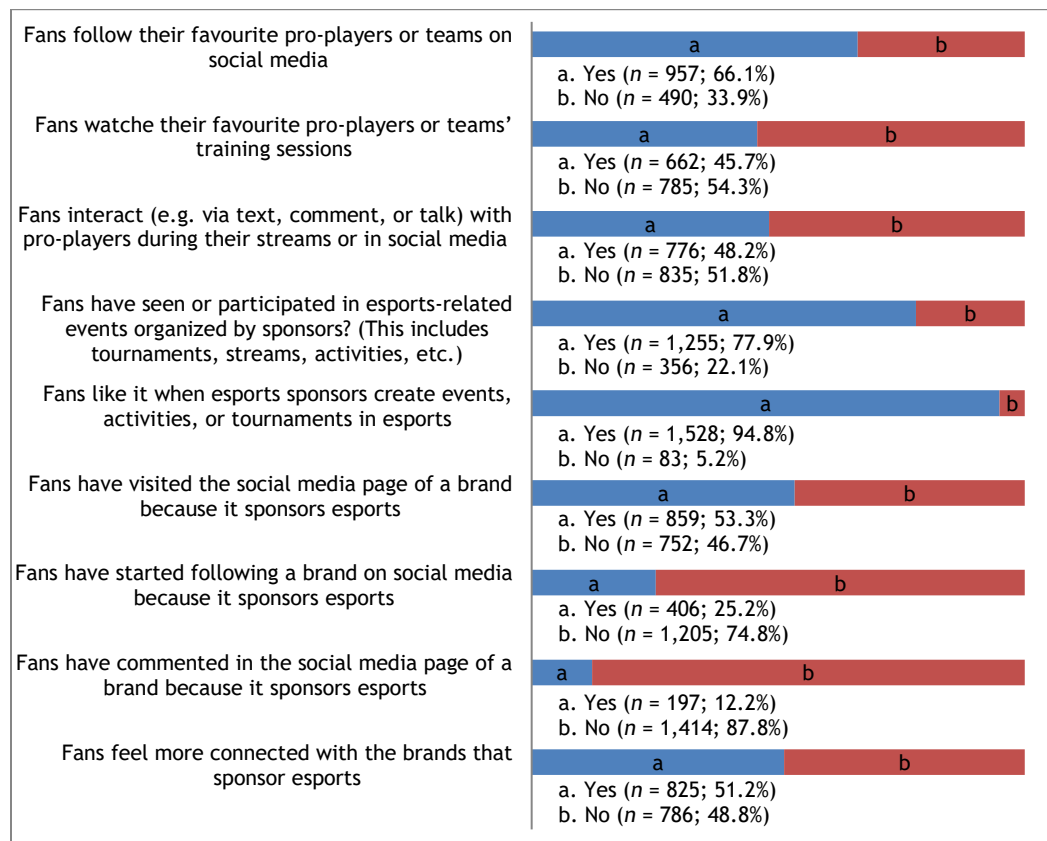**Figure 6:** Audience perception of celebrity pro-players

N = 1,611.
Source: Own survey.

A small majority of fans also admitted that a pro-player has influenced them (either directly or indirectly) to like a brand more. Although percentage-wise, this is not a significant majority, it is significant when seen from a marketers' point of view. If a pro-player is capable of influencing half of his millions of followers to like his sponsors more, then esports sponsorships is an extremely viable tool to improve brand image. In relation to influencing buying behaviours, although pro-players are not as effective in making people buy the sponsors' products as they are in enhancing the liking for a brand, they are still pivotal opinion leaders and product endorsers. As seen in Figure 6, although most fans have not been convinced (either directly or indirectly) by pro-players into buying something from their sponsors, a considerable percentage still indicated to have bought something because they saw a pro-player using it and a small group stated to have bought something because a pro-player verbally promoted it. The figures for both improving brand image and increasing product consumption are very significant for sponsors and serve as proof of the importance of the celebrity status of pro-players.

Increased engagement opportunities

The data confirmed H_6 that the high engagement of esports fans improves the esports sponsors' brand image. Esports provide sponsors with numerous opportunities to engage with the esports audience. As indicated by Figure 7, from the group who previously stated to have a favourite pro-player or team (i.e. 89.8%; $n = 1,447/1,611$), the majority follows their favourite pro-players and teams on social media. A very significant percentage also watches the pro-players' training sessions and interacts (e.g. by text or audio communication) with them during streams or in social media. This constant following, watching and interacting means that pro-players are ever-present entities of interest and serve as effective channels for sponsors to reach and engage with esports fans. As shown in Figure 8, from the group that interacts with pro-players, the most used online platform to conduct these interactions is Twitch by far. Other popular platforms include Reddit, YouTube, Twitter, and Discord. Platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Mixer are not as popular.
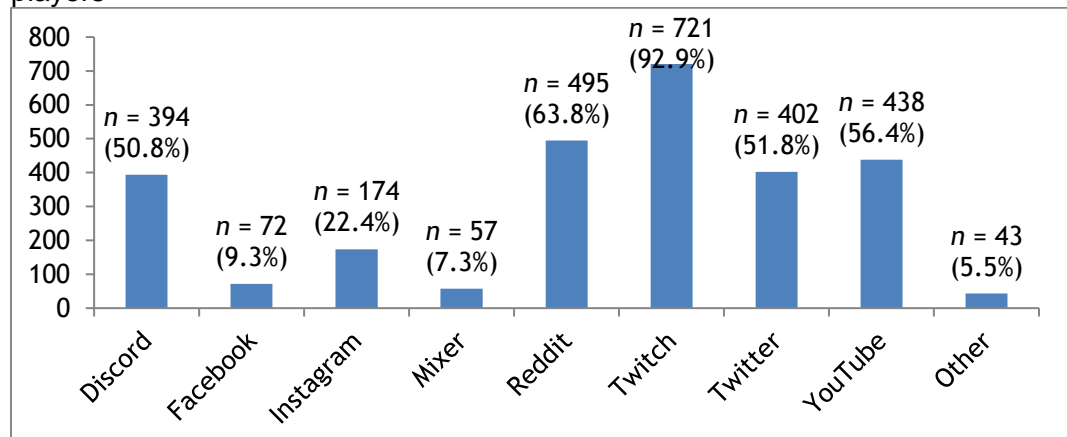
Figure 7. Opportunities for sponsors to engage with esports fans

Fans follow their favourite pro-players or teams on social media	a b
	a. Yes (n = 957; 66.1%)
	b. No (n = 490; 33.9%)
Fans watch their favourite pro-players or teams' training sessions	a b
	a. Yes (n = 662; 45.7%)
	b. No (n = 785; 54.3%)
Fans interact (e.g. via text, comment, or talk) with pro-players during their streams or in social media	a b
	a. Yes (n = 776; 48.2%)
	b. No (n = 835; 51.8%)
Fans have seen or participated in esports-related events organized by sponsors? (This includes tournaments, streams, activities, etc.)	a b
	a. Yes (n = 1,255; 77.9%)
	b. No (n = 356; 22.1%)
Fans like it when esports sponsors create events, activities, or tournaments in esports	a b
	a. Yes (n = 1,528; 94.8%)
	b. No (n = 83; 5.2%)
Fans have visited the social media page of a brand because it sponsors esports	a b
	a. Yes (n = 859; 53.3%)
	b. No (n = 752; 46.7%)
Fans have started following a brand on social media because it sponsors esports	a b
	a. Yes (n = 406; 25.2%)
	b. No (n = 1,205; 74.8%)
Fans have commented in the social media page of a brand because it sponsors esports	a b
	a. Yes (n = 197; 12.2%)
	b. No (n = 1,414; 87.8%)
Fans feel more connected with the brands that sponsor esports	a b
	a. Yes (n = 825; 51.2%)
	b. No (n = 786; 48.8%)

N = 1,611.
Source: Own survey.

Figure 8: Most used platforms by the esports' audience to interact with pro-players

N = 1,611. For this question, participants were able to select more than one option.
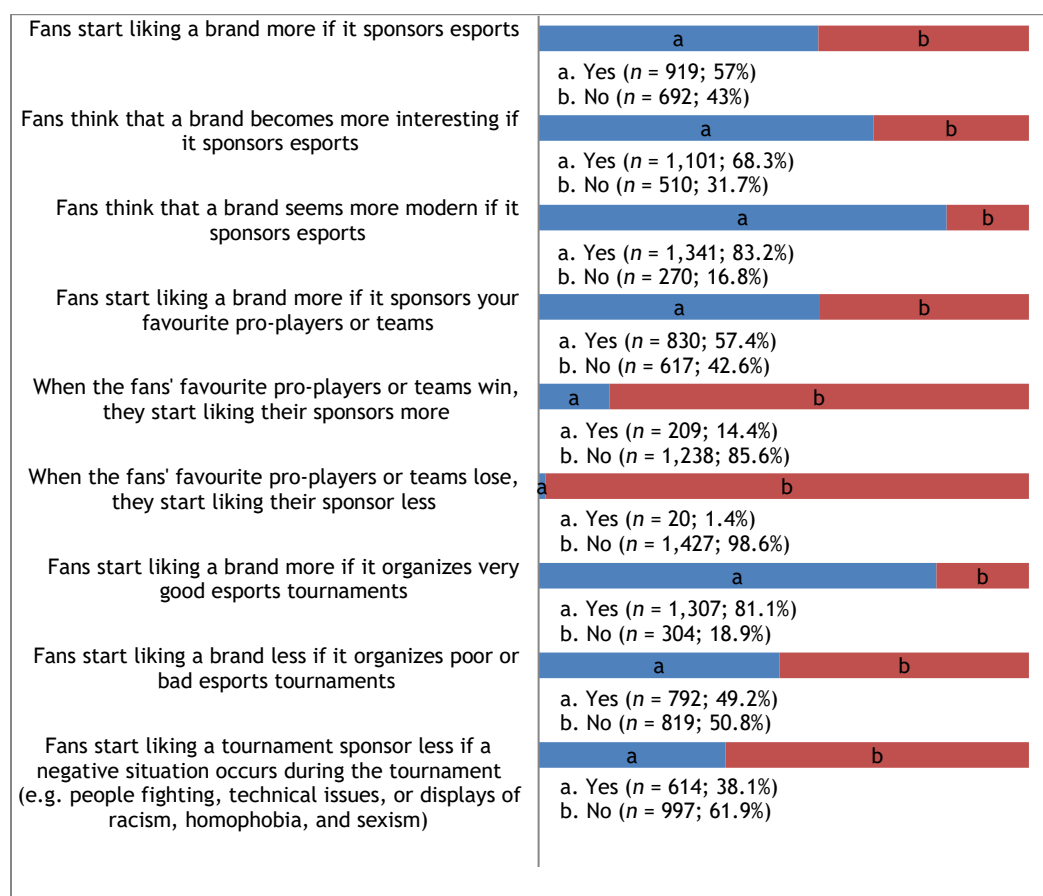*Source*: Own survey.

The large majority of fans have seen or participated in events, streams, tournaments, or activities organized by esports sponsors and almost all of them like it when esports sponsors create these experiences. The fact that almost all fans showed positive feelings towards events organized by esports sponsors shows that this is another effective tool to engage with esports fans. Half of the sample also indicated to have visited the social media page of a brand because it sponsors esports. However, only one quarter started following a brand on social media because it sponsors esports and only one-tenth have commented on the social media page of a brand because it sponsors esports. Although these may seem like small figures, having half of esports fans visiting a sponsor's social media page, with one quarter following it and one-tenth commenting, will create a very significant boost in brand interest and will provide the opportunity for an improved brand image. Furthermore, half of the sample indicated to feel more connected with the brands that sponsor esports. This may be because the high consumption of esports makes the sponsors a constant presence in the fans' daily lives, which may also lead to an improved brand image.

Brand image transfer

The data confirmed H_7 that brands benefit from positive brand image transfer as a result of sponsoring esports. As indicated by Figure 9, esports sponsorships provide various opportunities for brand image transfer. Roughly half of the sample stated that they start liking a brand more if it sponsors esports. Most of them think a brand becomes more interesting if it sponsors esports and the large majority perceives a brand as more modern if it sponsors esports. From the previous group of fans who indicated to have a favourite pro-player or team (i.e. 89.8%; $n = 1,447/1,611$), half indicated to start liking a brand more if it sponsors their favourite pro-players or teams. Interestingly, the vast majority of fans stated that the act of their favourite pro-players or teams winning does not make them like their sponsors more and almost all fans stated that the act of their favourite pro-players or teams losing does not make them like their sponsors less either. In this sense, although the sponsor does not seem to benefit from positive brand image transfer when the sponsored party wins, this provides some assurance against the fears of potential negative brand image transfer when it loses.

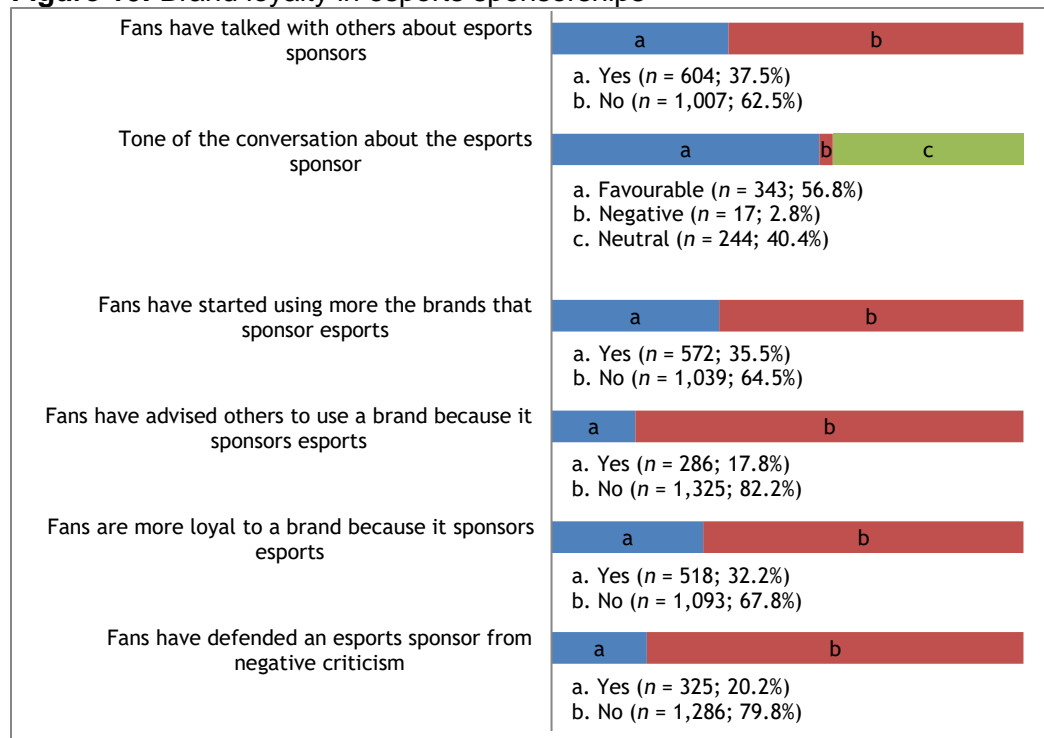**Figure 9.** Brand image transfer in esports sponsorships

Fans start liking a brand more if it sponsors esports	a / b
	a. Yes (*n* = 919; 57%) b. No (*n* = 692; 43%)
Fans think that a brand becomes more interesting if it sponsors esports	a / b
	a. Yes (*n* = 1,101; 68.3%) b. No (*n* = 510; 31.7%)
Fans think that a brand seems more modern if it sponsors esports	a / b
	a. Yes (*n* = 1,341; 83.2%) b. No (*n* = 270; 16.8%)
Fans start liking a brand more if it sponsors your favourite pro-players or teams	a / b
	a. Yes (*n* = 830; 57.4%) b. No (*n* = 617; 42.6%)
When the fans' favourite pro-players or teams win, they start liking their sponsors more	a / b
	a. Yes (*n* = 209; 14.4%) b. No (*n* = 1,238; 85.6%)
When the fans' favourite pro-players or teams lose, they start liking their sponsor less	a / b
	a. Yes (*n* = 20; 1.4%) b. No (*n* = 1,427; 98.6%)
Fans start liking a brand more if it organizes very good esports tournaments	a / b
	a. Yes (*n* = 1,307; 81.1%) b. No (*n* = 304; 18.9%)
Fans start liking a brand less if it organizes poor or bad esports tournaments	a / b
	a. Yes (*n* = 792; 49.2%) b. No (*n* = 819; 50.8%)
Fans start liking a tournament sponsor less if a negative situation occurs during the tournament (e.g. people fighting, technical issues, or displays of racism, homophobia, and sexism)	a / b
	a. Yes (*n* = 614; 38.1%) b. No (*n* = 997; 61.9%)

N = 1,611.
Source: Own survey.

The large majority of fans mentioned that they start liking a brand more if it organizes very good esports tournaments. However, half of the sample indicated that they would start liking less a brand that organized a bad esports tournament and a significant percentage stated that they would start liking a tournament sponsor less if a negative situation occurred during a tournament (e.g. fighting, technical issues, racism, homophobia, sexism, etc.). Although esports provide several opportunities for positive brand image transfer, and there seem to be low chances of negative brand image transfer from having the sponsored party losing, sponsors must be cautious about how they conduct their sponsorships. Particularly, how they organize esports tournaments that are in line with the fans' wants and values and how they shield themselves from possible negative occurrences or problems that may severely damage the brand.

Enhanced brand loyalty

The data did not support H$_8$ that brands benefit from enhanced brand loyalty as a result of sponsoring esports. The results in Figure 10 indicate that, unlike

what was found in the literature, esports sponsorships do not lead to a significant increase in brand loyalty. A considerable percentage of fans stated that they have talked with others about esports sponsors and most of these conversations were focused on positive aspects of the brands, only a very minor percentage had exclusively negative discussions about esports sponsors. A considerable percentage also mentioned to have started consuming more of the brands that sponsor competitive gaming. However, only a small percentage has advised others to use a brand because it sponsors esports. A considerable percentage also stated to be more loyal to a brand because it sponsors esports. But only a small percentage referred to have defended an esports sponsor from negative criticism. Despite some considerable percentages in favour of enhanced brand loyalty we do not think they are high enough to support the belief that the brands which sponsor esports have a high chance of benefiting from increased brand loyalty.

Figure 10: Brand loyalty in esports sponsorships

N = 1,611.
Source: Own survey.

CONCLUSIONS

The research allowed the development of both a conceptual and an empirical framework. While the conceptual framework was based only on a literature review and was lacking in detail, which ironically mirrors the great lack of scientific research on esports sponsorships, the empirical framework improved

upon it by crossing it with empirical data. The result is a much more detailed and reliable framework that provides brands with a better understanding of how esports sponsorships can benefit their brand image. Figure 11 presents the results of crossing the literary and empirical data.

Figure 11. The benefits of esports sponsorships on the sponsor's brand image (empirical framework)

Source: Own survey.

Theoretical implications

This study expanded upon the very limited research on esports and on the almost non-existent research on esports sponsorships. Since the empirical data showed that esports sponsorships do not have a significant impact on brand loyalty, this element was not featured in the empirical framework. Hence, this research identified a total of seven elements that can lead or facilitate the improvement of the esports sponsor's brand image. Six are focused on how sponsors can capitalize on the positive fan perceptions (i.e. audience accepts endemic esports sponsors, audience accepts non-endemic esports sponsors, supporting esports, passionate audience, the celebrity status of esports personalities, and brand image transfer) and one is focused on how sponsors can reach fans (i.e. increased engagement opportunities).

Managerial implications

Since the large majority of the audience accepts sponsorships in esports, there is a very low chance of fans being bothered or irritated by the presence of sponsors and ads. In fact, since the large majority indicated to like seeing sponsors, this already creates the opportunity for an improved brand image just by activating a sponsorship. Brands will have an even greater chance of benefiting from this if they present their sponsorships in the form of static ads, native ads, traditional and non-online ads, or as social media ads. The fact that the audience likes seeing both endemic and non-endemic sponsors also lowers any possibilities on non-gaming or non-technology-based brands suffering from sponsor incongruence. Although there was a slight preference for endemic brands, both are liked, and even wanted, by the fans. This facilitates the creation of a positive brand image as there are no significant congruency-related barriers for entering the esports scene.

It was proven that fans recognize how important sponsors are for the sustainability and growth of esports. Fans also believe that some sponsors have altruistic motives and wish to support esports. If sponsors are able to demonstrate that they are not only focused on commercial gains, but also on supporting and improving the esports scene (e.g. creating tournaments and activities), then sponsors will have a very high chance of being loved by the fans. This is in line with Taylor (2012), who mentions that some fans even to want to thank the sponsors for helping the esports industry.

The fans' passion also plays a vital role in facilitating the improvement of the brand image. This is a very passionate audience that consumes high amounts of esports. If sponsors manage to show fans that they share that same amount of passion and enthusiasm for esports they will be liked by the fans.

Since the sample perceives pro-players as celebrities and these individuals are able to influence fans to like and consume brands more, brands can be highly benefited if they correctly activate their sponsorships and maximize the potential of pro-players and teams as brand endorsers and brand ambassadors. An adequate sponsorship of a popular pro-player or team seems to have a high chance of leading to an improved brand image.

Fans are constantly in contact with pro-players. They follow their every move through a variety of social media. The interactivity of streaming platforms like Twitch and YouTube means that they can easily and directly interact with the pro-players. This high, intimate, and constant engagement is another element that sponsors can benefit from to gain, not only higher brand awareness, but also an improved brand image as long as the correct sponsorship activations are conducted. This will result in fans visiting and following esports sponsors on social media and in them feeling more connected with these sponsors.

Finally, brand image transfer was identified in esports sponsorships. Whenever a brand sponsors esports, fans start perceiving the brand as more interesting, modern, and likable. This is another element that, if properly leveraged, will highly benefit the brand image.

The findings from the empirical framework present valuable data for all sponsors who are unsure of how esports may benefit their brand image and may even fear that sponsoring esports will only lead their brands to be associated with the negative aspects of gaming. While this research did not delve into the topic of how sponsoring esports may damage the sponsor's brand image, it found that sponsoring esports provides several opportunities for improving the sponsor's brand image.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This research was greatly limited by the little to no scientific research on esports sponsorships and by the recentness of the esports industry. The quantitative approach limited the richness of the data and did not allow the sample to freely vocalize their opinions, which in turn made it impossible to conduct a deep analysis of each of the discussed elements that lead or facilitate the improvement of the brand image. Lastly, the research only analysed what elements may improve the brand image and did not cover which may damage it.

The topic of esports sponsorships is in deep need of more scientific research as currently not much is known about this area. To deepen our knowledge, future studies should analyse esports sponsorships with a qualitative approach to gather more rich and detailed data. It would be very interesting to interview long-running esports sponsors and analyse if they agree with the data on this research's empirical framework and if any elements may be missing. Finally, the hypotheses that resulted from this study should also be tested on esports sponsors.

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