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The Antecedents and Consequences of Sponsorship Image in E-Sports Sector

Thuy Thi Thu, Phung
Lecturer, Faculty of Sport Science, Ton Duc Thang University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
Trang Quang, Le
Lecturer, Faculty of Sport Science, Ton Duc Thang University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
Thu Thi Anh, Le
Student, Faculty of Sport Science, Ton Duc Thang University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Abstract:
In recent years, e-sports has gained significant attention, particularly due to the benefits it brings to organizations through sponsorships in e-sports tournaments. Therefore, the objective of this study is to investigate the influence of consumer perceptions of sponsorship, including event factors, sponsorship factors, and sponsor factors, on the mediator variable of sponsorship image in order to explore consumer sponsorship response. The research employed a quantitative method with a sample size of 237, and data analysis was conducted using Smart PLS 3.0. The results indicate that attitude towards the sponsor, team identification, and sponsor-event fit positively impact sponsor image. Furthermore, sponsorship image has a positive effect on consumer's favorability responses and purchase intention. These findings have important implications for e-sports managers and sponsors in enhancing sponsor image during their involvement in e-sports events and tournaments.

Keywords: Sponsorship image, purchase intention, e-sports, sports event

1. Introduction

E-sports, or electronic sports, was defined as "a form of sports where the primary aspects of the sport are facilitated by electronic systems; the input of players and teams as well as the output of the e-sports system are mediated by human-computer interfaces." (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017, pp. 211). This domain encompasses a wide range of games, from strategy games like "League of Legends" to first-person shooters like "Counter-Strike: Global Offensive" and sports simulations like "FIFA". The e-sports industry has grown exponentially, with viewership numbers and prize pools that rival traditional sports (Taylor, 2012) . The industry is supported by a robust infrastructure of professional players, teams, leagues, and event organizers, as well as a dedicated fanbase that engages with content through live-streaming platforms such as Twitch and YouTube Gaming. Moreover, sponsorship, in the context of e-sports, involves companies providing financial or material support to e-sports events, teams, or individual players in exchange for promotional opportunities and brand visibility. This symbiotic relationship benefits both parties: sponsors gain access to a highly engaged and targeted audience, while e-sports entities receive the necessary resources to enhance their operations and reach. Sponsorship can take many forms, including brand placements during broadcasts, logo displays on team jerseys, product placements, and exclusive content partnerships (Cliffe & Motion, 2005). The significance of sponsorship in e-sports cannot be overstated. For sponsors, e-sports represent a unique opportunity to connect with a predominantly young, tech-savvy, and hard-to-reach demographic. This audience is often more resistant to traditional advertising, making the immersive and integrated nature of e-sports sponsorships particularly effective. For the e-sports industry, sponsorship is a critical revenue stream that supports the growth and professionalization of the sport. It enables the organization of larger and more frequent events, better compensation for players, and overall enhancement of the viewing experience for fans.

The unprecedented growth of the e-sports industry has outpaced academic research, leaving a gap in comprehensive studies that address the specificities of e-sports sponsorships (Funk et al., 2018). While traditional sports sponsorship has been extensively studied, the unique characteristics of e-sports, such as its digital-native audience, virtual environments, and rapid technological advancements, demand focused research to uncover effective sponsorship strategies. Besides that, e-sports sponsorship represents a significant investment for brands aiming to engage with younger, more tech-savvy demographics (Freitas et al., 2020). These audiences are typically more resistant to traditional forms of advertising, which necessitates innovative approaches to capture their attention and foster brand loyalty. Understanding how sponsorship elements influence consumer perceptions and behaviors in e-sports can help brands optimize their marketing expenditures and achieve better returns on investment (Meenaghan, 2001). Moreover, the evolving nature of e-sports platforms and viewer engagement models creates an urgent need to study the effectiveness of sponsorship integration in these contexts. Unlike traditional sports, where sponsorship visibility and engagement methods are well-established, e-sports offers a more fragmented and dynamic landscape. This includes live-streaming integrations,

in-game advertisements, and interactive sponsorship activations that require tailored strategies to ensure authenticity and resonance with the audience. Furthermore, this research aims to fill the academic gap by providing empirical evidence on the antecedents and consequences of sponsorship image in e-sports. By examining how consumer perceptions of sponsorship encompassing event-related factors, sponsorship attributes, and sponsor characteristics impact the overall image of the sponsor, the study will offer valuable insights into optimizing sponsorship strategies. These insights will be beneficial not only for academic purposes but also for practitioners seeking to leverage e-sports sponsorships effectively to enhance brand image and drive consumer engagement. In conclusion, the rapid evolution and unique characteristics of the e-sports industry, coupled with the significant investments in sponsorships, underscore the importance of this research. By addressing the specific dynamics of e-sports sponsorship, this study aims to contribute to both theoretical knowledge and practical applications in the field of sports marketing, ultimately supporting the strategic development of sponsorship activities in this burgeoning sector.

Based on that, this study proposed a research objective to investigate the antecedents and consequences of sponsor image in e-sports events, focusing on how consumer perceptions of various sponsorship elements, event factors, sponsorship characteristics, and sponsor attributes influence the overall image of the sponsor. Additionally, it explores the subsequent effects of sponsorship image on consumer responses, including favorability towards the sponsor and purchase intentions. By employing a quantitative research methodology and analyzing data from a substantial sample size, this study seeks to provide comprehensive insights that can inform both academic research and practical applications in the field of e-sports marketing.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

2.1. Sports Sponsorship

Sponsorship in traditional sports has been extensively studied, revealing its significant role in marketing strategies. Sports sponsorship is defined as a mutually beneficial business relationship between a sponsor and a sports entity, where the sponsor provides financial or in-kind support in exchange for access to the commercial potential associated with the sport (Clark et al., 2009). This relationship leverages the emotional connection that fans have with sports, aiming to transfer the positive attributes of the sport or athlete to the sponsor's brand. Numerous studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of sports sponsorship in enhancing brand awareness, improving brand image, and driving consumer behavior. According to Gwinner and Eaton (1999), the congruence between the sponsor and the sport significantly affects consumer perceptions and attitudes toward the sponsor. Simultaneously, Meenaghan (2001) emphasized that sponsorship can create strong brand associations and foster brand loyalty, provided that the sponsorship activities are perceived as relevant and authentic by the target audience. The principles of sports sponsorship extend to the realm of e-sports, though with distinct considerations given the digital and interactive nature of this platform. E-sports sponsorship involves brands aligning themselves with e-sports events, teams, or players to reach a highly engaged and youthful audience.

E-sports sponsorship has emerged as a crucial element in the financial and promotional ecosystem of competitive gaming. Unlike traditional sports, e-sports fans are predominantly digital natives who consume content online, making digital engagement strategies crucial for effective sponsorship. The unique environment of e-sports necessitates an understanding of how sponsorships are perceived and how they impact sponsor image. While traditional sports sponsorship benefits from physical presence and direct audience engagement, e-sports sponsorship must navigate the complexities of virtual integration and digital brand placement. Huettermann et al. (2023) have begun to explore these dynamics, indicating that successful e-sports sponsorship requires a deep understanding of the gaming community and the creation of authentic, value-adding experiences for fans. This growth is fueled by the appeal of e-sports to a younger, digital-native audience that is typically more elusive for traditional advertisers. The role of sponsorship in e-sports extends beyond mere financial support; it also involves strategic partnerships that can enhance the viewer experience and increase engagement. Sponsors often integrate their brands into the gaming experience through in-game advertisements, branded content, and exclusive sponsorship activations during live streams and events. These integrations are designed to appear seamless and enhance the overall entertainment value, thereby fostering a positive association with the brand. Research has shown that effective e-sports sponsorship can lead to significant increases in brand awareness, brand loyalty, and purchase intentions among fans. This is largely due to the high level of engagement and emotional investment that fans have with e-sports, which translates into a greater receptivity to sponsorship messages. Moreover, the interactive nature of e-sports allows sponsors to create more personalized and immersive brand experiences, which are more effective in capturing the attention of the digital-savvy audience.

2.2. Hypotheses Development

The status of an e-sports event refers to its prestige, recognition, and perceived importance within the gaming community (Speed & Thompson, 2000). High-status events often attract large audiences, significant media coverage, and top-tier teams, which in turn enhances the visibility and perceived value of sponsors associated with these events. The prestige and recognition of an e-sports event significantly contribute to the enhancement of the sponsorship image. Research suggests that sponsorships linked to high-status events can enhance the sponsor's image by association, as the positive attributes of the event are transferred to the sponsor. In the e-sports context, status events like the League of Legends World Championship or The International for Dota 2 are regarded as pinnacle tournaments that attract massive viewership, media attention, and the best teams globally. The association with such prestigious events can significantly enhance a sponsor's image, as the positive attributes of these events, such as high competitive standards, large prize pools,

and extensive fan engagement, are transferred to the sponsor. Consequently, sponsors of high-status e-sports events are perceived as leading brands within the industry, benefiting from the event's prestige and the strong emotional connection fans have with these marquee tournaments.

Sponsor-event fit refers to the perceived congruence between the sponsor and the event, including aspects such as shared values, target audience alignment, and product relevance (Gwinner, 1997). A strong fit can enhance the perceived authenticity and effectiveness of the sponsorship, leading to more favorable consumer attitudes towards the sponsor. When the sponsor and event are well-matched, the sponsorship is seen as more credible and supportive of the event, positively impacting the sponsorship image. The concept of sponsor-event fit is particularly relevant in e-sports, where the alignment between a sponsor's brand and the event's characteristics is crucial. E-sports fans are highly engaged and discerning, often valuing authenticity and relevance. A sponsor that aligns well with the gaming culture, values, and interests of the audience is more likely to be accepted and appreciated. For instance, a gaming hardware company sponsoring an e-sports tournament would be seen as a natural and beneficial partnership, enhancing the sponsor's image as a key supporter of the e-sports ecosystem. On the other hand, a sponsor that appears out of place or inauthentic may struggle to achieve the same positive impact.

Attitude toward a sponsor, which includes consumer perceptions of the sponsor's reputation, trustworthiness, and corporate social responsibility (Kim et al., 2011), can significantly influence how the sponsorship is perceived. Positive attitudes toward the sponsor can enhance the overall image of the sponsorship, as consumers are more likely to view the sponsorship as a positive and supportive endeavor. Thus, it is posited that a positive attitude toward the sponsor will positively impact the sponsorship image. Particularly, e-sports audiences often have strong opinions about brands based on their previous interactions and experiences. Positive attitudes toward a sponsor, possibly derived from high-quality products, ethical business practices, or prior supportive engagements with the e-sports community, can lead to a more favorable sponsorship image.

*The ubiquity of sponsor*s refers to the extent to which a firm simultaneously engages in sponsorships (Speed & Thompson, 2000). High ubiquity can lead to increased brand recognition and familiarity, which can enhance the perceived legitimacy and prominence of the sponsor within the e-sports community. Ubiquity, or the widespread visibility of a sponsor, is particularly impactful in the digital realm of e-sports. Sponsors that maintain a strong presence across multiple platforms, such as social media, streaming services like Twitch, and within the games themselves, benefit from enhanced brand recognition and recall. This pervasive presence helps to build a robust and familiar sponsorship image. In e-sports, where fans consume content across various digital channels, a ubiquitous sponsor can effectively engage with the audience at multiple touchpoints, reinforcing the sponsor's commitment and relevance to the community.

Team identification is the extent to which fans feel a psychological connection and loyalty to a particular e-sports team (Wann, 2006). High levels of team identification can lead to more positive perceptions of sponsors who support the fan's preferred team, as the sponsorship is seen as a contributing factor to the team's success and sustainability. Team identification is a powerful factor in the e-sports industry, where fan loyalty to teams can be intense and personal. Fans who strongly identify with a team are more likely to support sponsors that back their favorite teams. These fans perceive the sponsorship as directly contributing to their team's success and stability. Indeed, if a major sponsor supports a popular e-sports team, fans of that team will likely develop positive feelings toward the sponsor, enhancing the sponsor's image. The emotional bond between the fans and their team amplifies the impact of the sponsorship, making team identification a critical variable in the sponsorship image equation.

Thus, this study proposed the following hypotheses:

- H(1): The status of the event positively impacts the sponsorship image.
- H(2): The sponsor-event fit positively impacts the sponsorship image.
- H(3): Attitude toward the sponsor positively impacts the sponsorship image.
- H(4): The ubiquity of the sponsor positively impacts the sponsorship image.
- H(5): Team identification positively impacts the sponsorship image.

Sponsorship image refers to the perceptions and attitudes that consumers form about a sponsor based on its association with a particular event or activity (Meenaghan, 2001). A positive sponsorship image can enhance brand equity, foster consumer loyalty, and ultimately drive purchase intentions (Smith, 2004). In traditional sports, the image of a sponsor is influenced by factors such as the fit between the sponsor and the sport, the visibility of the sponsorship, and the perceived sincerity of the sponsor's involvement (Olson, 2010). In e-sports, these factors are equally important. However, additional elements, such as the integration of sponsorship within the digital environment and the engagement tactics used to interact with the online audience, also play critical roles.

Sponsorship image plays a crucial role in the transfer of values, attributes, and associations from the sponsored event/team/athlete to the sponsor's brand. When fans develop a positive image of the sponsor through the sponsorship activity, these positive associations lead to increased favorability and liking towards the brand. The findings of the study conducted by Gwinner and Eaton (1999) demonstrated that a favorable sponsorship image significantly enhances consumer preferences and loyalty towards the sponsoring brand. In the context of e-sports, the sponsorship image is also shaped by how the sponsor integrates its image and activities into the event/tournament. When fans perceive a good fit, authenticity, and genuine support from the sponsor, they tend to develop greater affinity and higher evaluations of that brand. Additionally, the consistent and positive presence of the sponsor also contributes to reinforcing brand awareness and positive imagery among fans. Therefore, a favorable sponsorship image is expected to lead to increased favorability from consumers towards the sponsor's brand in the e-sports realm. Favorability refers to the overall positive attitude consumers have towards a sponsor, which is shaped by their perceptions of the sponsor's credibility, trustworthiness, and

relevance. When a sponsorship image is positive, it reflects well on the sponsor, making consumers more likely to develop favorable attitudes toward the sponsor (Speed & Thompson, 2000). This relationship has been validated in numerous studies, showing that the more positively consumers view a sponsor's image, the more favorable their overall attitudes toward the sponsor become (Gwinner, 1997).

Beyond its impact on consumer favorability, a favorable sponsorship image is also expected to drive purchase intentions for the sponsor's products/services. According to Meenaghan (2001), effective sponsorship activities help sponsors build strong brand associations, thereby enhancing the likelihood of consumers choosing to purchase their products. By linking the brand image with the values and passions of e-sports fans, sponsors can stimulate product needs and purchase intentions. Memorable and well-integrated sponsorship activations also help sponsors leave a positive imprint in consumers' minds, thereby boosting future purchase intentions. In addition to the direct impact of sponsorship image, consumers' favorability towards the sponsoring brand is also considered a key factor influencing purchase intentions. According to consumer attitude theory, when consumers have a strong liking and affinity for a brand, they tend to evaluate it more positively and exhibit higher intentions to choose its products (Martensen et al., 2007). This relationship has been consistently demonstrated in previous research on consumer behavior in the sports industry. In e-sports, fans' favorability towards sponsoring brands also plays a crucial role in driving product sales. When fans have a strong affinity and high regard for a particular sponsor, they tend to feel a closer connection and have a greater inclination to purchase products from that brand, especially those related to the e-sports they are passionate about. Therefore, this study suggested the following hypotheses:

- H(6): Sponsorship image positively impacts favorability
- H(7): Sponsorship image positively impacts purchase intention
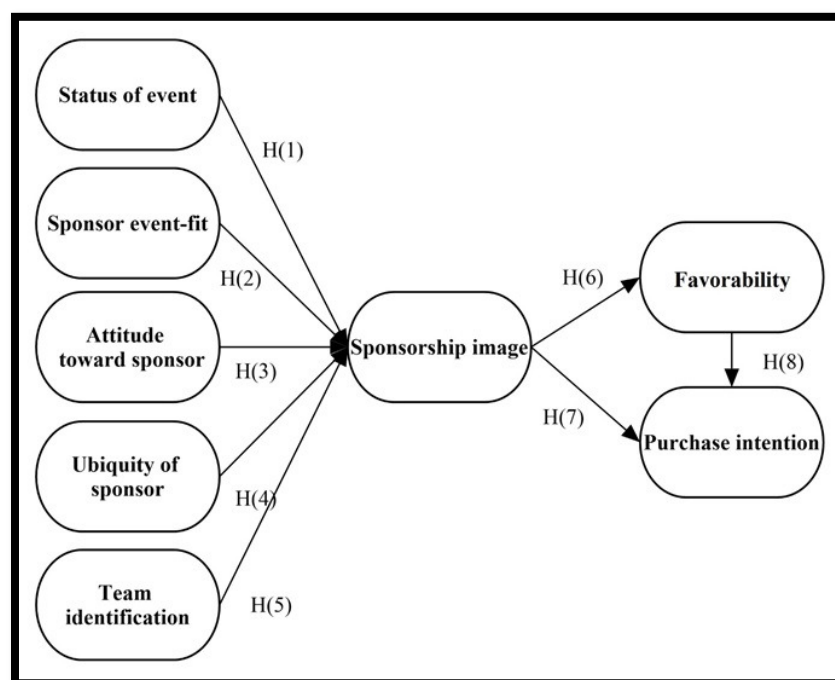- H(8): Favorability positively impacts purchase intention

Figure 1: Conceptual Model

3. Methodology

This study employs a quantitative research design to investigate the impact of various factors on the sponsorship image, favorability, and purchase intention in the context of e-sports. A structured survey was developed to collect data from e-sports enthusiasts, using established scales to measure the constructs of interest. The survey was administered online to ensure a wide and diverse sample of participants. The target population for this study consists of active e-sports fans who regularly engage with e-sports content, either through watching live streams, attending events, or participating in online discussions. Participants were recruited through social media platforms, e-sports forums, and online gaming communities to ensure that the sample is representative of the e-sports audience. The survey was designed based on established scales from prior research, with modifications to fit the e-sports context. A pilot test was conducted with 58 participants to refine the survey items for clarity and reliability. In the main phase, a total of 252 responses were collected over a period of two months. After screening for completeness and removing 15 invalid responses, 237 valid samples were used for data analysis.

4. Research Results

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the respondents. Out of the 237 valid responses, 53.6% were male and 46.4% were female. In terms of age distribution, the majority (75.8%) were between 18-25 years old, followed by 21.1% in the 26-35 age group, and only 3.1% above 35 years old. This age profile aligns with the typical demographic of

e-sports fans, which skews towards younger audiences. Regarding income levels, 74.3% of respondents reported a monthly income between $300 - $500, while 24.0% earned between $500 - $1000. Only a small fraction (1.7%) had an income exceeding $1000 per month. This income distribution suggests that the sample consisted primarily of students or young professionals with relatively modest incomes, which is consistent with the targeted demographic for e-sports viewership.

Classification	Respondents	
	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	127	53.6%
Female	110	46.4%
Age		
18–25 years old	168	75.8%
26–35 years old	62	21.1%
Above 35 years old	7	3.1%
Income		
300 – 500$	176	74.3%
> 500 – 1000$	57	24.0%
Higher than 1000$	4	1.7%
The Average Time Spent Watching E-Sports Per Week		
1 – 2 hours	46	19.4%
Over 2 – 4 hours	76	32.1%
Over 4 hours	115	48.5%
E-Sports Tournament Platforms		
Garena	162	68.3%
Tencent Games	39	16.4%
ONE E-sports	31	13.0%
E-sports Global	5	2.3%

Table 1: Respondents' Characteristics

Table 2 presents the findings related to the reliability and convergent validity of the research model, evaluated based on the criteria outlined by Hair et al. (2011). The factor loadings ranged between 0.753 and 0.913, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.7 (Chin, 1998), indicating strong relationships among the constructs. Furthermore, the composite reliability (CR) scores for each construct fell within the range of 0.867 to 0.929, surpassing the 0.7 benchmark, demonstrating satisfactory internal consistency reliability of the measurement scales. Convergent validity was assessed through the average variance extracted (AVE) values, which ranged from 0.640 to 0.767, meeting the criterion of AVE being greater than 0.5 (Chin, 1998; Höck et al., 2010). These results confirm that the measurement scales used in the study exhibited good reliability and convergent validity properties.

Variables/Items	Factor Loading	CR	AVE	VIF	R^2
Attitude to Sponsor (α = 0.707)		0.867	0.685		N/A
ATE1: As a fan, I have a good impression of the sponsors of this player/team.	0.823			1.535	
ATE2: Sponsors of this player/team succeed.	0.846			1.692	
ATE3: Sponsors of this player/team consistently deliver high-quality goods and services.	0.813			1.535	
Favorability (α = 0.899)		0.929	0.767		0.609
FV1: Sponsoring my favorite player/team enhances my preference for the sponsor.	0.881			2.730	
FV2: Through sponsorship, I develop more positive sentiments towards the sponsor.	0.875			2.454	
FV3: Sponsorship makes me feel more favorable/supportive towards the sponsor.	0.895			2.923	
FV4: Sponsoring the e-sports event has improved my awareness of the sponsor.	0.852			2.193	
Purchase Intention (α = 0.882)		0.919	0.738		0.587
PI1: I will consider purchasing products/services from the sponsors of this player/team.	0.864			2.399	

Variables/Items	Factor Loading	CR	AVE	VIF	R²
PI2: I will try out new products/services if I see their promotion by the company sponsoring my favorite player/team in the e-sports tournament.	0.889			2.685	
PI3: Due to this special sponsorship, I prefer the products/services of these sponsors.	0.844			2.033	
PI4: I will consider the option of buying products from this sponsor in the future.	0.839			2.154	
Status of e-Sport event (α = 0.825)		0.895	0.740		N/A
SE1: The e-sports event is highly important for the area where I live	0.780			1.595	
SE2: The e-sports event holds significant importance and has international reach.	0.882			2.119	
SE3: It is a major sporting event.	0.913			2.269	
Sport-event Fit (α = 0.884)		0.915	0.684		N/A
SF1: There is a logical connection between the event and the sponsor.	0.799			2.143	
SF2: The event's image and the sponsor's image are comparable.	0.861			2.580	
SF3: The sponsor and the event are a good match	0.846			2.252	
SF4: The company and the event represent similar qualities.	0.789			1.907	
SF5: The fact that this company sponsors this event makes sense to me.	0.837			2.118	
Sponsorship Image (α = 0.893)		0.921	0.700		0.674
SI1: The sponsorship of players/teams contributes to changing consumers' perception of the sponsor's products.	0.856			2.564	
SI2: I have a positive attitude towards the sponsor of my favorite player/team.	0.870			2.758	
SI3: Thanks to the sponsorship of my favorite player/team, I have developed a stronger liking for the sponsor's products.	0.822			2.126	
SI4: The company's sponsorship will enhance the image of the e-sport tournament.	0.787			1.934	
SI5: Sponsoring the tournament will elevate the reputation of the company.	0.846			2.333	
Team Identification (α = 0.860)		0.905	0.704		N/A
TI1: The most important thing to me is that my favorite player/team emerges victorious.	0.817			2.039	
TI2: I am a big fan of my favorite player/team.	0.860			2.389	
TI3: My friends believe that I am a devoted fan of the sponsored player/team.	0.814			1.869	
TI4: I follow my favorite team's matches on a weekly basis throughout the season.	0.864			2.234	
Ubiquity of Sponsor (α = 0.813)		0.877	0.640		N/A
US1: The company sponsors multiple players/teams across various tournaments.	0.753			1.564	
US2: I expect the company to continue sponsoring multiple players/teams in the future.	0.829			1.847	
US3: The company selectively chooses players/teams to sponsor.	0.778			1.576	
US4: It is quite common to see this company sponsoring players/teams in e-sports events.	0.838			1.788	

Table 2: Reliability Measures for the Measurement Model
Note: A = Cronbach's Alpha, CR = Composite Reliabilities,
AVE = Average Variance Extracted, VIF= Variance Inflation Factor, N/A = Not Available

To evaluate discriminant validity, the researchers utilized two approaches - the Fornell-Larcker criterion (Ringle et al., 2015) and the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT) (Henseler et al., 2015). Table 3 shows that the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct was greater than its correlation coefficients with other constructs, satisfying the Fornell-Larcker criterion for discriminant validity. Additionally, the highest HTMT value across all construct pairs was 0.875, which falls below the recommended threshold of 0.9 (Henseler et al., 2015). These results collectively demonstrate that the constructs in the measurement model exhibited adequate discriminant validity.

Constructs	Mean	S.D	AT	FV	PI	SE	SF	SI	TI	US
AT	5.25	1.058	0.828	0.679	0.619	0.657	0.841	0.860	0.747	0.875
FV	5.36	1.119	0.565	0.876	0.785	0.612	0.792	0.872	0.655	0.583
PI	5.16	1.143	0.510	0.738	0.859	0.520	0.629	0.792	0.604	0.614
SE	4.58	1.335	0.537	0.466	0.444	0.860	0.677	0.612	0.682	0.585
SF	5.32	1.122	0.722	0.521	0.555	0.600	0.827	0.785	0.696	0.841
SI	5.40	1.139	0.739	0.781	0.705	0.536	0.702	0.837	0.805	0.781
TI	5.13	1.287	0.610	0.578	0.527	0.591	0.609	0.708	0.839	0.768
US	5.37	1.041	0.773	0.503	0.516	0.497	0.712	0.674	0.647	0.800

Table 3: The Assessment of Discriminant Validity
Note: SD: Standard Deviation, the Diagonal Values Represent the Square Roots of Aves,
Above the Diagonal Are the Values of HTMT Values, and
Below the Diagonal Are the Correlation Coefficients between the Construct Values

Overall, the results indicated a satisfactory model fit, with good reliability and adequate convergent and discriminant validity of the measures. Before proceeding to the structural model analysis, the researchers assessed multicollinearity following the guidelines by Hair et al. (2015). Multicollinearity is a concern when tolerance values are below 0.20, or the variance inflation factor (VIF) exceeds 5. As shown in table 2, the VIF values ranged from 1.535 to 2.923, all below the threshold of 5. Therefore, multicollinearity was not a significant issue in this study.

Table 4 presents the results of the structural model analysis. The model explained 58.7% of the variance in purchase intention, 60.9% of the variance in favorability, and 67.4% of the variance in sponsorship image. The effects of the status of the event and the ubiquity of the sponsor on sponsorship image were positive but insignificant ($p > 0.05$), leading to the rejection of H1 and H4. However, sport-event fit had a significant positive effect on sponsorship image ($\beta = 0.225$, $p < 0.05$), supporting H2. Furthermore, attitude towards sponsor and team identification had significant positive impacts on sponsorship image ($\beta = 0.351$ and $\beta = 0.343$, $p < 0.01$, respectively), providing support for H3 and H5. Additionally, sponsorship image had a direct positive influence on both favorability and purchase intention ($\beta = 0.781$ and $\beta = 0.329$, $p < 0.01$, respectively), supporting H7. Finally, the effect of favorability on purchase intention was statistically significant ($\beta = 0.482$, $p < 0.01$), leading to the acceptance of H8.

Hypotheses	Path Coefficient	t-Value	*p*-Values
H1. Status of Event → Sponsorship image	-0.001[ns]	0.008	0.993
H2. Sport-event Fit → Sponsorship image	0.225*	2.131	0.031
H3. Attitude to Sponsor → Sponsorship image	0.351***	3.674	0.000
H4. Ubiquity of Sponsor → Sponsorship image	0.021[ns]	0.229	0.819
H5. Team Identification → Sponsorship image	0.343***	4.745	0.000
H6. Sponsorship Image → Favorability	0.781***	22.561	0.000
H7. Sponsorship Image → Purchase Intention	0.329***	3.471	0.000
H8. Favorability → Purchase Intention	0.482***	5.746	0.000

Table 4: Summary of Hypotheses Testing Results
*Note: *P < .05; **P < .01; ***P < .001. Note: Ns= Non-Significant*

The findings of this study contribute valuable insights to the understanding of sponsorship dynamics within the rapidly growing e-sports industry. By examining the antecedents and consequences of sponsorship image, we shed light on the factors that shape consumer perceptions of sponsors and their subsequent responses.

Consistent with previous research in traditional sports settings, our results confirm the significance of sponsor-event fit and attitude towards the sponsor in fostering a positive sponsorship image among e-sports fans. When sponsors are perceived as aligning well with the e-sports event and holding favorable attributes, fans tend to develop more positive associations with the sponsoring brand. Interestingly, the status of the e-sports event and the ubiquity of the sponsor did not significantly influence the sponsorship image in our study. This contrasts with findings from traditional sports contexts, where event status and sponsor ubiquity have been shown to impact sponsorship effectiveness. It is possible that in the e-sports realm, fans prioritize the perceived fit and authenticity of the sponsorship over the sheer status of the event or the sponsor's presence across multiple platforms. Besides that, team identification emerged as a crucial factor shaping sponsorship image, underscoring the deep emotional connections fans have with their favorite e-sports teams. Sponsors who align themselves with popular teams can effectively leverage this fan loyalty, enhancing their brand image and resonance within the e-sports community. Furthermore, the study reinforces the positive influence of sponsorship image on consumer favorability and purchase intentions, aligning with previous research in sports marketing. By cultivating a

favorable sponsorship image, brands can not only improve consumer attitudes towards their brand but also drive tangible outcomes, such as increased product sales and customer loyalty within the e-sports fan base.

5. Conclusions

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on e-sports marketing by examining the specific dynamics of sponsorship effectiveness in this unique context. By integrating insights from traditional sports sponsorship research with the distinct characteristics of e-sports, our findings provide a more nuanced understanding of how sponsorship strategies can be optimized to resonate with the e-sports audience. Additionally, the identification of team identification as a significant antecedent of sponsorship image highlights the importance of considering the unique emotional and psychological bonds that e-sports fans form with their favorite teams. This finding reinforces the need for a more comprehensive theoretical framework that accounts for the distinctive fan dynamics within the e-sports ecosystem.

For practitioners and e-sports industry stakeholders, our study offers valuable guidance on maximizing sponsorship effectiveness. Brands should prioritize establishing a strong fit between their brand values and the e-sports event or team they sponsor. Authenticity and genuine support for the e-sports community are likely to resonate more strongly with fans than mere ubiquity or event status. Furthermore, sponsors should strategically align themselves with popular e-sports teams that command strong fan loyalty. By leveraging this team identification, sponsors can tap into the passionate fan base and enhance their brand image within the e-sports community. Effective sponsorship activation strategies that foster meaningful fan engagement and create immersive brand experiences are crucial for building a positive sponsorship image. Brands should explore innovative ways to integrate their messaging and activations seamlessly into the e-sports viewing experience, whether through in-game advertisements, branded content collaborations, or interactive live stream activations. In the rapidly evolving landscape of e-sports, sponsorships represent a powerful marketing tool for brands seeking to connect with the passionate and highly engaged e-sports fan base. This study has shed light on the key factors that influence sponsorship image and its subsequent impact on consumer responses within the e-sports context. By prioritizing sponsor-event fit, fostering positive brand attitudes, and strategically aligning with popular e-sports teams, sponsors can cultivate a favorable image that resonates with fans. A positive sponsorship image, in turn, can drive favorability, brand loyalty, and, ultimately, increased purchase intentions among e-sports enthusiasts.

6. References

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