How Sponsors Should Bring Relevant-Added Value to Esports

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Abstract

This paper aimed to determine what types of relevant-added value esports fans most want sponsors to bring to them and to the competitive gaming industry. A review of the literature permitted the development of a conceptual model which was subsequently improved by analysing empirical data. A quantitative exploratory research was conducted on 1,359 esports fans who were sampled through a non-probability purposive heterogeneous method. Data was collected through a closed-ended online structured survey. The data showed that two of the three most wanted means for bringing relevant-added value are by directly helping the esports industry rather than focusing on the fans. Specifically, supporting the tournaments and pro-players and promoting good practice and integrity were highly valued. Most brands are still unaware of how to conduct effective esports sponsorships. By being one of the first studies in this area, this research provides brands with useful guidelines for developing sustainable esports sponsorships.

Keywords: esports; sponsorship; marketing; branding; sustainable marketing.

JEL classification: M31; M37.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since 2010, the esports industry has been growing at a very fast pace (Li, 2016; Lu, 2017; Nielsen Esports, 2017; Sylvester and Rennie, 2017). With an average annual growth of 21.7% (AEVI, 2018), competitive gaming evolved more in one year than football has in 10 (Nichols, 2017). Esports are, not only the world's fastest-growing sport (Kuhn, 2009; Sylvester and Rennie, 2017), they are also the fastest-growing market of the entertainment sector (Li, 2016), and one of the fastest-growing industries overall (Winnan, 2016). Furthermore, on average, the size of the esports audience has been increasing 13.5% per year (Newzoo, 2018). While in 2012 there were 58 million esports fans (Goetomo, 2017), in

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2018, that number had already increased to 395 million (Statista, 2019), and it is expected that by 2020 there will be over 500 million esports fans (BI Intelligence and Elder, 2017; Shabir, 2017). More importantly, this does not seem to be a passing fad since this growth-rate shows no signs of slowing down (Sylvester and Rennie, 2017). As can be seen, the esports industry is very resilient (Shabir, 2017; Ströh, 2017), even Matt Wolf, responsible for the gaming section of Coca-Cola, has stated that esports are sustainable (Lu, 2017).

Yet, esports' extremely accelerated growth has made it impossible for the scientific community to keep up with its advancements (Franke, 2015; Lokhman *et al.*, 2018). Because of this, very little is known about the esports market (Seo, 2013; Franke, 2015) and especially its sponsorships (Chalmet, 2015; Bouaoui, 2016; Korpimies, 2017). Furthermore, esports are very different from sports (Ströh, 2017). Thus, implementing current sport sponsorship strategies in esports is not a reliable option (Burton, 2017). The general sponsorship strategies do not translate well to esports (Burton, 2017; Ströh, 2017) and can oftentimes lead to some very negative results with strong flashbacks from the young esports community who can easily detect commercially predatory brands (Winnan, 2016). This means that there are no specific guidelines for how to conduct effective and efficient sponsorships in the competitive gaming market.

According to Shabir (2017), the large popularity of esports means that fans are enjoying more than 400 annual tournaments and vast arrays of content. However, the author also stresses that traditional advertising methods, such as native advertisements, banners and other invasive ads, which took the internet by storm during the 2000s, are now despised, being one of the least effective means of advertising. The contemporary internet user no longer accepts invasive ads, which has led to the popularization of ad-blockers (Shabir, 2017). To avoid this, some brands place their logos on the sponsored party's website or on the pro-players' jerseys (Taylor, 2012). Yet, such rudimentary advertising (BI Intelligence and Elder, 2017) and simple media exposure (Ströh, 2017), like basic logo placements, do not suffice (Shabir, 2017). Brands are not able to reach esports fans through such plain and self-focused advertising (BI Intelligence and Elder, 2017). The esports community wants to be heard, entertained, and see brands making an actual effort to improve the overall esports scene (Shabir, 2017).

In this sense, esports sponsors must seek more integrated, novel (Burton, 2017), and highly creative strategies to effectively reach esports fans (Winnan, 2016; Burton, 2017; Shabir, 2017). Although fans understand that the sponsors' main goal is commercial success, they believe that their second objective should be altruistic. If a brand only shows financial interest, it will not be well perceived (Ströh, 2017). Hence, and as stated by Stein and Scholz (2016), it is vital that brands show an intrinsic love and motivation to support esports. The author emphasises that this is what drives the industry. The people in esports are dedicating their lives to make this market grow and it is expected that brands will also do the same (Stein and Scholz, 2016). Thus, to effectively engage them, sponsors must bring relevant-added value to esports (Shabir, 2017; Ströh, 2017).

Shabir (2017) presents a study by the Esports Ad Bureau and the Magid Advisors which concluded that 72% of fans want sponsorships to bring value to the industry. Based on the author, this is not related to the simple value of monetary influx in exchange for brand visibility. Besides the basic value of financial support, Shabir stresses that esports fans want sponsors to provide relevant-added value. To provide relevant-added value, the sponsors themselves must contribute to the growth of the esports industry (Shabir, 2017) or perform activities that actually enhance the fans' experience (Seo, 2013). According to Shabir (2017), some specific examples of sponsors adding relevant-added value would be: promoting

competitiveness, providing meaningful opportunities for the community, and helping put esports closer to the mainstream culture. That is, brands must show an actual effort to improve the scene (Shabir, 2017), which means that they must also convince their stockholders that philanthropy is vital to gain larger and long-term ROIs (J. L. Crompton, 2015).

Furthermore Burton (2017) notes that the sponsorships must logically connect the brand's products with the esports culture. According to the author, esports fans are open to sponsorships as long as they make sense and make the brand an integral component of the scene. If the sponsorship shares the fans' particular interests, it will reach them (Burton, 2017). Likewise, Shabir (2017) points out that fans know that esports are a young industry and that it needs the help from sponsors to grow, so they welcome brands that make an extra effort to improve this market. By having the philanthropic intention of being part of the cause and improving the fans' experience and the esports industry itself, the sponsor will be a beloved part of the movement (Shabir, 2017). Bearing in mind the importance of bringing relevant-added value to esports, this research aimed at developing the first conceptual and empirical models of how sponsors should bring relevant-added value to esports.

Numerous sponsors have been highly successful because they brought relevant-added value to esports (Seo, 2013; Ströh, 2017). Among the benefits of bringing value, brands can expect to be perceived as an integral and relevant component of the scene (Ströh, 2017), which will improve the fans' attitudes (The Nielsen Company, 2015; Shabir, 2017; Ströh, 2017) and mitigate any doubts about the sponsors' sole financial interests (Winnan, 2016; Ströh, 2017). Moreover, this will make them reach a larger target-market (Ströh, 2017), gain considerable coverage (CGC Europe, 2015), enhance the brand's chances of having a sustainable sponsorship (Stein and Scholz, 2016), and harvest other substantial ROIs (Shabir, 2017; Ströh, 2017). And this can be done through relatively low investments (Ströh, 2017). In short, by raising their altruistic involvement in the scene and improving the fans' experience, sponsors will obtain considerable rewards (Seo, 2013). Thus, the following research question will explore how sponsors can bring relevant-added value to esports:

RQ: What marketing strategies can esports sponsors implement to bring relevant-added value to the esports industry and its fans?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Present relevant advertisements to fans

All advertisements must provide relevant information (Parreño *et al.*, 2013) or offers to fans (CGC Europe, 2015), like limited-time offers (Parreño *et al.*, 2013) or product discounts (Shabir, 2017). As stated by Parreño *et al.* (2013), if an ad is perceived as useful, the probability of irritation will be much lower. Because of this, brands must carefully ponder about the perceived usefulness of their ads (Parreño *et al.*, 2013).

Parreño *et al.* (2013) notes that the entertainment element of ads must also be improved. The author mentions that, the more entertaining an ad, the more positive the consumers' attitudes will be. Therefore, brands must implement entertainment-based advertising (Parreño *et al.*, 2013). Likewise, Lancaster and Massingham (2018) state that captivating or humorous advertisements increase brand equity. Specifically, the brand becomes deeply engraved in consumers' minds and they will develop more positive opinions of the brand, which will potentially lead to increased sales and brand loyalty (Lancaster and Massingham, 2018).

2.2 Provide relevant content to fans

It is very important that sponsors provide esports fans with relevant and interesting content (Winnan, 2016; Shabir, 2017; Ströh, 2017). In fact, all brands that wish to enter esports must present relevant content (Ströh, 2017). Shabir (2017) provides two examples of brands creating relevant-added value for esports. The first is focused on the Totino's brand who, during an Intel Extreme Masters tournament, created a challenge where attendees had to sit on a mechanical moving couch, and avoid falling from it, while playing a videogame. The second example, is focused on Coca-Cola who usually has given event attendees cheer boards to write messages on, hosted viewing parties at cinemas for important tournaments for those who cannot personally attend, and partnered with Riot Games to provide drinks during *League of Legends* tournaments. Other authors have also provided examples of brands creating relevant-added value for esports. For instance, according to Taylor (2012), besides sponsoring the World Cyber Games, the Shinhan Bank created a bank account, named Star League Mania, which provided its users with V.I.P. seats for the World Cyber Games' finals, giving fans a privileged experience. According to Keiper *et al.* (2017), Red Bull established a section in its company focused on esports coverage. And according to CGC Europe (2015), HyperX created an array of high-quality content for fans, including humorous videos with celebrities and esports news and insights. The author notes that their content was not composed of generic humour and facts. HyperX showed a deep knowledge of the scene, including the fans' lingo and inside jokes, which made their content feel authentic, and not artificial, and allowed HyperX to catch the attention of a massive audience (CGC Europe, 2015).

When people are able to experience the brand in a direct, interactive and flow-like manner, they develop much higher brand awareness and recall, and more positive attitudes, often perceiving it as more pleasant and exciting than one that simply shows a logo (Fransen *et al.*, 2013). Flow can be understood as the positive feeling that manifests when people are completely and directly involved with an activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). Thus, an according to Fransen *et al.* (2013), direct brand experiences are very impactful. The authors state that brands should also focus on social experiences as individual ones are less effective. People must feel that they are all integral elements of a shared social experience. These aspects demonstrate the importance of flow. As stated by the authors, brand encounters with active flow experiences are likely to have a positive impact on people's emotions. This allows the brand to prevent consumer scepticism, bypass rational information pathways and directly enter the consumers' mind, highly engraving the brand in the people's minds and enhancing brand recall and positive attitudes. These flow experiences are even possible though the internet as website interactivity can boost several dimensions of flow, like absentmindedness, control, concentration, engagement, and curiosity (Fransen *et al.*, 2013).

2.3 Focus on storytelling

Storytelling is a vital marketing tool (Grzesiak, 2018). It is the selling point of any tournament, including esports (Borowy, 2012). Stories around an old-time veteran versus a promising rookie (Taylor, 2012), of favourite versus underdog, of evil versus kind (Borowy, 2012), or of a losing team making a comeback (Demers, 2015) are very effective at grabbing the crowd's attention (Borowy, 2012; Taylor, 2012). As stated by Taylor (2012), similar to

sports, as tournaments get closer to the climax, the event is presented with increasingly more drama and tension. The author notes that all of the teamwork, euphoria, and frustration are aspects that the audience relates to. Because of this, various media outlets (Taylor, 2012) and tournament organizers (Hamari and Sjöblom, 2017), like the Electronic Sports League (ESL); Nielsen Esports, 2017 and the Championship Gaming Series (CGS), have put a significant effort on increasing storytelling across esports (Taylor, 2012). According to Taylor (2012), they drew attention to the drama as well as the personal and competitive aspects of the scene and developed a narrative around teamwork, individualism, and rivalries.

Commentators also play a vital role here as they are glorified storytellers with a deep knowledge (Taylor, 2012) and authentic love for esports (Demers, 2015). Commentators are able to establish captivating narratives because they have considerable knowledge about the history and context of esports, including of the pro-players and tournaments (Taylor, 2012). Demers (2015) states that, according to Sean "Day[9]" Plott, one of the best *StarCraft* commentators, his main goal is not simply to convey excitement, but to tell a compelling story that is strengthened through his authentic excitement, as fans can easily identify fake enthusiasm. If a losing team makes a comeback, the fans' attention is captured (Demers, 2015).

Taylor (2012) also mentions that, according to Mike Burks, an experienced producer from the NBA, NHL, NFL, and esports, the main focus is not the sport itself, but the people who play it. Burks states that, fans are emotionally attached to the pro-players, loving some pro-players and hating others. But he stresses that even the latter is good because, while an uninterested person will ignore that pro-player's matches, a person who does not like him is much more likely to watch him play. Influencing someone to watch a player they hate is the product of a great storyteller (Taylor, 2012).

A fine-tuned storytelling strategy in esports will raise much more brand awareness than any classical advertising method (CGC Europe, 2015). This is in line with the words of Andy Reif, the CEO of CGS, who stated that what will take esports to the next level is not simply the right production values, it is also the right storytelling (Taylor, 2012). For instance, the Ginx brand is focused on creating stories by interviewing pro-players, showing how things look like in the backstage of major tournaments, and by creating documentaries (Rogers, 2018). According to Lim (2018), Mastercard, the main sponsor of one of 2018's biggest esports tournaments (i.e. the League of Legends World Championship), is looking to go even beyond storytelling and embrace story-making. Specifically, Mastercard wants to provide fans with experiences that enable them to create their own stories and become fans of the brand. Instead of simply showing a number of advertisements, they are delivering experiences to fans. The author notes that, by placing fans close to what they love, they will create unforgettable stories, which will be shared online and with their friends. Some examples of these experiences include: allowing select fans to attend opening ceremony rehearsals, augmented reality experiences, behind-the-scenes tours, and other ways of engaging fans through what they love (Lim, 2018).

The popularity of storytelling is justified by its various benefits (Trigoni, 2016). Especially, the power to rise above all the advertising clutter and draw consumer attention (Walter and Gioglio, 2014). Consumers will be connected with the brand because the narrative will create conversations between them and the brand, which will increase brand recall (Singh and Sonnenburg, 2012). This is because humans are not good at remembering facts, unless they are delivered in a narrative form (Pikos and Olejniczak, 2016; Grzesiak, 2018). If the brand is an integral element of the story, then it will always be on the audience' mind (Trigoni,

2016). Essentially, a good story will make your content more attractive (Pikos and Olejniczak, 2016), attract consumers, enhance their familiarity with the brand (Y.-s. Lee and Shin, 2015), give meaning (Singh and Sonnenburg, 2012) and improve the brand image Grzesiak, 2018, and keep fans emotionally engaged (Y.-s. Lee and Shin, 2015; Shabir, 2017). Still, it is vital that the stories and the pro-players' personas be real, they must not be enforced upon them. Esports should avoid the theatricality of wrestling (Taylor, 2012).

2.4 Perform product trial

As reported by McCarville *et al.* (1998), product trial is very important and is among the most effective sponsorship strategies. It is highly efficient at stimulating people's senses and provides immediate satisfaction to consumers (McCarville *et al.*, 1998). Most importantly, product trial can greatly benefit the adoption process because consumers like to experience a product prior to deciding if they should buy it (Wood, 2017). There are several people who wanted to try a particular product but never had the chance to do it (J. Crompton, 1994). Thus, various brands use events to encourage these trials as they are quite effective at encouraging non-users to consume the brand's products or at ensuring that existing customers continue using them (Masterman and Wood, 2005). According to McDonnell and Moir (2014), it is quite difficult to turn people who are just interested in a product into individuals who actually desire it. But, giving people the chance to experiment a product free of costs is a very effective way of achieving this (McDonnell and Moir, 2014). In general, an enjoyable product trial will lead to positive word of mouth (Masterman and Wood, 2005), increased brand awareness (Kotler and Keller, 2016) and sales (Masterman and Wood, 2005; Fahy and Jobber, 2015), and has a higher chance of leading to long-term use of the product than regular advertising (Belch and Belch, 2018).

During offline esports tournaments, it is common for brands to use demo booths (Taylor, 2012) to showcase their products or provide samples (Winnan, 2016). For instance, the main sponsor of the 2010 World Cyber Games, Samsung, used the event to demonstrate several of its products, including tablets, smartphones, and monitors (Borowy, 2012). During some ESL offline tournaments, Zowie placed booths where attendees could try their newest gaming peripherals and add-ons (Ströh, 2017). And, according to Shabir (2017), during an Intel Extreme Masters in Oakland, Intel allowed fans to try out several of its products, including experiences in virtual reality. In the same event, Totino's also provided attendees with free samples of their pizza products (Shabir, 2017).

Product trial can also be used to improve the brand's products (Taylor, 2012). It is common for brands to use product trials to evaluate consumers' reactions and even test their products in real-world settings (Winnan, 2016). For example, as stated by Taylor (2012), gaming peripheral esports sponsors, like SteelSeries, ask pro-players to try, and provide feedback, on the quality of their upcoming products to ensure that, when released, they will have the required qualities to be used by the best of the best. In this sense, SteelSeries can publicise their products as being fit for the top pro-players (Taylor, 2012). This will attract several esports fans (Winnan, 2016) who want more esports merchandise (Franke, 2015) and are willing to spend large sums on top quality products (Winnan, 2016).

2.5 Support tournaments and pro-players

Sponsors should do their best to support tournaments and pro-players beyond the expected monetary backing (Shabir, 2017). When fans perceive that the sponsor is supporting the industry they love, they will develop much more positive attitudes toward the brand (Ströh, 2017). This has led several companies to support the industry (Shabir, 2017). For instance, Red Bull created the Red Bull Battle Grounds tournament (Härig, 2015) and built a training facility for pro-players (Winnan, 2016). Monster Energy provides pro-players with free cans of their energy drink during tournaments (Li, 2016). According to Shabir (2017), Gillette has provided free grooming services to pro-players during an Intel Extreme Masters tournament and allowed them (and fans) to customize and keep a 3D printed razor. The author also notes that Coca-Cola partnered with EA Sports to develop the eCOPA Coca-Cola. A tournament for amateur *FIFA* players where the winners qualify to participate in the professional *FIFA* tournaments and earn a scholarship (Shabir, 2017).

Based on Gifford (2017), even the South Korean Air Force has brought value to esports. In 2007, they formed The Ace Team to allow professional *StarCraft* players to continue competing when performing South Korea's two years of mandatory military service (Gifford, 2017). Seo (2013) mentions that the airline brand, Korean Air, also made an effort to become an integral component of the industry and improve the scene. According to the author, in 2010, it hosted the finals of a major *StarCraft* tournament on its hanger and wrapped images of the videogame's characters on two of its airplanes. Korean Air stated that this served to show their continuous effort to support esports (Seo, 2013).

2.6 Promote good practice and integrity

The esports industry is still in its infancy (Gainsbury *et al.*, 2017; Keiper *et al.*, 2017; Shabir, 2017; Ströh, 2017; AEVI, 2018) and needs help to grow (Winnan, 2016). Hence, all entities within esports should do their best to improve this industry (AEVI, 2018), and this includes sponsors, who should promote good practices and integrity in esports (Brickell, 2017). This should be one of their main goals as it will erase the possibility of their brands being associated with acts of disreputable behaviour (Ströh, 2017), which can have a very negative effect on the brands (Stivers, 2017). Furthermore, this will prevent people from losing faith in the legitimacy of esports (Sylvester and Rennie, 2017).

It is essential that sponsors instruct people to comply with the codes of conduct and regulations, require stronger integrity measures, and promote cooperation among all esports entities (Brickell, 2017). Organizations like the Esports Integrity Coalition (ESIC) have made strong efforts to promote the integrity of esports, fight corruption (Ströh, 2017) and doping (Mooney, 2018), standardise the codes of conduct, regulate esports, etc. (Sylvester and Rennie, 2017). The ESL, the Nationale Anti Doping Agentur, the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA); Stivers (2017); Ströh (2017) and the International Esports Federation (IeSF) are all working hard to fight doping in esports (Ströh, 2017; IeSF, n.d.). Entities like the United Kingdom Gambling Commission (Griffiths, 2017, Ströh, 2017), the ESL and Sportradar are doing their best to fight illegal and unregulated gambling (Winnan, 2016). And ESIC has published several codes of conduct and even a disciplinary procedure for offenders (Shabir, 2017). This led several brands, like Intel, Betway (Ströh, 2017) and ESL, to abide by their code and make efforts to promote esports' integrity (Mooney, 2018). But

ESIC is still a very recent organization and does not have a large jurisdiction in the industry (Brickell, 2017).

The entire esports industry must cooperate to erase cheating and corruption from esports (Sylvester and Rennie, 2017). Sponsors especially must do their best to minimize corruption as this can also negatively affect their brands (Manoli, 2018). The presence of cheaters, for instance, can cause severe problems to the sponsors' public relations (Stivers, 2017). In regular sports, it is common for sponsors to withdraw their partnerships if the sponsored party is found to have engaged in any sort of wrongdoings (Manoli, 2018). Because cheating can negatively affect every esports entity, there can be no room mercy or forgiveness (Christophers, 2011).

Everyone in esports must also do their best to prevent all acts of discrimination and provide equal inclusion rights for everyone (AEVI, 2018). For example, according to Mooney (2018), in an effort to increase the small number of female pro-players (who often do not compete due to sexism issues), Bandai Namco created tag team tournaments where each team had to be composed of one male and one female pro-player. They are also planning on implementing female pro-players training programmes to increase the number of women in esports (Mooney, 2018). In the same vein, brands like Ubisoft have sponsored female pro-teams, like the Frag Dolls (Li, 2016). Sponsoring female players will create role models for women and attract more female fans and pro-players (Winnan, 2016). Lastly, it is also important to inform people that, just like with McDonald's, doughnuts, etc., the excessive play of videogames is unhealthy (Shabir, 2017).

2.7 Promote gaming's acceptance

There is a myriad of misconceptions that haunt gamers (Shabir, 2017). They are perceived as nerds (Winnan, 2016), and various politicians, academics, parent groups, and media have stated that gaming leads to aggressiveness, obesity, social isolation (Crawford and Gosling, 2009) and addiction (Nielsen and Karhulahti, 2017). But there is little evidence to support these claims (Crawford and Gosling, 2009; Franke, 2015). In reality, the condemnation of gaming is based in part on ignorance (Hilvoorde, 2016). The logic behind the criticisms toward gaming is extremely flawed and depicts games and gamers quite grotesquely (Newman, 2008). For example, the dedication of pro-players to their careers should not be confused with addiction (Nielsen and Karhulahti, 2017). According to Shabir (2017), both athletes and pro-players can spend up to 10 hours per day training. Similarly, regarding the excessive exposition to screens and sitting, the same can be said for the millions of people whose work consists of sitting in a chair looking at screens for 8 hours per day (Shabir, 2017). Furthermore, Ströh (2017) notes that esports are not a solitary activity, they are a social one. Fans communicate between themselves (Ströh, 2017). In fact, for this community, the main attraction of esports is not the competition, it is the social interactions (Peša et al., 2017). Research has even shown that esports increase people's social embeddedness (Domahidi et al., 2014) and the success of a pro-team is extremely dependant on communication and cooperation (Parkin, 2015; Li, 2016). Lastly, videogames can also be educative (Steinkuehler, 2016).

Nevertheless, these criticisms are so voracious and persistent (Newman, 2008) that corrective measures must be implemented (Newman, 2008; AEVI, 2018). Bearing in mind the rate at which esports is growing and the size it already has, it is very important to drop these

outdated stereotypes and make society aware that esports are a serious and international sport and an economic powerhouse with hundreds of millions of fans (Ströh, 2017). Fortunately, the public's negative perception of videogames has been decreasing thanks to the help of some sponsors and other entities (Shabir, 2017). CGS has shown multiple videos refuting several negative assumptions about esports (Taylor, 2012), while also highlighting the passion and energy of the scene (Li, 2016). And, according to Shabir (2017), multiple other esports sponsors have also been working hard to promote gaming's acceptance. With everyone's help, it may be possible to improve gaming's image (Shabir, 2017).

3. METHODOLOGY

Through the literature review, it was possible to identify seven main tools that sponsors can use to bring relevant-added value to esports. Figure no. 1 provides a conceptual model of the aggregation of the literary data. However, the lack of quality literature on esports sponsorships and the fast growth of this industry mean that the model may not be accurate and updated. Furthermore, the model does not provide an idea of what tools may be more important to esports fans nor does it indicate what the most important specific strategies are for each tool. As such, precise and updated empirical data were collected which allowed to significantly improve the quality, detail, and reliability of this model and to identify which tools and specific strategies are more important to esports fans. To develop an improved model, this research had an exploratory purpose and a quantitative approach. The study setting was non-contrived, the researchers took an overt stance, and the time horizon was cross-sectional.
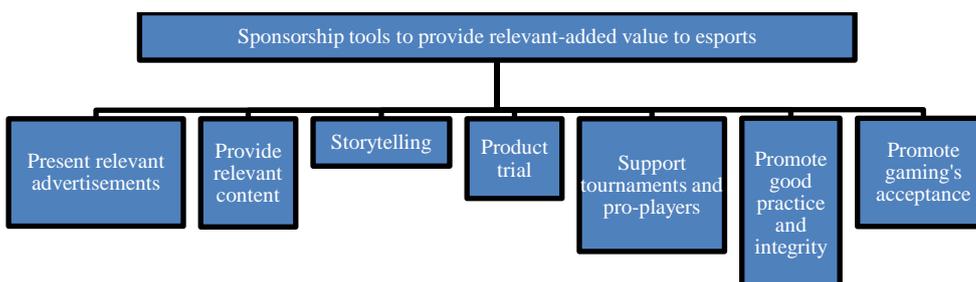

Figure no. 1 – Tools for sponsors to bring relevant-added value to esports (conceptual framework)

3.1 Population and sampling

The sample was composed of esports fans ($n = 1,359$) who were sampled through a non-probability purposive heterogeneous method. That is, there was a purposeful selection of a highly diversified sample of esports fans. To ensure that the sample included fans of all major esports titles, a list was created based on the 10 most watched esports games of 2019 and the 100 esports games that have awarded the highest amount of prize money through the years. Data on the most viewed esports games was acquired from Newzoo (2020), a website that, among other things, presents a monthly updated list of the 10 most watched esports titles from Twitch and Youtube. For this research, we used four of Newzoo's lists of the most watched esports games of 2019. These lists were related to the months of January through April 2019. Newzoo is a website with esports-related statistics, being used by

various researchers and authors, including Cunningham *et al.* (2018), Lokhman *et al.* (2018), Shabir (2017), Ströh (2017), etc. The list of the 100 esports games that provided the most prize money was obtained from Esports Earnings (2020). Esports Earnings is a popular website for esports statistics and used by several researchers, like Holden and Ehrlich (2017), Brickell (2017), Keiper *et al.* (2017), etc. Table no. 1 presents an overview of the list that resulted from combining the 10 most viewed esports titles from January to April 2019 and the 100 esports games with the highest prize money awarded. Requests for participation in the online survey were placed on esports-related forums focused on one or more of the games from the created list. Besides these, requests for participation were also placed on online forums related to popular tournaments and pro-players, and general esports.

Table no. 1 – Most watched and highest prize money awarded esports games

League of Legends	Tekken 7
Dota 2	Magic: The Gathering Online
Counter-Strike: Global Offensive	Age of Empires II: The Age of Kings
Overwatch	Quake III Arena
Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six: Siege	Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3
Hearthstone	rFactor 2
Call of Duty: Black Ops 4	Painkiller
PLAYERUNKNOWN'S BATTLEGROUNDS	Madden NFL 2017
Super Smash Bros. Ultimate	NBA 2K18
StarCraft II	Turbo Racing League
Fortnite	Brawlhalla
Heroes of the Storm	Defense of the Ancients
Counter-Strike	Injustice 2
Arena of Valor	Ultra Street Fighter IV
SMITE	Vainglory
StarCraft: Brood War	Halo: Reach
Halo 5: Guardians	Gwent
Rocket League	iRacing.com
WarCraft III	Quake Live
CrossFire	Point Blank
World of WarCraft	Team Fortress 2
Call of Duty: World War II	KartRider
Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare	Quake 4
Call of Duty: Black Ops III	Mortal Kombat X
World of Tanks	Pro Evolution Soccer 2017
FIFA 19	Dead or Alive 4
Counter-Strike: Source	Guild Wars 2
Gears of War 4	Halo 2 Anniversary
Super Smash Bros. Melee	FIFA 13
Heroes of Newerth	Halo 4
Apex Legends	Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare
Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare	Old School Runescape
Magic: The Gathering Arena	Blade & Soul
FIFA 18	Counter-Strike Online
Quake Champions	Madden NFL 2013
Street Fighter V	Forza Motorsport 7
Halo 3	Call of Duty: Black Ops
H1Z1	Super Street Fighter IV Arcade Edition

PLAYERUNKNOWN'S BATTLEGROUNDS Mobile	Halo: Combat Evolved
Call of Duty: Ghosts	Project Gotham Racing 3
Clash Royale	World in Conflict
Street Fighter V: Arcade Edition	Madden NFL 2018
Super Smash Bros. for Wii U	Realm Royale
Halo 2	ShootMania Storm
FIFA 17	Doom 3
Call of Duty: Black Ops 2	Gears of War
FIFA Online 3	Super Smash Bros. Brawl
Shadowverse	Battlefield 4
Attack on Titan Tribute Game	Teamfight Tactics
Paladins	FIFA Online 4

Note: Table based on Newzoo (2020) and Esports Earnings (2020)

Because this study explored what strategies (related to the creation of relevant-added value) esports sponsors should implement, the unit of analysis was the organization (i.e. esports sponsors) and the unit of observation was the individual (i.e. esports fans). Fans were selected as observation units because they are the ones who ultimately decide if the sponsorship presented and brought relevant-added value. As Kotler and Armstrong (2018) state, real sustainable marketing requires that brands be in sync with consumers and that both work together to develop socially responsible marketing activities. Particularly, the brand should engage in consumer-oriented marketing and societal marketing. That is, the brand should act in accordance with the consumers' wants and points of view. Table no. 2 presents the sample's demographics.

Table no. 2 – Esports fans' demographics

	n = 1,359					
	Valid	No answer	Valid %	Mean	SD	Mode
Gender	1,324	35				
Female	66		5			
Male	1,258		95			
Age	1,251	108		23.3	6.6	18
Marital status	1,300	59				
Single	988		76			
Cohabiting	195		15			
Married	106		8.2			
Divorced	8		.6			
Widowed	3		.2			
Education	1,302	57				
6th grade or less	6		.5			
7th to 12th grade	414		31.8			
Bachelor degree	637		48.9			
Master degree	114		8.8			
PhD	22		1.7			
Post-doctorate	3		.2			
Other	106		8.1			
Employment status	1,312	47				
Student	655		49.9			
Employed	539		41.1			

	n = 1,359					
	Valid	**No answer**	**Valid %**	**Mean**	**SD**	**Mode**
Homemaker	7		.5			
Unemployed	67		5.1			
Retired	4		.3			
Other	40		3			
Region	1,319	40				
Africa	9		.7			
Asia	100		7.6			
Europe	438		33.2			
North America	684		51.9			
Oceania	58		4.4			
South America	30		2.3			
Ethnicity	1,290	69				
American Indian or Alaska Native	23		1.8			
Asian	205		15.9			
Black or African American	46		3.6			
Hispanic, Latino or Spanish origin	112		8.7			
Middle Eastern or North African	31		2.4			
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	13		1			
White	981		76			
Other	65		5			

Note: n = Sample size; SD = Standard deviation. For ethnicity, participants were able to select more than one option.

3.2 Data collection tool, application method, and data analysis procedure

The data collection tool consisted of an online structured survey with closed-ended questions (with the exception of the age demographic question, which was open-ended). The survey was created on Google Forms, an online survey platform recommended by various authors like Cohen *et al.* (2018). The survey was applied through self-recruitment and self-administration on multiple esports-related online forums. In these forums, a request was written for fans to fill out the survey and a link for the survey was provided. To guarantee that the sample was solely composed of esports fans, the first item of the questionnaire was a filter question asking if the participant regularly watched or participated in esports. Only those who answered "Yes" were able to complete the remainder of the survey and were included in the sample. Before being officially applied, the questionnaire was pretested on 36 individuals (i.e. 33 esports fans and 3 individuals with experience in scientific research) and whose answers were not included in the data analysis. Data collection began on May 2nd, 2019 and ended on May 21st, 2019 (i.e. 20 days). Requests for participation in the online survey were placed on Reddit and Discord which, as stated by J. Lee (2017), are the two most popular social media platforms for gaming discussions. Specifically, requests were placed in 183 Reddit esports-related sub-forums and in 74 Discord esports-related channels (each request was placed only once per sub-forum or channel). Data was analysed with SPSS 25.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In Table no. 3, it is clearly visible that the large majority of esports fans want sponsors to bring relevant-added value to esports. The three most voted reasons for why sponsors should bring value to esports are all related to how sponsors should be more altruistic (i.e. it is their duty to bring value, it shows that they care about esports, and fans dislike commercially-only focused brands). This is in line with Ströh (2017) who claims that esports fans want sponsors to have altruism as their second objective (with commercial success being their first). By contrast, only a small portion stated that sponsors should simply focus on their financial goals. From these, the majority justified this belief by defending that sponsors are not the ones who should bring value to esports.

Table no. 3 – Bringing relevant-added value to esports

	n = 1,359	Valid %
Should esports sponsors bring value to esports or just focus on their financial goals?		
Esports sponsors should bring value to the esports industry	1,172	86.2
Why should sponsors bring value to the esports industry?		
It shows that they care about esports	751	64.1
The esports industry needs more content	480	41
They are profiting from the sponsorships, so they should bring value	808	68.9
I am tired of traditional advertising methods	339	28.9
I do not like brands that are only interested in commercial success	517	44.1
Other	98	8.4
Esports sponsors should only focus on their financial goals	187	13.8
Why should sponsors only focus on their financial goals?		
It is not their responsibility to bring value to esports	126	67.4
They do not know how to bring value to esports	72	38.5
If they bring value, they will use it as an opportunity to promote their brands	62	33.2
Other	40	21.4

Note: Depending on the answer, participants were asked to answer different contingency questions. The items "Why should sponsors bring value to the esports industry?" and "Why should sponsors only focus on their financial goals?" are multiple-choice questions.

4.1 Present relevant advertisements to fans

As can be seen in Table no. 4, the bulk of fans believe sponsors should develop more relevant advertisements. The most requested types of advertisements are the ones that provide esports information, humor, or discounts. More fans preferred ads with esports information than entertainment-focused ads. Although this goes against the notions of the entertainment-based ads of Parreño *et al.* (2013) and the humorous ads of Lancaster and Massingham (2018), the empirical data is in line with Burton (2017) and Shabir (2017) who defend that sponsors must logically connect their brands with esports. Nevertheless, both these options were highly requested and a sponsorship that combines both these approaches could have a very high success rate. The least voted option was related to limited time offers. This could be an indication that a significant portion of esports fans do not have a high appreciation for offers that pressure them to make fast purchases. Still, with a 44% approval rate, there are a considerable number of fans with positive feelings towards limited time offers.

Table no. 4 – Presenting relevant advertisements to fans

	$n = 1,359$	Valid %
Should sponsors bring relevant advertisements to esports fans?		
No	158	11.6
Yes	1,201	88.4
What types of relevant advertisements should esports sponsors create?		
Advertisements with relevant esports information	1,033	86
Advertisements about product discounts	717	59.7
Advertisements about limited time offers	536	44.6
Entertaining/humorous advertisements	923	76.9
Other	66	5.5

Note: Participants who selected "No" were not allowed to answer the contingency questions of that item. The item "What types of relevant advertisements should esports sponsors create?" is a multiple-choice question.

4.2 Provide relevant content to fans

Table no. 5 shows that most fans want sponsors to provide them with more relevant content. Just like in the previous chapter, most fans prefer when sponsors directly connect their brands (in this case, their products) with esports. Although several of the other options also included the topic of esports, the most voted one was the only one where the brand had to directly connect its products with esports. This again further cements Burton (2017) and Shabir (2017) beliefs that sponsors must find ways to link their brands with esports. Although a sponsor who, for instance, presents an interview with an esports celebrity will be connecting the brand with esports, a sponsor who creates an esports-related product will be establishing a much stronger connection with competitive gaming. Besides this, and again just like in the previous chapter, content related to esports information and humour, were also voted by most fans. Finally, the proposition of hosting viewing parties at cinemas for important tournaments was also heavily voted, which further proves how esports fans value face to face social interactions. Instead of viewing the tournaments from their homes, they prefer to watch it alongside others who share their interests.

Table no. 5 – Providing relevant content to fans

	$n = 1,359$	Valid %
Should sponsors provide esports fans with relevant content?		
No	233	17.1
Yes	1,126	82.9
What types of relevant content should esports sponsors provide?		
Entertaining/humorous challenges	714	63.4
Entertaining/humorous videos	752	66.8
Provide cheer boards for tournament attendees	430	38.2
Host viewing parties at cinemas for important tournaments	696	61.8
Personalized products (e.g. *League of Legends*-themed cans, bank accounts with VIP seats for some tournaments, etc.)	781	69.4
Interviews with esports celebrities	739	65.6
Esports news and insights	773	68.7
Other	7	.6

Note: Participants who selected "No" were not allowed to answer the contingency questions of that item. The item "What types of relevant content should esports sponsors provide?" is a multiple-choice question.

4.3 Focus on storytelling

According to Table no. 6, the larger part of fans indicated to like it when esports sponsors engaged in storytelling (e.g. videos showcasing the history of rivalries, drama, individualism, and teamwork of esports). The most preferred story was that of a rookie training to become one of the best and the second most voted was related to how an underdog won against a veteran pro-player. Maybe this is an indication that fans have the dream of becoming pro-players themselves, so they immediately feel a strong connection with the story of an aspiring or disadvantaged pro-player who does his best to overcome all hurdles and reach the top. This could be one of the reasons why Taylor (2012) mentions that the Steel Series brand tests their products on pro-players before selling them to regular gamers. Maybe SteelSeries believes that regular gamers want quality products to further increase their chances of entering the professional leagues. Another highly voted story was related to the esports community and market as a whole, which provides additional evidence to how esports fans treasure the interconnectedness and socialness of esports and the overall sense of belonging to a community. Interestingly, none of the four most voted stories were focused on famous pro-players.

Table no. 6 – Focusing on storytelling

	n = 1,359	Valid %
Should esports sponsors engage in storytelling?		
No	211	15.5
Yes	1,148	84.5
What types of stories should esports sponsors focus on?		
Underdog: How an underdog won against a veteran pro-player	839	73.1
Evolution: How a rookie trained into becoming one of the best	941	82
Rebirth: How a pro-player lost a tournament's finals but came back next year for revenge	729	63.5
Unlucky victor: How a pro-player was thrown into unfavourable circumstances, but inevitably won	622	54.2
Tragedy: How some pro-players have fallen	486	42.3
Perfection: How a pro-player has always won everything and has no rival	528	46.0
Quest: Focus on the journey, not on the climax	688	59.9
Comedy: Humorous stories from esports	756	65.9
Community: Focus on all pro-players, fans, organizations, etc.	828	72.1
Other	61	5.3

Note: Participants who selected "No" were not allowed to answer the contingency questions of that item. The item "What types of stories should esports sponsors focus on?" is a multiple-choice question.

4.4 Perform product trial

As indicated in Table no. 7, the large majority of fans showed positive feelings towards sponsors using esports to showcase their products. Still, it must be noted that a significant portion stated that the products should only be showcased in demo booths for those who personally attend the tournaments and should not be shown during the live-streams. Similarly, almost all fans think that sponsors should use esports to give attending fans the chance to try out their products.

Although product trial is not as new a strategy as the rest of the strategies presented in this paper, the extreme high number of people who voted in favour of product trial (i.e. 96.8% or 1,316/1,359) proves that this brings value to esports fans. Furthermore, from all the sponsorship tools of this article, this strategy is the one that is most focused on giving fans something that is actually tangible as opposed to something that they can only see. This could possibly be the reason why so many fans selected this option as a method to bring value. As McCarville *et al.* (1998) state, product trial is one of the most effective sponsorship strategies because it is better at stimulating the senses and at providing immediate satisfaction.

Table no. 7 – Performing product trial

	n = 1,359	Valid %
Should sponsors use esports to showcase their products?		
No	43	3.2
Yes	959	70.5
Yes, but only on demo booths for those who personally attend the tournaments	357	26.3
Should sponsors use esports to give attending fans the chance to try out their products?		
No	77	5.7
Yes	1,282	94.3

4.5 Support tournaments and pro-players

As Table no. 8 denotes, the overwhelming majority of fans want sponsors to support both the tournaments and the pro-players. An interesting finding here is that most fans put the sponsorships of existing tournaments and pro-players and pro-teams ahead of the creation of new ones. This could be an indication that fans have already developed emotional attachments with these entities and prefer to see brands further supporting them instead of creating new and unknown tournaments and pro-teams. This would be in accordance with Taylor (2012) where Mike Burks refers that esports fans are emotionally attached to pro-players. The creation of amateur tournaments that offer the possibility of entering the pro-leagues was also a very popular choice, which further cements the idea that the fans would like to become pro-players. The fourth most voted option was to help existing pro-players who are in danger of quitting. This provides even more evidence that fans are not just focused on the most successful pro-players and that they value brands that show signs of altruism and philanthropy.

Table no. 8 – Supporting tournaments and pro-players

	n = 1,359	Valid %
Should esports sponsors support tournaments and pro-players?		
No	41	3
Yes	1,318	97
How should esports sponsors support tournaments and pro-players?		
Sponsor existing pro-players and teams	1,146	86.9
Create new pro-teams	707	53.6
Sponsor existing tournaments	1,162	88.2
Create new pro-tournaments	765	58
Create amateur tournaments where the winners are able to enter pro-tournaments	905	68.7

	$n = 1,359$	Valid %
Build training facilities for pro-players	542	41.1
Provide pro-players with free products	569	43.2
Help existing pro-players with their careers so they do not have to quit	903	68.5
Other	52	3.9

Note: Participants who selected "No" were not allowed to answer the contingency questions of that item. The item "How should esports sponsors support tournaments and pro-players?" is a multiple-choice question.

4.6 Promote good practice and integrity

The data in Table no. 9 shows that fans are divided on whether there is a lack of integrity and good practices in esports. While 51.6% defend that esports do not lack these virtues, 48.4% state that there is indeed a shortage of these qualities. The large majority of this latter group states that sponsors should promote good practices and integrity in esports. The most wanted mean for doing so is by fighting disreputable behaviour.

It makes sense for the fight against disreputable behaviour to be the most voted mean for promoting good practice and integrity. If the issue of disreputable behaviour were solved, all of the other problems would also be less severe or urgent. There would be less need to instruct people to abide by the regulations and codes of conduct, less need to promote cooperation between esports entities or to require stronger integrity measures from organizations. The issue of equal inclusion rights for everyone would also not be as severe, there would not be as much of a need to require more regulation from organizations, and the number of female pro-players would also probably increase as less disreputable behaviour would also mean fewer issues related to sexism.

Table no. 9 – Promoting good practice and integrity

	$n = 1,359$	Valid %
Is there a lack of integrity and good practices in esports?		
No	701	51.6
Yes	658	48.4
Should sponsors promote good practices and integrity in esports?		
No	51	7.8
Yes	607	92.2
How should sponsors promote good practices and integrity in esports?		
Instruct people to comply with codes of conduct and regulations	408	67.2
Fight disreputable behaviour (e.g. corruption, sexism, discrimination, doping, etc.)	476	78.4
Fight for equal inclusion rights for everyone	351	57.8
Fight to increase the number of female pro-players (e.g. make females feel more comfortable within the esports scene)	264	43.5
Require more regulation from organizations	296	48.8
Require stronger integrity measures from organizations	402	66.2
Promote cooperation between all esports entities	402	66.2
Other	37	6.1

Note: Participants who selected "No" were not allowed to answer the contingency questions of that item. The item "How should sponsors promote good practices and integrity in esports?" is a multiple choice question.

4.7 Promote gaming's acceptance

As indicated by Table no. 10, most fans stated that society still has negative perceptions over videogames. A small majority of this group stated that society's negative views on videogames have led them to hide their love for esports. Even so, a significant portion stated that the stigma around videogames has not led them to hide this passion.

From those who agree that society has negative views over videogames, the predominant opinion is that sponsors should promote gaming's acceptance. The most requested ways that fans want sponsors to promote gaming's acceptance are by creating content showing that esports are a serious activity with millions of fans and an economic powerhouse and by creating content showing the passion and energy of esports. This could be connected to the fans' desire for esports to be taken seriously and not as a simple hobby or kids' game. Possibly, esports fans wish to put esports on the same level of acceptance and popularity as other sports like football and basketball.

Table no. 10 – Promoting gaming acceptance

	$n = 1,359$	Valid %
Does society still have a negative perception of video games?		
No	106	7.8
Yes, most people have negative views on video games	381	28
Yes, some people have negative views on video games	872	64.2
Has society's negative views on video games ever led you to hide your love for esports?		
No	571	45.6
Yes, always	120	9.6
Yes, sometimes	562	44.9
Should esports sponsors promote gaming's acceptance?		
No	230	18.4
Yes	1,023	81.6
How should sponsors promote gaming's acceptance?		
Create content refuting negative gaming myths	529	51.7
Create content showing that esports are a serious activity with millions of fans and an economic powerhouse	928	90.7
Create content showing the passion and energy of esports	859	84
Other	56	5.5

Note: Participants who selected "No" were not allowed to answer the contingency questions of that item. The item "How should sponsors promote gaming's acceptance?" is a multiple-choice question.

5. CONCLUSIONS

With the lowest general method for bringing value to esports still being voted by 81.6% of fans (i.e. promote gaming's acceptance), it is undeniable that the large majority of esports fans want sponsors to bring relevant-added value to competitive gaming. This also means that every general type of relevant-added value method covered in this research is desired by the large majority of esports fans. Besides proving this, this research also showed the most wanted means (from the consumers' point of view) for adding value. Figure no. 2 presents the empirical model that resulted from combining the conceptual model with the empirical data. The model provides an overview of the order of importance of each sponsorship tool and of the best strategies for each. The strategies are also sorted by order of importance.
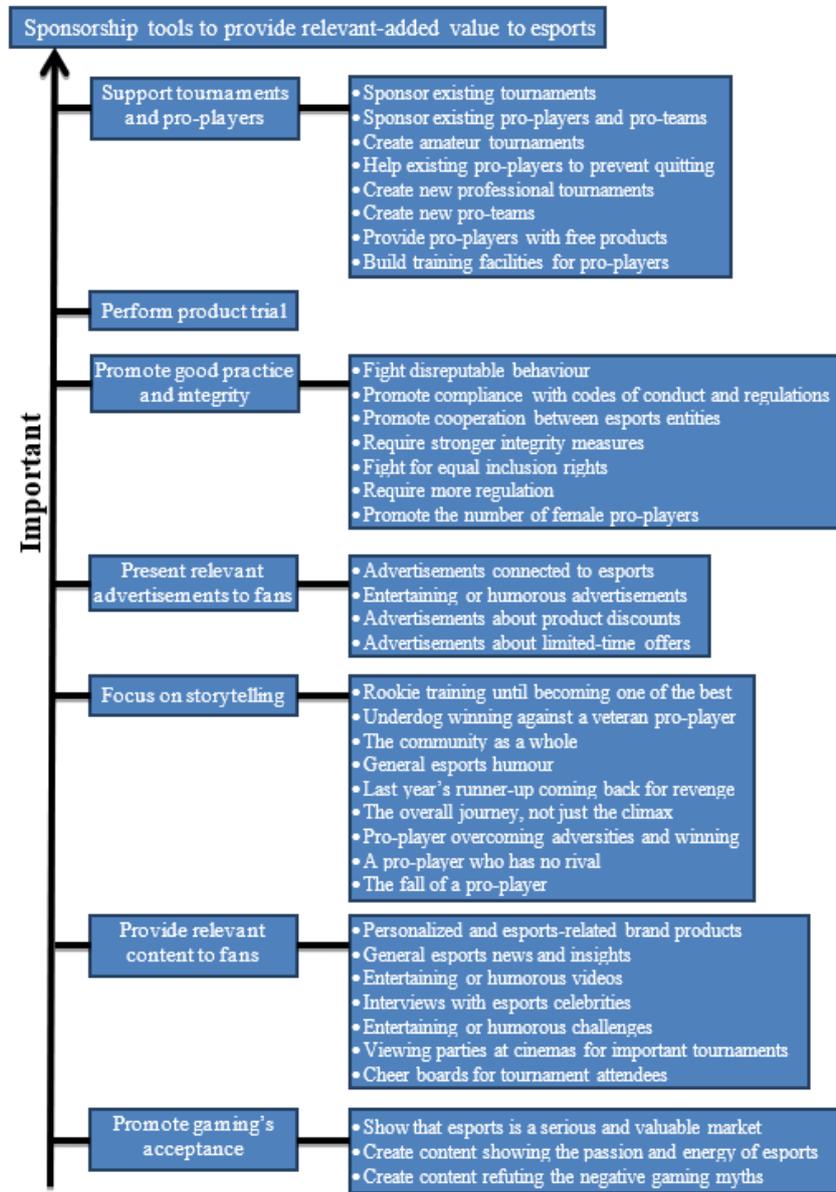
Figure no. 2 – Tools for sponsors to bring relevant-added value to esports (empirical framework)

In total, seven tools that sponsors can use to bring relevant-added value to esports were identified. Three of these are focused on supporting the esports industry (i.e. support tournaments and pro-players, promote good practice and integrity, and promote gaming's acceptance) and four are directed at improving the fans' experience (i.e. perform product

trial, present relevant advertisements to fans, focus on storytelling, and provide relevant content to fans).

Although it was expected that fans would want sponsors to bring value, it was surprising to see that two of the three most voted means for bringing value were not focused on directly benefiting the fans themselves (the only exception was performing product trial, which was the second most voted option at 96.8%). Specifically, while providing relevant ads, content, and storytelling were voted by 88.4%, 82.9%, and 84.5% of fans, respectively, supporting tournaments and pro-players and promoting good practice and integrity were voted by 97% and 92.2% of fans, respectively. This could be an indication of the fans' concern for the industry they love. They wish for sponsors to help the pro-players and tournaments and to improve the overall esports industry and its sustainability, rather than directly providing fans with entertainment. While creating relevant content, ads, and stories for fans will improve their experience, it will not provide much help to the sustainability of the industry and of the entities they love. If sponsors firstly focus on supporting the general esports industry, then this will ultimately create a better environment for the fans to enjoy esports. These data are in line with the statements of authors like Shabir (2017), Ströh (2017), and Winnan (2016) who point to several flaws of the esports industry and how it needs the help from sponsors to grow. It seems that esports fans are also aware of this need.

The least voted tool for bringing relevant-added value to esports was by promoting gaming's acceptance, which scored 81.6%. Although this high percentage means that this is also a viable way to help and support the esports market, it makes sense that this would be the least voted tool focused on improving the esports industry. Possibly, the reason why supporting tournaments and pro-players and promoting good practice and integrity took priority over promoting gaming's acceptance was because the tournaments and pro-players' positions need firstly to be solidified as this market is still very volatile (Franke, 2015) with several tournaments and pro-players disappearing as quickly as they appeared (AEVI, 2018). Promoting good practice and integrity was also seen as more important possibly because the esports industry lacks regulation (Hollist, 2015; Li, 2016; ONTIER, 2018) and some severe incidents have occurred (Winnan, 2016; Brickell, 2017). In this sense, sponsors should only focus on promoting the acceptance of the gaming and esports' industry after the aforementioned issues have been resolved. It would make no sense to convince the general society to accept an industry that is not yet adequately solidified and regulated.

Besides developing an empirical model, this research also allowed to create several hypotheses which should be tested on esports sponsors. Although the specific strategies of each tool are also important, the most vital hypotheses that emerged from this study were related to the tools themselves. Particularly: (1) Supporting tournaments and pro-players is a viable esports sponsorship strategy, (2) Performing product trial is a viable esports sponsorship strategy, (3) Promoting good practice and integrity is a viable esports sponsorship strategy, (4) Presenting relevant advertisements to fans is a viable esports sponsorship strategy, (5) Focusing on storytelling is a viable esports sponsorship strategy, (6) Providing relevant content to fans is a viable esports sponsorship strategy, and (7) Promoting gaming's acceptance is a viable esports sponsorship strategy.

These data and the empirical model present valuable guidelines for all brands wishing to engage in sustainable esports sponsorships. Bringing value to esports that is in line with the fans wants will allow sponsors to become an integral, relevant, and esteemed element of this young, but promising, industry at an early stage. Likewise, helping an industry in need

like esports will create a considerable amount of goodwill, not only among the esports fans, but also with the other esports organizations which will facilitate future sponsorships businesses. This will also help cement the sponsors' long-term position in this market, ensure the sustainability of their marketing actions, improve their brand image and awareness, and enhance the probability of benefiting from profitable long-term relationships. Moreover, the fact that two of the three most wanted means by fans for bringing relevant-added value are by supporting the industry itself, instead of entertaining the fans, means that, by following these guidelines, sponsors will be, not only improving their image among fans and the sustainability of their sponsorships due to fulfilling the fans' desires, but also improving their B2B relationships due to supporting the development and promoting the sustainability of the general esports market. The fulfilment of both of these needs will result in successful, profitable, and long-term relationships between the sponsors, the fans, and the overall esports industry.

6. LIMITATIONS

One of the main aspects that severely limited this research was the scarce scientific literature on esports and the little to no research on the specific topic of esports sponsorships. The quantitative nature of this research also limited the fans' ability to freely vocalize all their needs and wants and did not allow for a deeper analysis of each of the topics addressed in this research. Finally, the focus on solely analysing the best methods to add relevant value, and only from the fans' point of view, may have also limited the research.

7. FUTURE RESEARCH

Much more research is needed on esports and especially on the area of esports sponsorships. To delve even deeper into the matter of what relevant-added value sponsors should bring to esports, researchers should perform more intimate qualitative or case study investigations and face-to-face interviews with esports fans. It could also be useful to perform qualitative analyses on the sponsors' point of view about what are the best methods for bringing relevant-added value to esports. Furthermore, it would be very interesting to understand why fans prioritized sponsors supporting the pro-players, tournaments, and the general esports industry rather than providing fans with relevant ads, content, and stories. Lastly, both the empirical model and the hypotheses that resulted from this research should be tested by studying the sponsors that attempted to use these tools to bring relevant-added value to esports.

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