Sponsoring Esports to Improve Brand Image

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Abstract

This research aimed to identify how esports sponsorships affect the sponsors' brand image. An exploratory focus was adopted along with a convergent-parallel mixed method with equal status. Twenty-two experts in esports sponsorships were interviewed and 5,638 esports fans were surveyed. Quantitative data was processed on SPSS 25 and qualitative data on NVivo 10. The two data sets were analysed separately from one another, but the results were interpreted together and given the same level of importance. The results showed that all experts believe that sponsoring esports can positively affect the sponsors' brand image and roughly one-third of fans perceive more positively a small number of brands as a result of them sponsoring esports. This image improvement is, however, dependent on multiple variables, including activation strategy, brand type, and target audience. The findings are relevant for academics and companies looking to better understand the brand image effects of sponsoring esports.

Keywords: esports; sponsorship; brand image; marketing; branding.

JEL classification: M31; M37.

1. INTRODUCTION

Until recent years, gamers used to meet up in LAN parties to test their skills in small friendly matches (Shabir, 2017). However, now that high-speed internet, social networking, and streaming technologies have popularized and become commonplace (Carter and Gibbs, 2013), a new, larger, and more serious form of gaming competitions has emerged (Stroh, 2017). Esports – short for electronic sports – are highly popular and professionally orchestrated videogame tournaments where world-class gamers – generally called pro-players or pro-gamers – participate (Shabir, 2017) to acquire prestige and win money, prizes, etc.

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(Mooney, 2018). Just like water sports, esports is a collective term that encompasses a wide number of disciplines (i.e. videogames) and even tournaments can feature various games (Stroh, 2017). These events are also divided into tiers (Shabir, 2017), like amateur (Hamari and Sjoblom, 2017), high amateur, and professional (SuperData, 2017). For instance, while low tier matches commonly occur in a virtual environment, with each pro-player participating from their residence through an internet connection (Stein and Scholz, 2016), high tier events are organized in real-world locales where pro-players meet, like football stadiums and large arenas, and are filled by thousands of fans who wish to personally watch the event which is also broadcasted to millions of online viewers (Gifford, 2017).

Esports' popularity only became relevant in the early 2010s (Stroh, 2017). But, since then, this industry has grown very rapidly (Shabir, 2017) to the point where it is now a global phenomenon (Hiltscher and Scholz, 2017). Competitive gaming has already been recognized as an official sport in South Korea and many other countries are doing the same (Hiltscher and Scholz, 2017). Esports have already been recognized as the fastest-growing sport in the world (Sylvester and Rennie, 2017) and as one of the fastest-growing industries in general (Winnan, 2016). The significant popularity (CGC Europe, 2015), considerable economic relevance (Shabir, 2017), and strong worldwide reach (BI Intelligence and Elder, 2017) are attracting a large number of consumer brands eager to use it as an important marketing channel (CGC Europe, 2015). Because of this, just in 2016, over 600 brands started sponsoring esports (Shabir, 2017). Some of the most notable ones include Manchester City, Paris Saint-German, Nissan, Google, Sony, Audi (Shabir, 2017), Vodafone, Coca-Cola (Stroh, 2017), Red Bull, Microsoft, and Samsung (Funk *et al.*, 2018).

Competitive gaming sponsors are benefiting from significant ROIs (Freitas *et al.*, 2020). One of the most sought after benefits is increased brand awareness (Stroh, 2017). Reports show that, in 2020, the esports' fan-base comprised 495 million people (Newzoo, 2020; Statista, 2020). With a yearly increase of 10.4% to 12.3% (Newzoo, 2020), it is estimated that, in 2023, there will be 646 million esports fans (Newzoo, 2020; Statista, 2020), which is a bigger fan-base than that of the NFL and in line with that of several popular sports (Shabir, 2017). Esports are already receiving higher viewership figures than some popular sports matches (Winnan, 2016). For instance, the 1.7 million people who tuned in to ESPN to watch Germany versus the USA in the 2014 Football World Championship (CGC Europe, 2015) is considerably below the 46 million who tuned into YouTube and Twitch to watch the Intel Extreme Masters esports event in Katowice (Statista, 2018). Another benefit of sponsoring esports has been increased sales (Winnan, 2016; Freitas *et al.*, 2020). Reports have proven that esports fans receive a higher than average income (Stroh, 2017) and are compulsive buyers, early technological adopters (Winnan, 2016), and important influencers of the buying behaviour of their social circles (Stroh, 2017). Additionally, this market is expected to be valued at 1.34 billion US dollars in 2020 (Pannekeet, 2019) and its value is growing 9.7% every year (SuperData, 2017).

Some believe that sponsoring esports may also improve the sponsor's image (Stroh, 2017). One of the reasons for this assumption is the unexpected overall acceptance of sponsorships by esports fans (Stroh, 2017; Freitas *et al.*, 2020). Unlike other industries where the majority of the audience dislikes advertising and perceives it as intrusive and annoying (Crompton, 1994), competitive gaming fans have shown to understand that the current large scale esports industry requires sponsors to survive (Stroh, 2017). Since fans

realize that competitive gaming is a fragile market that requires sponsorship funds, they tend to view sponsors as supporters of esports (Shabir, 2017). It is believed that this, in turn, makes them positively perceive them (Nielsen Esports, 2017).

Today's markets are saturated with so many similar brands and products that it is hard for organizations to find a main selling point (Belch and Belch, 2018). However, brand image has shown to be a strong distinguishing factor (Chaffey and Smith, 2013). Organizations that create the best image for their brand and products will gain a competitive advantage and increase their chances of conquering a larger market share and of reaping higher ROIs (Belch and Belch, 2018). This is because people who positively perceive a brand are much more likely to buy its products (Ko *et al.*, 2008). Ergo, it is imperative to invest in improving the brand's image and one of the best tools to achieve this is through advertising (Belch and Belch, 2018). Sponsorships, in particular, have proven to be the most effective at this as they are perceived as less commercial (Bennett, 1999). If brands reach consumers in non-commercial environments, they are more likely to benefit from improved image (Stroh, 2017).

In terms of place, sports have been recognized as one of the best markets to improve the brand image (Winnan, 2016). But some now believe that esports may also offer the same brand image improving benefits of sports (Shabir, 2017; Stroh, 2017), especially due to their low sponsorship costs when compared to sports (Stroh, 2017). However, some have defended that the negative view the general public still has over videogames may repel some brands in fear of being associated with gaming's supposed negative elements (Stroh, 2017). Furthermore, for some time now, it has been claimed that sports and esports offer different sponsorship benefits (Stroh, 2017) and that sports knowledge is not well applicable to esports (Burton, 2017; Stroh, 2017). Hence, this research aimed to identify how esports sponsorships affect the sponsors' brand image. In other words, the research question was: How do esports sponsorships affect the sponsors' brand image? This study is necessary because, if it is found that the esports sponsors' image is being negatively instead of positively affected, it could lead to increasingly fewer brands sponsoring esports over time and make esports unsustainable. On the other hand, if it is found that esport sponsorships positively affect brand image, the future of esports will be more secured. This objective is also substantiated by the scant research in the esports field (Kozachuk *et al.*, 2016; Stroh, 2017; Lokhman *et al.*, 2018) and the even higher lack of studies in esports marketing (Franke, 2015; Burton, 2017) and esports sponsorships (Korpimies, 2017; Stroh, 2017; Cunningham *et al.*, 2018; Hallmann and Giel, 2018).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

It is the goal of every brand to create a positive, distinct, and strong brand (Kotler and Keller, 2016). Authors like Stroh (2017) have defended that all companies looking to improve their image and become more modern and appealing to millennials should take esports sponsorships into consideration. It is believed that sponsoring esports improves the sponsor's brand image (Franke, 2015; Bouaoui, 2016; Shabir, 2017; Stroh, 2017). One of the reasons for this is centred on the fans' demography (Stroh, 2017). According to Shabir (2017), millennials and the newer generations are cause-driven individuals and esports' economic dependency on sponsors makes it a cause (i.e. something that is benefited by, or requires, external assistance). Because of this, fans view sponsors as supporters of esports

(Shabir, 2017) and infer that they might have some altruistic motive for sponsoring it (Carrillat and d'Astous, 2012). Hence, the sponsor will be more likely to acquire significant goodwill (Carrillat and d'Astous, 2012; Shabir, 2017; Stroh, 2017) and to receive a better appreciation of the brand (Shabir, 2017; Stroh, 2017), including a perceived higher degree of prestige, credibility (Shabir, 2017), and status (Carrillat and d'Astous, 2012; Shabir, 2017; Stroh, 2017). Shabir (2017) defends that, when a brand sponsors something that is greatly loved by an audience, they will be more prone to perceive it and engage with it in a more positive manner. The positive word of mouth and publicity generated by the sponsorship will give the brand positive exposure, which may serve as a catalyst for improved brand image (Shabir, 2017).

Brands like Samsung have been part of competitive gaming almost from the start and, as a result, the fan-base now sees them as an important and integral element of the scene to the point that they are almost perceived as a synonym to the term *esports sponsor* (Seo, 2016). Authors claim that, instead of seeking short-term ROIs like immediate sales, these brands' main goal is to gradually build their reputation, acquire good faith (Korpimies, 2017), and develop their image (Korpimies, 2017; Lu, 2017). These assumptions may be true as there have been sponsors indicating that, instead of aiming for fast increased sales, they look to build their brands by becoming an integral element of the enthusiastic esports fan-base (Pitkänen, 2015). The fans have shown to have a high affinity towards esports and to be highly engaged, emotive (Stroh, 2017), and passionate (Nielsen Esports, 2017) because competitive gaming serves as a form of escapism, entertainment, and excitement (Stroh, 2017). Moreover, roughly two-thirds of the fan-base considers esports as a very important hobby and some even see it as a passion (Stroh, 2017). This high attachment is very compelling for brands (Tsiotsou and Alexandris, 2009; Stroh, 2017) since engaged fans are more prone to positively perceive sponsors (Portlock and Rose, 2009; Tsiotsou and Alexandris, 2009). Ergo, brands that sponsor esports are reaching fans in a point when their emotions are positively high, which could serve as a catalyst for positive brand image transfer (Winnan, 2016).

A number of studies have also concluded that most fans have positive attitudes towards esports sponsors and that they accept their promotional activities (Franke, 2015; Nielsen Esports, 2017; Shabir, 2017; Stroh, 2017). According to Stroh (2017), the fan-base does not perceive sponsors as altruistic corporations, but they understand their economic necessity. Ströh defends that the majority of fans view sponsors an inevitable requirement that is not irritating per se. The author points out that the fans are well aware that sponsors are there to gain commercial success, but they do not mind it since the industry needs them to be sustainable. Ströh mentions that some fans even believe that the second goal of some of these sponsors may be altruistic. As a result, esports sponsorships are appreciated by the esports community (Stroh, 2017). Studies have even shown that fans welcome both endemic and non-endemic esports sponsors (Seo, 2013). Despite there being a preference for endemic brands (Stroh, 2017), non-endemic ones are also accepted (Nichols, 2017; Nielsen Esports, 2017; Shabir, 2017; Stroh, 2017; Aevi, 2018; Lokhman *et al.*, 2018). An investigation by Stroh (2017) even found that 70% of the fan-base wishes that more non-endemic brands would sponsor esports and that both types of brands had become more likeable after sponsoring competitive gaming.

There seems to be various evidence that esports sponsorships may lead to an improved brand image (Freitas *et al.*, 2020). However, there have also been some signs of the exact

opposite (Freitas *et al.*, 2019). According to Shabir (2017), gaming – and, in turn, esports – are still negatively perceived by the general society. It is common for the media to depict gamers as antisocial unhealthy beings who spend the entire day looking at screens (Shabir, 2017). Stroh (2017) notes that this has led gaming to be associated with low grades and violence, and of promoting school shootings. The author notes that the unfounded accusers even coined the term *killer games*. This is very dangerous to esports sponsors as they can be easily associated with these negative assumptions (Stroh, 2017). Esports have also been suffering from various incidents of disreputable behaviour conducted either by the sponsored entities or by the sponsors themselves (Shabir, 2017). For instance, there have been several instances of doping, cyber-attacks, cheating, match-fixing, illegal and unregulated gambling, sexism and harassment, and toxic behaviour (Stroh, 2017). Lastly, as Crompton (1994) indicates, every time a sponsored entity underperforms it brings fourth the risk of the sponsor being associated with losing or with low quality. Because of their potentially severe repercussions, Crompton stresses that brands do their best to avoid these negative associations.

Despite this, authors defend that esports have a generally positive environment (Jin, 2010; Shabir, 2017; Stroh, 2017) and that sponsors are doing their best to reap the benefits of this positivism (Winnan, 2016). The brand image benefits also seem to spread to the fans' buying behaviour as the esports' fan-base shows increased customer satisfaction (Taylor, 2012) and loyalty (Stroh, 2017). One of the best examples of this extreme positivism is provided by Taylor (2012), who indicates that SK Telecom, an esports sponsor, reported that their esports fans sometimes go as far as wanting to thank the brand for sponsoring esports. SK Telecom stressed that this seems to go beyond just brand awareness and positive perception. The fans express feelings of genuine loyalty and love for the esports sponsor (Taylor, 2012). It is because of this that authors like Bouaoui (2016), Franke (2015) and Stroh (2017) defend that brands looking to improve their brand image should sponsor esports. These arguments led us to posit the following:

H₁: Sponsoring esports improves the sponsors' brand image.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study had an exploratory focus and opted for convergent-parallel mixed methods with equal status. In particular, two different samples were used and their data were simultaneously collected. Sample 1 provided mostly qualitative data and sample 2 mostly quantitative. The two sets of data were analysed in separate but, to reach a conclusion, the data sets were interpreted as a whole and given equal consideration. In other words, conclusions were drawn by triangulating sample 1 and 2's results. Data were collected in a cross-sectional time horizon and in a non-contrived setting with researchers adopting an overt stance.

Sample 1 comprised of 22 experts in esports sponsorships that worked in companies with experience with this type of commercial partnerships. Specifically, seven marketing agencies (MAs), eight non-endemic esports sponsors (NEESs), and seven endemic esports sponsors (EESs). A nonprobability purposive expert heterogeneous methodology was used to sample these companies. In particular, a conscious decision was made to gather a group of different companies so that it would be possible to obtain a large number of different

market perspectives on esports sponsorships. This allowed to have a better understanding of the topic from different points-of-view. Only businesses with a minimum of two years of experience in esports sponsorships were contacted. This was done to ensure that the sample had relevant knowledge and experience in esports sponsorships. The minimum was set at only two years since – just like Stroh (2017) points out – the large scale and professional esports market has only officially existed for less than a decade. The companies were contacted through their publicly available websites' contact sections and via the email addresses in the aforementioned websites.

The data of Sample 1 was gathered through Skype interviews – or via Microsoft Teams or Zoom when solicited by an interviewee. In addition to asking questions about the companies' characteristics, the experts were shown a 6-point Likert scale with the statement "Sponsoring esports leads to an improved brand image" and were solicited to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with it (i.e. Strongly disagree, Disagree, Somewhat disagree, Somewhat agree, Agree, or Strongly agree). A neutral option was not included to – as indicated by Lavrakas (2008) and Mooi et al. (2018) – encourage the experts into taking a stance and not select the safest option. Even so, the following item was the open-ended question "Please justify your selection" to prompt the experts into freely expressing their views. A structured questionnaire was used to guide the interview process and it was pretested on nine people from the areas of marketing, management, and scientific research between 14 April and 21 May 2019. The empirical data collection of sample 1 happened between 15 August and 12 December 2019. Tables no. 1 and no. 2 present the detailed characteristics of each member of sample 1.

Sample 2 was composed of 5,638 esports fans. The sampling method was nonprobability purposive heterogeneous. In particular, a conscious decision was made to gather a group of different fans so that it would be possible to obtain a large number of different fan perspectives. This sample was reached by constructing a database of the current most popular esports videogames and using it to detect online communities on Discord and Reddit – named Discord channels and subreddits, respectively – centred on these videogames. Esports fans were reached through Discord and Reddit because, according to Lee (2017), these are the two most widely used social platforms by gaming fans. This database was developed by merging the data from Newzoo (2020) on the 20 most-viewed esports games between January and May 2019 and the data from Esports Earnings (2020) on the 100 esports videogames with the cumulative highest prize money awarded. Esports Earnings and Newzoo are two databases widely used by numerous researchers, like Menasce (2019), Jenny et al. (2018), Cunningham et al. (2018), Sylvester and Rennie (2017), Stroh (2017), Shabir (2017), and Owens (2016). The resulting database contained 103 different esports games and is exhibited in Table no. 3.

Table no. 1 – Characteristics of sample 1's esports sponsors

ID	Industry	Interviewee position	Year of foundation	Years sponsoring esports	Current no. of sponsorships					Total no. of sponsorships					No. of connected games [a]
					Players & teams	Commentators	Tournaments & leagues	Videogames	Other	Players & teams	Commentators	Tournaments & leagues	Videogames	Other	
EES1	Gaming chair	Country General Manager in Brazil, Portugal, Spain, and UK	2010s	7	≥6	3	≥6	1	≥6	≥11	≥11	≥11	1-2	≥11	41
EES2	Gaming computers, hardware, and peripherals	Esports and Partnerships Manager	1980s	8	2	0	3	0	3	≥11	1-2	5-6	9-10	≥11	10
EES3	Gaming computers and peripherals	Esports Specialist	2000s	≥10	≥6	1	≥6	0	3	≥11	1-2	≥11	≥11	≥11	34
EES4	Gaming computer hardware and peripherals	UK Marketing Manager	1990s	4	1	1	0	0	2	3-4	1-2	1-2	0	3-4	10
EES5	Gaming peripherals	Marketing Manager in Spain and Portugal	2000s	≥10	≥6	3	3	3	1	≥11	≥11	≥11	≥11	≥11	20
EES6	Gaming retail	Head of Partnerships	1980s	2	5	0	2	0	1	5-6	0	1-2	0	1-2	7
EES7	Gaming computer hardware and peripherals	Gaming Partnership Specialist	1990s	9	≥6	≥6	≥6	0	0	≥11	≥11	≥11	9-10	0	13
NEES1	Software development, computer hardware, consumer electronics, etc.	Brand Partnerships Manager	1970s	≤1	1	0	0	0	0	1-2	0	0	0	0	9
NEES2	Energy drink	Esports Manager	1980s	≥10	≥6	≥6	≥6	≥6	≥6	≥11	≥11	≥11	≥11	≥11	25
NEES3	Craft beer and brewing	Community, Partnerships, Sponsorships, and Major Events Manager	1990s	2	5	1	4	0	2	5-6	1-2	3-4	0	1-2	6
NEES4	Automotive	Head of Sponsoring and UEFA	1930s	3	1	0	1	0	1	1-2	0	1-2	1-2	1-2	5
NEES5	Online payments	EEA Chief Executive Officer	2000s	6	2	0	≥6	0	0	1-2	0	9-10	0	0	8
NEES6	Consumer electronics (smartphones)	Head of Global Brand Partnerships	2010s	3	1	0	0	1	0	1-2	0	0	1-2	0	11
NEES7	Insurance	Marketing Director, Media, and Sponsorships	1920s	2	≥6	0	2	1	0	1-2	0	3-4	5-6	0	6
NEES8	Conglomerate (consumer electronics, medical equipment, computer hardware, ships, automotive, apparel, chemicals, etc.)	Head of Mobile Marketing Partnerships in America	1930s	5	≥6	0	2	3	0	≥11	1-2	3-4	3-4	1-2	4

Note. EES = Endemic esports sponsor; NEES = Non-endemic esports sponsor. NEES7 and NEES3 work at a national level. All other EESs and NEESs work internationally.

[a] No. of connected games demonstrates the number of different videogames associated with the brands' sponsored entities (e.g. games featured in sponsored tournaments, games sponsored by the brand, games played by sponsored players and teams, and games linked to other sponsored entities).

Table no. 2 – Characteristics of sample 1's marketing agencies

ID	Interviewee position	Year of foundation	Years connected to esports	Provide marketing advice outside videogames	Approximate no. of assisted esports sponsors	No. of connected games [a]
MA1	Founder and Director	2010s	2	No	100	9
MA2	Founder and Director	2010s	3	No	10	21
MA3	Member of the Board of Directors	2010s	4	No	50	6
MA4	Founder and Director	2000s	11	No	100	35
MA5	Sr. Market Analyst and Esports Specialist	2000s	6	No	50	43
MA6	Account Director and Esports Specialist	1990s	4	Yes	15	15
MA7	Founder and Director	2010s	2	No	40	39

Note. MA = Marketing agency.
[a] No. of connected games demonstrates the number of the different videogames associated with the sponsors that the marketing agencies worked with.

Table no. 3 – Most viewed and highest prize money awarded esports videogames

Esports videogames	
Quake Champions	*Street Fighter V*
Pokémon: Let's Go, Pikachu! and Eevee!	*PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds*
StarCraft: Brood War	*Point Blank*
Forza Motorsport 7	*Painkiller*
Super Smash Bros. Melee	*World of WarCraft*
Brawlhalla	*Halo 2 Anniversary*
SMITE	*Madden NFL 2017*
Rocket League	*Super Smash Bros. for Wii U*
FIFA 20	*Apex Legends*
Madden NFL 2018	*Call of Duty: Ghosts*
Gears of War 4	*Call of Duty: Black Ops 4*
Mortal Kombat 11	*Call of Duty: Black Ops 2*
Clash Royale	*FIFA 17*
Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3	*Mortal Kombat X*
Super Smash Bros. Ultimate	*Counter-Strike*
Heroes of Newerth	*Pokémon Sword/Shield*
Defense of the Ancients	*Halo 4*
Pro Evolution Soccer 2017	*Dead or Alive 4*
Quake 4	*World in Conflict*
Shadowverse	*FIFA 13*
Fortnite	*World of Tanks*
NBA 2K18	*Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare*
Halo: Reach	*Auto Chess*
Clash of Clans	*Halo 5: Guardians*
Old School Runescape	*Arena of Valor*
Paladins	*FIFA 18*
TEPPEN	*Call of Duty: Black Ops*
KartRider	*Halo: Combat Evolved*
H1Z1	*Teamfight Tactics*
Halo 3	*Magic: The Gathering Arena*
Project Gotham Racing 3	*Gwent*
WarCraft III	*FIFA Online 3*
F1 2019	*FIFA 19*
Heroes of the Storm	*Ultra Street Fighter IV*

Esports videogames	
Call of Duty: Black Ops III	*Age of Empires II*
Counter-Strike: Global Offensive	*Turbo Racing League*
Street Fighter V: Arcade Edition	*Dota 2*
Injustice 2	*Counter-Strike Online*
Vainglory	*rFactor 2*
Call of Duty: World War II	*Guild Wars 2*
Counter-Strike: Source	*Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*
Free Fire	*CrossFire*
Team Fortress 2	*Quake III Arena*
Overwatch	*Tekken 7*
Madden NFL 2013	*Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six: Siege*
Halo 2	*Blade & Soul*
Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare	*iRacing.com*
Call of Duty: Modern Warfare	*League of Legends*
Attack on Titan Tribute Game	*StarCraft II*
Magic: The Gathering Online	*PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds Mobile*
Super Street Fighter IV Arcade Edition	*Hearthstone*
Quake Live	

Note. Table based on data from Esports Earnings (2020) and Newzoo (2020).

Due to esports fans' elevated rapport with online environments, data was collected through an online survey. The questionnaire was mostly closed-ended and was applied via self-recruitment and self-administration. It was developed in the online survey website Google Forms, a digital platform recommended by research specialists like Cohen *et al.* (2018). Participation requests, accompanied by a link to the online questionnaire in Google Forms, were posted in 263 Discord channels and 392 subreddits. The questionnaire opened with a filter yes/no item asking "Do you regularly watch and/or participate in esports?" Those who selected "No" were automatically excluded. Subsequently, in addition to asking demographic questions, participants were asked the yes/no question "Is there any brand that you started liking more because they sponsor esports?" Those who answered "Yes" were asked the open-ended question "What brands did you start liking more because they sponsor esports? (Use commas to separate the brands and list only those that come to your mind right now)". Participants were asked to separate the brands by commas to facilitate the data analysis procedure. The last item of the survey asked participants the optional open-ended question "Would you like to add anything else about what was addressed in this survey? (Optional)" This questionnaire was pretested on 167 esports fans, from subreddits and Discord channels related to esports, from 14 April to 25 May 2019. Sample 2's empirical data collection began on 29 June and ended on 3 December 2019. Table no. 4 presents sample 2's demographic characteristics.

The demographic characteristics of sample 2 appear to be in line with the literature's data on the esports population. Sample 2 was 92.7% male, which is quite similar to the 92.4% reported by Billings *et al.* (2019) and the 90% indicated by Zolides (2015). The sample also had an average age of 23.05, which is in sync with the 18 to 25 presented by Mooney (2018) and close to the mean age of 26 stated by Nielsen Esports (2017). Since there is scant reliable literature on esports, it was not possible to compare the remaining demographic data.

Table no. 4 – Esports fans' demographics

|	Valid	No answer	Valid %	Mean	SD	Mode
			N = 5,638			
Age	5,412	226		23.05	6.062	18
Gender	5,560	78				
Female	407		7.3			
Male	5,153		92.7			
Education	5,497	141				
6th grade or less	11		.2			
7th to 12th grade	2,178		39.6			
Bachelor degree	2,332		42.4			
Master degree	525		9.6			
PhD	90		1.6			
Post-doctorate	16		.3			
Other	345		6.3			
Marital status	5,510	128				
Single	4,056		73.6			
Cohabiting	932		16.9			
Married	480		8.7			
Divorced	33		.6			
Widowed	9		.2			
Employment status	5,527	111				
Student	2,720		49.2			
Employed	2,293		41.5			
Homemaker	40		.7			
Unemployed	324		5.9			
Retired	17		.3			
Other	133		2.4			
Ethnicity	5,477	161				
American Indian or Alaska Native	71		1.3			
Asian	824		15			
Black or African American	147		2.7			
Hispanic, Latino or Spanish origin	421		7.7			
Middle Eastern or North African	116		2.1			
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	38		.7			
White	4,255		77.7			
Other	197		3.6			
Region	5,553	85				
Africa	32		.6			
Asia	322		5.8			
Europe	1,860		33.5			
North America	3,013		54.3			
Oceania	191		3.4			
South America	135		2.4			

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

Because of the lack of reliable literature on esports sponsorships, this study focused on only asking participants the most vital questions. This was done so that the small number of questions would attract a larger number of participants and thus enhance the relevance and significance of the results. IBM SPSS Statistics 25 was used to analyse quantitative data and NVivo 10 to assist in the analysis of qualitative data. Sensitive information and data which could be used to track or identify any member of the sample (e.g. company name, interviewee name, and the specific year of foundation) were either excluded or altered to abide by the social research standards of confidentiality. For sample 1, the organization was both the unit of observation and the unit of analysis. For sample 2, the unit of observation was the individual and the unit of analysis was the organization.

4. RESULTS

The general results confirmed H_1 that sponsoring esports leads to an improvement of the brand image of the esports sponsor. Although the fans' empirical data only somewhat supported the hypothesis, the experts' empirical data strongly supported it.

As Figure no. 1 shows, all experts (i.e. 100%; $n = 22/22$) were in accordance with the statement that sponsoring esports leads to an improved brand image. This strongly supported the hypothesis. The opinions were evenly distributed, except for "Strongly agree" (i.e. 18.2%; $n = 4/22$), which was the least selected option that received votes. This shows that, despite every expert believing that esports sponsorships benefit brand image, they had an overall low to medium level of confidence with their stance and only a small portion was very confident about this. Also, since the percentages of non-endemic and endemic sponsors who considered this as a benefit were equal (i.e. 100% or $n = 8/8$ non-endemic brands and 100% or $n = 7/7$ endemic brands), it is believed that esports sponsorships might equally benefit the brand image of both endemic and non-endemic sponsor.
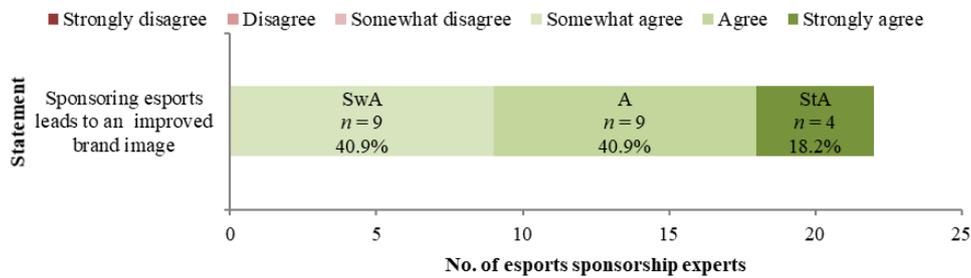
Note. $N = 22$; Valid $n = 22$; Missing $n = 0$. StD = Strongly disagree; D = Disagree; SwD = Somewhat disagree; SwA = Somewhat agree; A = Agree; StA = Strongly agree.

Figure no. 1 – Experts' opinion on whether sponsoring esports improves brand image

It was also possible to identify more arguments from experts in favour of the statement than against it or defending that it depends (i.e. 18 vs 10 vs 10, respectively). The most relevant quotes are thematically categorized in Table no. 5.

Table no. 5 – Experts' most relevant quotes on how esports improve the sponsors' brand image

Theme	ID	Quotes agreeing
Passionate audience	EES6	"If you do it the right way, that community will champion your brand and support your brand better than almost any other community out there"
	MA6	"Esports is mostly young people and they're highly engaged, so you are supporting something that's very close to their hearts"
More positivism in social networks	EES7	"We noticed that fans became more positive on social media when talking about our brand in the context of esports"
Enhanced validation	EES1	"What it gives is validation. You know? You can say 'Oh, I have a Razer mouse'"
Enhanced relevancy	NEES1	"By connecting [NEES1] in a really relevant way, leveraging our technology and telling interesting stories, we feel that makes [NEES1] more relevant and helps our brand image among those different target audiences"
Enhanced coolness	NEES5	"Could be the benefit of coolness. . . . [Esports are] a good way because they're cool. . . . You could look good to the broader media and all that. You know, you're looking cool, you're in a very trendy industry and all that"
Brand rejuvenation and attraction of younger consumers	NEES5	"Either if you're an outdated brand that has a lot to gain from esports or if you're a brand that appeals to more senior ages and you want to go to younger ages . . . they're a good way"
	MA3	"Sponsoring in esports allows, again, to improve the brand image and in front of a new audience. As for the old audience, it might also be useful because it provides an image of an innovative company that supports new trends"
	MA6	"The engagement positions your brand as innovative, as younger, and as more digital. Just by entering into an esports sponsorship, you're already doing something for your brand image"
	MA7	"It reflects a rejuvenation or young lifestyle. So, no matter if you're talking Coca-Cola, or Microsoft, or Uber, or anything like that . . . definitely gives you a younger touch because there's still the combination of stigma and society that puts gaming more towards the younger ages than the older. . . . It always has this vibrant rejuvenating thing, that's a 100% given with brand image"
Aligning with consumer interests	NEES7	"The goal is always, whether it's baseball, basketball, or League of Legends, is that we want to align ourselves with a passion-point of the consumer or audience that we're going after. And so, aligning ourselves with something that you're passionate about hopefully has the rub-off effect of making our brand and our brand image look better"
Improved brand image in general	MA5	"Doing the right type of activation that resonates with esports fans . . . leads to a very strong and improved brand image. We've seen brands that have gone into esports, done activations that resonated very well with fans, DHL did that, Mercedes, some other brands, and those have had a really big positive language and positive sentiment around them in online communities, on social media, etc. So the ones that have done it well, 100%"

Theme	ID	Quotes disagreeing
Lack of relevant-added value	EES6	"Many brands will be blacklisted and earn a decreased brand image by sponsoring esports if they do not improve the experiences of the gaming community as a result of their sponsorship"
Incorrect activations	EES6	"There's a lot of brands that can sponsor esports and it hurts their brand, because they didn't do it right. . . . There's a lot of brands that got into esports that wish they never got into it because they did it wrong"
	MA7	"Often brands that do not understand how marketing should be done or could be done in esports, I would say they also have certain brand damage . . . Lidl or Tesco, I don't remember, one of those had a fun project, which was called something like Game Sniper, or Stream Sniper . . . you, as a parent, could hire someone that kills your kid online all the time until it gets so frustrating that they go away from their PC and go to lunch . . . Everybody smashed that brand for doing this, because in essence it's cyberbullying. So yes you get your kid to lunch, but he's traumatized . . . That's a big issue and your brand does not want to be associated with that. So it took like, 2 weeks of outrage over the media"
Esports fans can be	MA4	"You're doing a half-time show at the Super Bowl, if your advert is not so good . . . somebody might do a couple of Twitter posts that says 'What the hell was that?', but it's forgotten about,

Theme	ID	Quotes disagreeing
unforgiving		it's done. In esports, because of Reddit, because the audience is so hyper-socially connected, they'll never forget it, and they will look to flame you, and your brand, and your image into the ground, and actually they don't give up that easily"
	MA7	"The internet never forgets . . . the damaging memes that are getting created . . . they live on for years. . . . Once you screw up with the internet it's really though and expensive to get back on track"
Disreputable behaviour	EES1	"You have to be very careful with what you're doing as it can even damage your brand. . . . There was a brand that sponsored an esports girl. The girl posted a picture on Twitter and a guy posted a comment teasing her. Then she replied to him by saying 'This is why every man is trash'. . . . Some people from Brazil saw the girl's post and sent it to her sponsor and said 'Here is the person you're sponsoring, isn't your target-group male?'. The sponsor cancelled the girl's sponsorship. But then other people came to the sponsor and said 'A bunch of guys do stupid things and you don't cancel their sponsorship, but you cancel a girl's sponsorship?'. So now the brand is receiving backlash from both ends. . . . Sometimes you stand there not knowing what to do. It's very complicated"
	EES5	"It's not always improved . . . For example, OpTic Gaming . . . had an issue with one of their Counter-Strike players because he was caught cheating in one of the events and that type of thing affects obviously the sponsorship itself because at the end of the day you sponsor a team that you expect a good reputation from, and then this type of thing happens"
Society's negative view of videogames	EES2	"If you're in a mainstream education industry and you sponsor esports, you know, some very traditional people might not view it positively"
Target the right audience	EES4	"If you're targeting women, moms for example… it's not"

Theme	ID	Quotes indicating that it depends
Sponsorship strategy	EES6	"Is entirely dependent on how the sponsor activates in the space. Not solely by the act of sponsorship. . . . If you do it the right way I absolutely agree, if you do it the wrong way, I absolutely disagree"
	NEES5	"It all depends . . . [if] someone who's approaching esports have done their homework, they know why they want to be in esports, they recognize internally, they have their story to tell, not just to the esports public but internally as well, they have their own narrative as to why they're in esports, and they understand it, and it's not just because it's really cool to have our brand in front of 15 thousand young adults and all that, or because CEO nephew plays Counter-Strike or something like that"
	MA4	"When done correctly, it can improve. . . . You have a problem using esports for brand image that you don't have with other traditional sponsorships purely because the audience will love you or hate you, whereas in traditional sports they either love you or they just ignore you"
Brand type	EES2	"Depends on what industry you're in or what company you are"
Target audience	EES4	"Depends on . . . who you want to target"

Note. . . . = edited cut

Regarding the fans, although the results indicated that most fans did not start liking a brand more because of it sponsoring esports (i.e. 67.5%; $n = 3,804/5,638$), a significant number did (i.e. 32.5%; $n = 1,834/5,638$). From this latter group, the average fan perceived more positively 1.8 brands after they began sponsoring esports. And, with a standard deviation of 1.384, roughly 68% of the fans had a more positive impression of 0.4 to 3.2 brands after they activated esports sponsorships.

Besides showing the fans' 100 most well-perceived esports sponsors, Table no. 6 showed a somewhat good balance regarding endemic and non-endemic sponsors (i.e. $n = 42/100$ and $n = 58/100$, respectively). Yet, most of these brands were mentioned by an insignificant percentage of fans (e.g. the 100th most well-perceived brand, Panda Global,

was cited by only 0.2% of the sample). Hence, to acquire more significant and reliable information, we limited the analysis to just the brands mentioned by at least 2% of the sample (i.e. 18 brands). From these, only 33.3% (i.e. $n = 6/18$) were non-endemic and 66.6% (i.e. $n = 12/18$) were endemic. Here there is no longer a balance, with endemic esports sponsors being much more prevalent. To enhance the reliability of the results even further we calculated the sum of the number of times all 100 brands were mentioned (i.e. 2,834) and used that figure to calculate the percentage of more well-perceived non-endemic and endemic sponsors. In total, endemic sponsors were slightly more positively-perceived than non-endemic ones (i.e. 55.5% or $n = 1,574/2,834$ versus 44.5% or $n = 1,260/2,834$, respectively). Thus, we can safely deduct that, in general, endemic esports sponsors tend to be somewhat more positively-perceived than non-endemic ones. However, it should also be mentioned that the most mentioned sponsor was non-endemic (i.e. Red Bull; 17.2%; $n = 316/1,834$) and it was significantly more mentioned than the second one, which was endemic (i.e. Logitech; 11.9%; $n = 219/1,834$).

Table no. 6 – Fans' 100 most positively-perceived esports sponsors

Sponsor	Type	*n*	*%*	Sponsor	Type	*n*	*%*
Red Bull	NE	316	17.2	PayPal	NE	12	.7
Logitech	E	219	11.9	Champion	NE	11	.6
Intel	E	146	8	HTC	NE	11	.6
HyperX	E	145	7.9	KIA	NE	11	.6
Razer	E	125	6.8	Nissan	NE	11	.6
CORSAIR	E	101	5.5	Brisk	NE	10	.5
Monster Energy	NE	95	5.2	Adidas	NE	9	.5
G Fuel	E	90	4.9	Cup Noodles	NE	9	.5
Coca-Cola	NE	81	4.4	Marvel	NE	9	.5
Steelseries	E	68	3.7	Paris Saint-Germain	NE	9	.5
Alienware	E	61	3.3	Rocket Mortgage	NE	9	.5
HP OMEN	E	60	3.3	Vodafone	E	9	.5
ASUS ROG	E	58	3.2	Axe	NE	8	.4
State Farm	NE	56	3.1	Bose	E	8	.4
T-Mobile	E	55	3	GEICO	NE	8	.4
Mountain Dew	NE	52	2.8	Kennedy Space Center	NE	8	.4
BenQ	E	49	2.7	Microsoft	NE	8	.4
Toyota	NE	46	2.5	NZXT	E	8	.4
Honda	NE	34	1.9	Renault	NE	8	.4
ZOWIE	E	33	1.8	Strafe	E	8	.4
AMD	E	30	1.6	Bud Light	NE	7	.4
MSI	E	30	1.6	Jack & Jones	NE	7	.4
NVIDIA	E	30	1.6	Nintendo	E	7	.4
Acer	E	27	1.5	QANBA	E	7	.4
Mercedes-Benz	NE	25	1.4	SAP	NE	7	.4
ASTRO gaming	E	24	1.3	Snickers	NE	7	.4
Audi	NE	24	1.3	Dell	E	6	.3
Mastercard	NE	24	1.3	HEB	NE	6	.3
Twitch	E	24	1.3	Lenovo	E	6	.3
OnePlus	NE	23	1.3	Pepsi	NE	6	.3
Samsung	NE	23	1.3	Schalke 04	NE	6	.3
Dr Pepper	NE	21	1.1	Sony	E	6	.3
Secretlab	E	21	1.1	Arby's	NE	5	.3
Razor	NE	20	1.1	Cloud9	E	5	.3

Sponsor	Type	*n*	*%*	Sponsor	Type	*n*	*%*
Sour Patch Kids	NE	20	1.1	Doritos	NE	5	.3
iBUYPOWER	E	19	1	Fanatec	E	5	.3
LOUIS VUITTON	NE	19	1	FYM Hot Sauce	NE	5	.3
Nike	NE	19	1	Grubhub	NE	5	.3
BMW	NE	18	1	Hot6 Energy	NE	5	.3
Gillette	NE	17	.9	McDonald's	NE	5	.3
Scuf Gaming	E	17	.9	ROCCAT	E	5	.3
Betway	NE	16	.9	Team Liquid	E	5	.3
Sennheiser	E	16	.9	Totino's	NE	5	.3
Jack In The Box	NE	15	.8	Afreeca	E	4	.2
Puma	NE	14	.8	Hitbox	E	4	.2
Chipotle	NE	13	.7	JIN AIR	NE	4	.2
DHL	NE	13	.7	Marketplace.tf	E	4	.2
Turtle Beach	E	13	.7	Old Spice	NE	4	.2
DXRacer	E	12	.7	OPPO	NE	4	.2
Jersey Mike's	NE	12	.7	Panda Global	E	4	.2

Note. $N = 5,638$; Valid $n = 1,834$; Missing $n = 3,804$; E = Endemic; NE = Non-endemic. For this study, brands advertised as gaming-related or whose majority of product lines are requited for playing esports were categorized as endemic; all other brands were categorized as non-endemic.

From the optional open-ended item that asked fans to provide their views on esports improving the brand image of the companies that sponsors it, a total of 69 fans provided comments supporting the hypothesis and 3 fans presented comments that neither supported nor disproved the hypothesis. Table no. 7 presents and thematically categorizes the most relevant quotes.

Table no. 7 – Fans' most relevant quotes on how esports improve the sponsors' brand image

Theme	Fan ID	Quotes agreeing
Improved brand image	87	"Seeing brands that I like in esports would probably make me like the brand more."
	229	"I respect non-tech brands when they support esports by sponsoring them."
	256	"I have a lot more trust in brands that sponsor esports."
	273	"My only positive feeling towards sponsors is that 'nice, this sponsor is helping allow this pro I like continue doing his thing'"
Passionate audience	33	"There are still a lot of tournaments run by the community, proving the passion of the esports community"
Audience accepts sponsorships	9	"I don't think there are too many sponsors in esports right now"
	30	"There need to be sponsors for the lower tier scenes of esport titles to ensure and incentivize new/young players to focus on their esports career"
	33	"More advertisers supporting these events will take the strain off of the community, allowing the sport the chance to prosper instead of living on a season by season basis (for many games)"
	62	"Sponsorships for events are nessisary to keep them free"
	65	"Sponsors should include more products and services that aren't strictly related to computing/gaming. (soap, cars, vacations, clothes, etc.)"
	109	"One minor thing I would like to be focused on from all parties in esports, especially when it comes to tournament organisation, is the importance of sponsorship and the scene's reliance on it to keep a steady growth . . . one would seldom understand how much money is needed to provide a sufficient product and keep the scene interesting"
	191	"Without ads we wouldn't really be able to support tournaments and such at the levels we can now. Just like conventional sports"
	214	"I think the esports industry needs more money, and i have no problems watching ads"

Theme	Fan ID	Quotes agreeing
	226	"I think most people who watch esports understand that everyone needs to make money and that the sponsors make that happen"
	252	"I hope that these results motivate sponsors that we, the esports fans, love to support the brands that support the games we love!"
	259	"The amount of sponsors can definitely increase since it usually means a tournament has more money either for price pools or being able to set up facilities and catering for the players"
	273	"I understand they can make or break a pro's ability to play a game sustainably that he's invested his life into being skilled at, as tournament winnings usually are not present or stable enough to rely on, so my sympathy is always with pros' interests above all, and it is evident over these past few years as esports has been ramping up, that pros really need sponsors"

Theme	Fan ID	Neutral quotes
Sponsorships are a necessary evil	73	"Sponsors are like a necessary cancer. Teams need them to function"
	104	"It's a sort of necessary evil to have quality events and a lot of them"
	276	"I don't really care what sponsors do, I know they are a necessary evil under capitalism"

Note. . . . = edited cut.

5. DISCUSSION

Overall, the results from the experts were twofold. On the one hand, all of them believe that sponsoring esports can improve the sponsors' brand image. On the other hand, they defended that there are numerous variables at play that can heavily influence if, and how much, the brand image will be benefited or damaged. The experts' arguments clearly justify why most had a medium or low confidence level with their stance. According to them, the effect on the sponsors' brand image is dependent on the sponsorship activation method, the target audience, and the brand type. For instance, a worldwide popular endemic brand with a wide target audience is prone to have large funds to invest in a good sponsorship and, thus, is more likely to improve their brand image. However, a small, niche, and non-endemic brand will probably lack funds to conduct a very elaborate sponsorship and, thus, is more likely to damage their brand image. The experts' arguments also allowed to determine that validity, relevancy, coolness, and rejuvenation are the main elements of the brand image that will be enhanced if the sponsorship is successful. These elements correctly portray the youth and innovation of the esports market.

The experts' arguments indicated that the esports fans' high engagement and passion are a double-edged-sword. If the fan-base likes a sponsorship, it will proactively praise the sponsor on social media, and personally, to others. Yet, if the fan-base's likes do not correlate with the sponsorship's message, it will proactively criticize the sponsor and may even attempt to damage the sponsor's image by spreading negative messages on digital platforms and social media. It was also verified that, similarly to sports, disreputable behaviour from the sponsored-party can damage the esports sponsors' brand image. According to the experts, it is difficult for sponsors to prevent their sponsored pro-gamers from cheating and to control how they act on social media. The fact pro-players are young and can gain mass popularity in a very short instance makes them even more likely to lack professionalism and business acumen.

Regarding the fans, the results indicated that roughly a third of the fan-base perceives more positively roughly 1 to 3 brands as a result of them sponsoring esports, which is quite significant. Bearing in mind the size of the esports audience, if one-third of fans perceive a sponsor more positively, it will be highly benefited. Also, more endemic esports sponsors tend

to have their brand image improved than non-endemic ones, but only by a small margin. In the same vein, the fan quotes strongly indicated that the fan-base accepts and understands that, for the esports industry to maintain its current large scale, they need sponsors. Therefore, because it is unlikely that esports sponsorships will be perceived as bothersome by the fan-base, it is improbable that sponsorship unacceptance will occur and damage the sponsors' brand image.

Both the fans and experts' results were mostly in conformity with the literature. The fans and experts were in sync with Bouaoui (2016), Franke (2015), Korpimies (2017), Seo (2016), Shabir (2017), and Stroh (2017), who proposed that sponsoring esports might improve the sponsors' brand image. NEES5, MA3, MA6, and MA7 were in line with Stroh (2017), who stressed that esports sponsors tend to be perceived as more modern. EES6, MA6, and Fan ID 33 were in accordance with Nielsen Esports (2017), Stroh (2017), and Winnan (2016), who noted how passionate the esports fan-base is. Fans ID 9, 30, 33, 62, 65, 109, 191, 214, 226, 252, 259, and 273 were in conformity with Franke (2015), Nielsen Esports (2017), Shabir (2017), and Stroh (2017), who indicated that esports fans tend to accept and have positive attitudes towards sponsors. Just like Fans ID 73, 104, and 276 stated that esports sponsors are a necessary evil, Stroh (2017) commented that, despite the fan-base not seeing sponsors as altruistic, they understand they are an economic necessity. Also, just like the results revealed that both endemic and non-endemic sponsors can have their brand image benefited at similar levels, Aevi (2018), Lokhman *et al.* (2018), Newzoo (2016), Nichols (2017), Nielsen Esports (2017), Shabir (2017), and Stroh (2017), pointed out that the fan-base tends to welcome both endemic and non-endemic brands.

The results are highly significant and relevant for every existing or potential esports sponsor, especially those wanting to know how esports sponsorships can affect their brand image. Given that every member of the diverse sample of experts – which comprised endemic and non-endemic sponsors, as well as marketing agencies – agreed that sponsoring esports can improve brand image, we believe that both endemic and non-endemic sponsors can benefit from this. The fan' data also supported this. Hence, non-endemic brands can confidently sponsor esports without fear of being negatively perceived or seen as out-of-place. This, of course, does not mean that every brand is accepted into esports as Winnan (2016) noted that brands from the porn or unhealthy lifestyle industries may receive some resistance. This is in line with EES2's comment that sponsors will have their image benefited depending on their brand type.

The fact that a third of fans start having better perceptions of brands that sponsor esports and most experts had a medium or low agreement level with the statement means that most brands will probably not improve their brand image solely by activating any kind of esports sponsorship. As EES6 alluded, the sponsorships must bring relevant-added value to fans. Simple logo placement and traditional activation methods will probably not suffice. Similarly, EES6 and MA7 defended that poorly executed sponsorships will likely backfire. Ergo, although this research confirmed that sponsoring esports benefit the sponsors' brand image, this is more likely to happen to the sponsors that correctly develop and implement their sponsorships. To achieve this, they must thoroughly study the esports industry and its fans prior to starting to develop the sponsorship, ensure that their messaging is in sync with the fan-base's perspectives and likes, and bring relevant-added value to the fans (e.g. comedy, relevant esports information, and commercial offers). By doing this, sponsors will greatly increase their chances of improving their image.

The fact that sponsoring esports enhances the brands' relevancy, validity, coolness, and rejuvenates them justifies why this market is attracting so many companies. Esports are a

technologic-focused phenomenon; hence it is easily seen as a vanguard in entertainment. Because of this, every brand that successfully connects with esports will benefit from the positive brand image transfer effect and be perceived as also being a vanguard brand. This can be quite appealing, for example, for both the non-endemic company that wants to be seen as innovative and focused on the youth and for the endemic company that is struggling to keep its relevancy in the technologic market. Therefore, considering how cheap it is to sponsor esports (when compared to most sports), brands that need to reform or renew their image should see esports as a cost-effective, efficient, and attractive option, provided that the sponsorship is correctly conducted and esports fans comprise part of their target-consumer group.

The double-edged sword effect of having a highly engaged and passionate fan-base implies that companies looking to sponsor esports should very thoroughly plan their sponsorships. Particularly, they must acquire the highest possible amount of esport expertise prior to planning any kind of partnership. Concerning the brands' susceptibility to disreputable behaviour from the sponsored-entities, companies should partner with entities or pro-players with a proven long history of positive and professional behaviour and avoid partnering with those who are still too recent, unpredictable, and unknown. This way brands can make an informed decision of who are the most professional and beneficial entities to sponsor.

6. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study was heavily limited by the small number of scientific research and reliable literature on esports sponsorships and its brand image benefits to sponsors. The inexistence of a complete list or database of the people that watch esports or the brands that sponsor it also made it impossible to conduct a probabilistic data collection, which might have affected the empirical data's reliability.

This research offered a substantial foundation for future studies to build on. It would be interesting to analyse the variables that can affect if, and how much, brand image will be improved (e.g. sponsorship strategy, brand type, and target audience). A better understanding is needed of the elements from the brand image that will be mostly enhanced (i.e. validity, relevancy, coolness, and rejuvenation). The double-edged-sword effect of having a very passionate and engaged audience requires a dedicate study. Lastly, academia should study and test strategies that esports sponsors can use to ensure that their brand image is improved (e.g. bringing relevant-added value) and to shield them from threats like the negative effects of disreputable behaviour from sponsored entities.

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