

eSports' Event Sponsorship: Sponsor's Brand Authenticity, Brand Equity and Purchase Intention

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ABSTRACT

Objective: the goal of the study is to expand the current knowledge of sponsorship within the scenario of eSports whose novelty inherits many challenges that are important to improve future management decisions in broader sports contexts. The study investigates the influence of authenticity on sponsors' overall brand equity and on fans' purchase intention, having the Brazilian League of Legends Championship as this research's scenery. The theories supporting this study are the balance theory and attribution theory. **Methods:** the study's sample consists of League of Legends fans capable of recalling at least one sponsor of the championship. The data analysis applied confirmatory factor analysis, structural equation modeling, and multigroup analysis. **Results:** suggest that brand authenticity affects the eSports fans' perception of sponsors' overall brand equity and their purchase intention. Additionally, overall brand equity exerts a mediation role between brand authenticity and purchase intention. Finally, gamers' experience moderates the influence of brand authenticity on overall brand equity and on purchase intention. **Conclusions:** This study contributes to the knowledge in marketing and consumer behavior in the digital environment since eSports' sponsorship brings the 'digital' to the very core of the context of investigation, the phenomenon, and the locus for knowledge application.



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INTRODUCTION

According to [Newzoo \(2021\)](#), the global game market has grown to \$175.8 billion dollars in 2021 and is expected to reach \$218.78 by 2024, a yearly growth rate of 8%. This shows the position games have earned as the current largest entertainment market industry in the world, surpassing the global music and movie industry ([Shawn, 2021](#)) even with issues brought by COVID-19, such as productivity problems ([Waber & Munyikwa, 2021](#)) and disruption of supply chains ([Sweney, 2021](#)). eSports has also shown significant improvement. The market is expected to reach \$1.62 billion dollars by 2024, a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 11.1% ([Newzoo, 2021](#)), although COVID-19 has negatively impacted revenue streams through the decrease of deals ([Newzoo, 2021](#)) and renegotiation of licensing transmission fees ([Global Data, 2020](#)). However, the scenario is optimal considering the increase in renewed multi-year agreements ([Newzoo, 2021](#)) and the exponential popularity that eSports has earned during this period, attracting the attention of sponsoring organizations ([PricewaterhouseCoopers \[PWC\], 2022](#)).

While eSports revenue market is composed of media rights, publisher fees, merchandise, tickets for events, among others, sponsorship has represented the foundation of the industry, generating \$641 million dollars or 59% of the entire market ([Newzoo, 2018](#)). This shows the role that sponsorship has had within the traditional sports context.

Although sponsorship has been present for over 100 years, it was in the beginning of the 1970s that this practice became more developed and shifted toward more commercial purposes ([Meenaghan, 1998](#)). This led to larger field of studies examining sponsorship especially in sports, which currently still holds the highest percentage of sponsorships ([Meenaghan, 2013](#)) given the increasing preference toward experiences in consumers' lives ([Floriano & Silva, 2023](#)).

Studies within the literature of sport sponsorship have examined the strategic objectives these partnerships can offer to corporations as a valuable communication and promotion mechanism ([Cornwell & Maignan, 1998](#)) capable of effectively reaching out to consumers and improve the sponsor's brand association, loyalty ([Donlan, 2013](#)), image ([Grohs & Reisinger, 2014](#)), and, naturally, overall brand equity ([Cornwell et al., 2001](#)).

Initially, academics focused on answering which aspects present or developed within a sponsorship preceded and were more strongly responsible for the effective growth of a sponsor's brand equity. A branch of papers sustained the role that fit — the meanings shared between the sport and the sponsor in the mind of the viewer ([Gwinner, 1997](#)) — has in creating, enhancing or

modifying the brand's image ([Gwinner & Eaton, 1999](#)), positively influencing certain attitudes held toward the brand ([Speed & Thompson, 2000](#)) and improving the formation of brand trust and loyalty ([Mazodier & Merunka, 2012](#)), which are elements that compose the sponsor's brand equity ([Wang et al., 2011](#)).

Another segment attempted to associate the levels of identification — the extent to which an individual identifies with a group ([Gwinner & Swanson, 2003](#)) — presented by fans that affect their self-esteem and behaviors ([Wann, 1993](#)), with a variety of desired favorable outcomes of a sponsorship such as improvement of brand image ([Gwinner et al., 2009](#); [Gwinner & Eaton, 1999](#)), recognition, and attitude ([Gwinner & Swanson, 2003](#)), also elements of brand equity.

Other studies have investigated the resulting effects related with a brand's positive equity. While some articles focused on understanding how distinguished brands with different proportions of equity influence perceived event fit ([Roy & Cornwell, 2003](#)), most strived to evidence the effects that some elements of overall brand equity such as preference ([Cobb-Walgren et al., 1995](#)), attitude ([Papadimitriou et al., 2016](#)), awareness, and image ([Ko et al., 2008](#)) have on the intention to purchase the sponsor's product.

In parallel, another segment that has been growing slowly focused on investigating the effects of brand authenticity in sport sponsorship and its impact on brand equity ([Koo & Lee, 2018](#)). While there is a good amount of research that explored the relationships between authenticity and brand equity, most presented the theme under divergent names such as sincerity ([Speed & Thompson, 2000](#)) and credibility ([Wang, 2017](#)) and with different empirical scales utilized, which do not fully account the extensive meanings that authenticity presents ([Charlton & Cornwell, 2019](#)). These issues make it relevant to investigate the effects of authenticity on a sport event sponsor's brand equity.

As presented, academic studies on sports have existed for some time researching themes within the context of sponsorships such as brand equity ([Olson, 2010](#)), fit ([Koo et al., 2006](#)), authenticity ([Rifon et al., 2004](#)), identification ([Branscombe & Wann, 1991](#)), and purchase intention ([Dees et al., 2008](#)). In contrast, the academic scenario for eSports (electronic sports) is relatively new and yet to be more thoroughly researched.

eSports may be 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 eSports system are mediated by human-computer interfaces" ([Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017](#), p. 211). Within this novelty context, academic studies have begun to address a variety of relevant themes

such as whether eSports can be considered actual sports (Cunningham et al., 2018; Hallmann & Giel, 2018; Jenny et al., 2016); negative behaviors of professional players and audience (Adinolf & Turkay, 2018; Kou, 2020; Kwak et al., 2015); ethical subjects concerning gambling (Sweeney et al., 2019), frauds (Holden & Ehrlich, 2017), doping (Ghoshal, 2019); institutional organizations and governance (Holden et al., 2017; Peng et al., 2020); the effects of eSport practice for the health of athletes and players (Yin et al., 2020); the motives that drive eSport continuous use (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017; Weiss & Schiele, 2013), the distinction from traditional sports audiences (Cushen et al., 2019; Pizzo, et al., 2018); effects on consumers concerning identity and loyalty (Kordyaka et al., 2020); and the divergent experience of women in the scenario (Ruvalcaba et al., 2018). Although apparently extensive, each of these subjects possesses a rather scarce number of studies, which reinforces the need for further research (Funk et al., 2018).

In the realm of sponsorships, only a few studies have discussed it within the context of eSports. Among them, some examined the perceptions and responses of consumers toward non-endemic sponsors (Huettermann et al., 2020), the benefits that sponsoring brands can obtain (Elasri-Ejjaberi et al., 2020; Gawrysiak et al., 2020), and restriction toward certain sponsoring brands (Chambers, 2020).

Considering the gaps present in the literature of eSports and traditional sport events, the present study focuses on contributing to the literature by providing further knowledge about eSport event sponsorship. The study focused on understanding which characteristics from the individual spectator and the partnership between sponsor and event most contributed to the value of the sponsoring brand and, furthermore, the intention to purchase a sponsor's product or service.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Brand authenticity

Authenticity has been a relevant construct examined in a variety of research fields such as consumer behavior (Grayson & Martinec, 2004), brand extensions (Spiggle et al., 2012), and celebrity endorsement (Moulard et al., 2015), which showed the recurring relevance of the subject. Within the sport sponsorship literature, the construct has been mostly examined under the credibility (Rifon et al., 2004), goodwill (Meenaghan, 2001), and sincerity (Speed & Thompson, 2000) names. As such, credibility can be defined as an honest (Koo & Lee, 2018) and trustable (Wang et al., 2011) image that companies desire to create through the sponsoring of projects (Rifon et al., 2004).

Within the studies of sport sponsorship, it was through the theories of balance and attribution that researchers were able to establish the relationship between the authenticity of a brand and its equity. Balance theory affirms that people prioritize equilibrium for their lifestyles. The theory considers the connections between objects or thoughts that people may determine to belong together if the ideas or conceptions associated with them are positive. In parallel, if these objects or thoughts are perceived as dissimilar, then these conceptions will be negative (Heider, 1958).

People may not just connect elements, but, according to attribution theory, they also try to form causal inferences about any event that is either lived or observed (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1973). These inferences created by individuals are shown to depend on (1) their personal specificities (intrinsic motivation) and (2) information that is available in their surroundings (extrinsic motivation) (Heider, 1958). These attributions allow individuals to develop a better understanding, control, and prediction of events and behaviors taking place around them (Deitz et al., 2012; Rifon et al., 2004; Scheinbaum et al., 2017), which provides support for personal future choices or courses of action (Kelley, 1973).

Customer-based brand equity (CBBE)

Authors in the field of brand equity have defined it "as a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name and symbol, that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or that firm's customer" (Aaker, 1991, p. 15). In other words, brand equity concerns "the marketing effects uniquely attributable to the brand" (Keller, 1993, p. 1) or "consumers' different response between a focal brand and an unbranded product when both have the same level of marketing stimuli and product attributes" (Yoo & Donthu, 2001, p. 1), which "enables a brand to earn greater volume or greater margins than it could without the brand name and, in addition, provides a strong, sustainable and differential advantage" (Srivastava & Schocker, 1991, p. 5) that would not occur if the product or service did not have that brand (Keller, 1993).

Within the literature of brand equity, customer-based brand equity is defined as "the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand" (Keller, 1993, p. 1). The theory proposes customer-based brand equity can be measured through distinct methods that verify the traits and elements that help develop brand knowledge — "the knowledge that has been created about the brand in consumers' minds" (Keller, 1993, p. 2).

Brand awareness consists of "the ability of a potential buyer to recognize or recall that a brand is a member of

a certain product category" where "a link between product class and brand is involved" (Aaker, 1991, p. 76), while brand image is "a set of associations, usually organized in some meaningful way." (Aaker, 1991, p. 126).

Brand associations can be defined as "anything 'linked' in memory to a brand" (Aaker, 1991, p. 126) and may characterize them into three categories (attributes, benefits, and attitudes) that can form a direct link with the brand or rely on a secondary entity to form this connection (Keller, 1993). In the case of an event, when a link is established (i.e., through a sponsorship deal), some associations may indirectly relate to the brand, such as slogan, symbol, or anything that can be related (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993).

Purchase intention

One of the most recurring marketing goals that motivates the development of initiatives, including sponsorships, is the increase of sales numbers (Cornwell, 1995). In general, academic researchers of marketing (Alexandris et al., 2007) and advertisement (Cobb-Walgren et al., 1995) examined the 'purchase intention' of products and services. The idea of 'intention' can be described by behavioral psychology as the amount of effort that a person would accept to spend in order to do the actual behavior (Ajzen, 1991). Purchase intention itself can be summarized as "an individual's conscious plan to make an effort to purchase a brand" (Spears & Singh, 2004, p. 56), which reinforces the effort involved.

An important characteristic of purchase intention is the connection that it shares with purchase behavior, which makes it considerably relevant in sponsorship studies. Initially, it is relevant to distinguish purchase intentions from actual purchase behaviors. The former instigates thoughts and plans that precede and lead into the occurrence of the latter (Dees et al., 2008). Thus, although these concepts are distinguishable, purchase intention retains a critical role in affecting sales since it takes the role of a previous step before the actual purchase (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010) connecting the willingness of the action with the consequential behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). As such, understanding which elements and how they promote the development of purchase intentions within the sport event sponsorship context is of great significance.

Brand authenticity and purchase intention

Studies on the field of sport sponsorship have addressed the effects that brand authenticity generates within the context of sport events. It has been shown that event spectators do come up with possible motivations for the reasons behind a sponsor's presence within an event as a quest in their desire to form symmetry between

the linked elements within the sponsorship relationship (Dean, 2002). These effects may be affected by developed marketing communication strategies; however, interpretations occur with or without their presence (Rifon et al., 2004). Based on their experiences, if the bonds shared by the event and sponsor in the partnership are perceived as legitimate and honest, spectators may create positive attributions toward the sponsoring brand, which may even modify their attitudes toward it (Ruth & Strizhakova, 2012). In contrast, in instances where brands are seen as being mostly incentivized by financial reasons such as sales numbers or other self-benefiting gains, the sponsorships may generate opposite results (Rifon et al., 2004; Ruth & Strizhakova, 2012).

In regard to purchase intention, studies in the fields of advertising and cause-brand alliance have claimed that consumers attempt to create explanations for the firm's support to a cause and that any decision that instigates the development of a trustworthy perception in them will, consequently, help establish a more altruistic and credible profile, which considerably influence their decision-making process in purchases (Lafferty, 2007; Ndasi & Ackay, 2020). For sports sponsorships, studies have led to similar results. Sponsor integrity has been shown to be of the primary components significantly influencing purchase intention since they are more likely to take place if customers understand the contributions the sponsorships are bringing to the event (Dees et al., 2008) and believe in the sponsoring company's motives (Kim et al., 2011), which can be developed by the sponsoring companies through initiatives that show genuine concern for teams, clubs, and local communities (Smith et al., 2008).

These findings suggest that since fans maintain a judgmental perspective toward the reasons behind a sponsorship, a sponsor that is perceived as possessing legitimate and altruistic motives will have its products and services with higher odds of being purchased by the audience during their decision-making process. As such, the first hypothesis formulated is:

H1: Brand authenticity has a positive impact on purchase intention.

Brand authenticity and customer-based brand equity

Within the literature of sports sponsorships, much research has addressed the favorable impacts that positive perceptions have on sponsoring brands. Event audience interpretation of sponsors, and their possible motivations, do not depend on the presence or absence of communications to be built, but they may be influenced

by them. Through honest and socially responsible messages alongside favorable actions for the event, sponsors transmit credibility to consumers, which affect the audience's perceptions and, eventually, consumer responses and attitude toward the brand (Rifon et al., 2004). These interpretations can be more deeply affected (positively and negatively) depending on the level of engagement that the fan shares with the event (Deitz et al., 2012). Similar effects are also identified in the context of charity and non-profit, where highly appreciated events can be advantageous to sponsoring brands if their actions are perceived as altruistic, which results in an improved attitude toward the brand (Dean, 2002), besides other benefits such as brand patronage and gains through word-of-mouth (Scheinbaum et al., 2017). Even long-term partnerships with events that have developed a positive perception in the sight of event consumers can find themselves in tough situations when the sponsor exits the partnership. This can be detrimental to consumer's brand attitude, especially if they are committed fans and if the given reasons are mostly economical (Ruth & Strizhakova, 2012).

Concerning the impacts that sponsorships offer to brands, a variety of gains have been evidenced to take place, many of which consist of elements that compose consumer-based brand equity. Some papers have examined the effects that altruistic attributions toward sponsor's motives generate on more immediate elements such as the awareness of the sponsoring brand alongside transferring the characteristics of the event to the image of the brand in the perception of its audience (Dean, 2002; Meenaghan, 2001; Rifon et al., 2004).

Alongside these papers, most research that has examined credibility, sincerity, and goodwill in sport sponsorship have identified the role that it has in affecting consumers' attitude toward the sponsoring brand. The perception of honest good intentions by sponsors has been shown to translate into favorable attitudes shown by positive word-of-mouth (Dean, 2002), demonstrations of gratitude for a legitimate event support (Ruth & Strizhakova, 2012), and, eventually, the overall achievement of sponsorship goals (Speed & Thompson, 2000). As such, these and other objectives of event sponsorship can be extensively overlapped with many elements that compose brand equity (Cornwell et al., 2001).

The studies of brand equity seek to emphasize the effects that are generated from the associations between a brand and another entity. As the shared connections are maintained over time, they become stronger and eventually result in deeper and more meaningful results such as attitude or credibility (Keller, 1993), which are essential elements for a brand to create and develop its image (Aaker, 1991) and, especially, as mechanisms to improve

fan's relationship of sponsors credibility and motivations (Dean, 2002; Rifon et al., 2004). These findings suggest that since fans maintain a judgmental perspective toward the reasons behind a sponsorship, a sponsor that is perceived as possessing legitimate and altruistic motives will be better accepted and valued by the audience. As such, the second hypothesis formulated is:

H2: Brand authenticity has a positive impact on sponsor's overall brand equity.

Brand equity and purchase intention

Considering the abstract characteristics of brands, one of the goals of research was to attribute measurable indicators for the equity of a brand, which led to two main categories developed within the literature: the first one focusing on consumers' cognition and affection — awareness, image — and the second involving their behaviors — loyalty, willingness to pay (Cobb-Walgren et al., 1995). It is through the optimal success of indicators from consumers' cognition (awareness and image) that favorable results occur in indicators of consumers' behavior (i.e., brand loyalty), which translates into a routine behavior of purchasing the brands' products or services (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993).

Among these indicators, brand attitudes are highly important as a way to understand purchase intention since attitudes are "a learned predisposition to respond in a consistently favorable or unfavorable manner with respect to a given object" (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975, p. 6) and a "relatively enduring, unidimensional summary evaluation of the brand that presumably energizes behavior" (Spears & Singh, 2004, p. 56). Thus, it is through these favorable evaluations that behavioral intentions are defined, which positively pump consumer behavior (Keller, 1993).

Event sponsorship literature has consistently reinforced the role that brand equity, or some of its elements, has on the intention to purchase sponsor's products. Some authors have examined the effects that a positive overall brand equity have on the behavioral intentions of event participants (Llopis-Amorós et al., 2018) while other research evidenced how events help sponsors improve their brand awareness and image, leading to a higher intention to purchase sponsor's products (Bachleda et al., 2016). However, most research has evidenced the role that the developed attitude toward the sponsoring brand has on the intention to purchase its products (Koo & Lee, 2018; Koo et al., 2006). In general, whenever consumers build a favorable perception of the sponsoring brand, which can be strongly influenced by the sponsor's goodwill (Dees et al., 2008) or credibility

(Rifon et al., 2004), positive attitudes are formed toward the brand, leading to a variety of consumer effects such as participation in a brand sponsored event (Schivinski et al., 2019) or the intention to purchase sponsor's products or services (Meenaghan, 2001). However, in certain instances sponsors may take actions that are negatively perceived by consumers, which consequently leads to diminishment in intention to purchase (Ruth & Strizhakova, 2012).

These findings suggest that the more fans value the brands sponsoring the sport event, the stronger the willingness to purchase those sponsors' products is going to be. Thus, the third hypothesis formulated is:

H3: Sponsor's overall brand equity has a positive impact on consumer's purchase intention of sponsor's products.

Mediating effect of brand equity

Within the domain of sponsorship literature, it has been consistently evidenced the mediating role that a brand's value has on the sponsor's credibility and the intention of spectators to consume its products. Most of the literature has addressed the consumer's brand value perception under the attitudes that are created toward the sponsoring brands (Wang et al., 2012). Studies have demonstrated attitude toward the sponsoring brand through an improvement in loyalty (Woisetschlager et al., 2017), a better willingness to recommend it (Spiggle et al., 2012), and an increase in both preference (Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006) and attachment (Cornwell, 2019) toward the brand and consumer's purchase intention (Kim et al., 2015; Madrigal, 2001). The mediating role of attitude toward the brand has been used in previous research to explain possible improvements in consumer's purchase intention with the pairing of events and brands with high fit on their sincerity (Lee & Cho, 2009) and companies that build and present credibility when sponsoring sports teams (Wang et al., 2012), events (Koo & Lee, 2018), or any type of agreement that supports sports organizations (Koronios et al., 2021). However, few studies have adopted the overall equity of a brand as a mediating role for brand authenticity, although some have used it to mediate purchase intention (Buil et al., 2013).

These findings suggest that the value of the brands sponsoring the sport event can affect the fan's perception of motives behind the support as possessing legitimate and altruistic motives, which, consequently, influences toward a stronger intention to purchase products and services from the sponsor. Thus, the fourth hypothesis formulated is:

H4: Sponsor's overall brand equity mediates the relationship between brand authenticity and purchase intention of sponsor's products.

Moderating effect of gamer experience

One of the cornerstones of any sponsorship practice concerns the involvement of the fan with the sponsored object or activity. It refers to the levels of identification and motivation regarding specific activities. In sports sponsorships, brands place themselves between fans and their sport activities in hopes of establishing a positively-oriented emotional connection by supporting the fan's favorite sport, team, or event and developing, as a result, better goodwill and image effects (Meenaghan, 2001).

Concerning the specific effects of sport involvement on sponsorships, research has shown that a higher involvement with sports through spectatorship of the sport event can affect fans' value perception of the sponsoring brand through increased awareness and a more positive image (Kim et al., 2015; Ko et al., 2008), fans' intention for sponsor brand usage (Bennett et al., 2009), and fans' likelihood to purchase the sponsor's products (Kim et al., 2015; Ko et al., 2008). Few studies have examined the relationship between a fan's involvement and his perceptions of sponsor sincerity and, although some results did not sustain a direct connection between involvement and sponsor sincerity (Olson, 2010), other studies have demonstrated the importance that a fan's perception of a sponsor's sincerity/goodwill with the sport can have on their overall experience with the event and the sponsor (Meenaghan, 2001; Speed & Thompson, 2000). Additionally, in the context of eSports, a comparison between eSports and traditional sports fans has shown that the former presents a stronger involvement with the sport (Brown et al., 2018), which reinforces the importance of studying fan involvement. These findings suggest that a more intense involvement of the fan with the sport and sport event, in this study characterized by the gamers' experience, could influence perceptions of authenticity of the sponsoring brand, their overall value, and the willingness to purchase those sponsors' products. Thus, the next hypotheses formulated are:

H5a: The gamers' experience moderates the relationship between brand authenticity and purchase intention of sponsor's products.

H5b: The gamers' experience moderates the relationship between brand authenticity and brand equity of sponsor's products.

H5c: The gamers' experience moderates the relationship between brand equity and purchase intention of sponsor's products.

Conceptual model

Based on the previously mentioned research questions and the proposed relationships, a conceptual model was developed (see Figure 1).

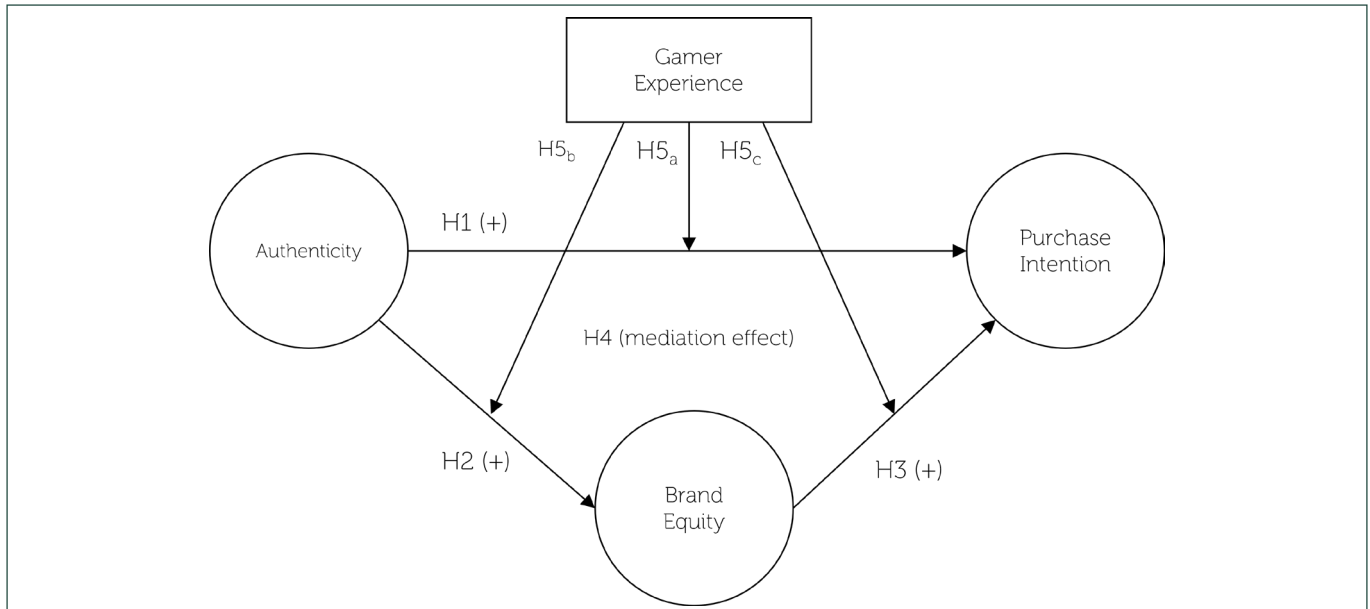


Figure 1. Conceptual model.

METHOD

The objectives of this study are as follows: Verify if (and to what extent) the perceived authenticity of the sponsoring brand with the event positively influences fans' intention to purchase its products or services and the mediating effect that the audience's perception of the sponsor's brand has on this relationship. Additionally, it also analyzes if a gamers' experience affects the relationship between authenticity, brand perception, and purchase intention. This objective was operationalized into five research questions:

- (1) Does perceived authenticity of the sponsoring brand positively affect the purchase intention of its products?
- (2) Does perceived authenticity of the sponsoring brand positively affect the sponsor's overall brand equity?
- (3) Does a sponsor's overall brand equity positively affect the purchase intention of its products?
- (4) Does the sponsor's overall brand equity mediate the relationship between the sponsor's brand authenticity and the purchase intention of its products?

- (5) Does the gamers' experience of eSports fans moderate the relationship between the authenticity, overall brand equity, and purchase intention of the sponsoring brand products?

Context

In order to establish a domain to this study, League of Legends game was chosen. This was due to its traits as the current most popular game and eSport worldwide with 580 million hours watched during the course of 2020 (Borisov, 2021), besides being the most popular eSport tournament event with average viewership of 1.11 million viewers (Belous, 2020). The respondents chosen were self-declared Brazilian League of Legends eSport fans who watched content concerning the game while not necessarily being a player.

The chosen event for this research was the League of Legends Brazilian Championship since: (a) it was one of the most relevant League of Legends events in Brazil, with peak viewership of 207.9 K during the first split in its 2020 edition (Yakimenko, 2020); (b) the event sponsors were composed of well-known brands: Dell, Red Bull, Mastercard, Gillette, and KitKat (meio&men-sagem, 2021).

Operationalization of constructs

The sponsor's brand authenticity construct was operationalized by applying the horizontal marketing partnership authenticity scale composed of four items and adapted by [Charlton and Cornwell \(2019\)](#) from the perceived brand authenticity scale developed by [Morhart et al. \(2015\)](#). While the latter examined a single brand, the former focused on the authenticity between brands. This study utilized the short version of the horizontal marketing partnership authenticity scale. This scale had not been used in Brazil previously, thus, it was necessary to translate it to Portuguese. The chosen method was reverse translation ([Malhotra, 2006](#)). For the sponsor's customer-based brand equity, this study applied the overall brand equity scale proposed by [Yoo and Donthu \(2001\)](#), composed of four items, considered to be the most efficient created so far ([Christodoulides & Chernatony, 2010](#)). This scale was adapted by [Amorim and Almeida \(2015\)](#) since the original version is product-focused and some of the sponsors were also service providers. Lastly, purchase intention of sponsors' products was measured through three variables proposed by [Ohanian \(1991\)](#). Both scales had already been applied within the Brazilian context ([Costa & Almeida, 2012](#); [Düsenberg et al., 2016](#)), thus making it unnecessary to perform translations (see scales in <https://doi.org/10.17632/hswg9pwwg8v.1>)

Population and sample

The population of the study are Brazilian eSport spectators who had watched the League of Legends Brazilian Championship 2021 and/or its last two editions (2019 and 2020) and were able to recall one of the five sponsors of the event and were qualifiable consumers of the brands (above 18 years old). No filters were applied to economic conditions nor level of instruction. The method of collection was a random sample of respondents.

To reach this spectator profile, four filter questions were present in the questionnaire: (a) degree of engagement with the eSport, (b) habits of watching live or recorded contents of the game, (c) having watched at least one the last three tournaments, and (d) successfully recalling at least one of the sponsors of the event. The degree of engagement with the game and the habits of watching live and recorded games were used to ascertain whether the respondents had sufficient interactions to be considered consumers. Having watched at least one of the last three tournaments translated into a minimum level of involvement with the event. Recalling correctly at least one sponsor translated into a minimum level of engagement with

the sponsoring brand. The minimum age of 18 years served as a proxy to an economically active and a viable intention of buying sponsor's products and services.

Data collection

The instrument for data collection was a web questionnaire using the SurveyMonkey platform. Before sending out the questionnaires, a pre-test was conducted. It was performed with a set of respondents whose traits were in accordance with this study's sample group. The questionnaire was distributed within relevant community groups of League of Legends Brazilian fans through social media channels, such as Discord, Twitch, Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook.

The respondent's questionnaires included information such as gender, age, email address, and device IP address. Since these types of data are considered sensitive, it was necessary to treat them properly to avoid risks of leakage. As such, all registrations of respondents' personal data have been erased from the researcher's and advisor's electronic devices at the end of the research. This was done all in accordance with the Brazilian General Law of Data Protection and the requirements of the Research's Ethic Committee.

Data analysis

The main tools utilized to perform the data analysis were IBM SPSS v. 26 and IBM AMOS v. 26. The analysis consisted of: (a) descriptive analysis, including mean, skewness, kurtosis, correlation, and t-test to examine the existence of differences between the means of groups; (b) confirmatory factor analysis was applied to verify the quality of the scales; (c) structural equation modeling was applied to verify the relationships among constructs in the conceptual model; (d) bootstrap procedure was applied to investigate the mediation effect; and (e) multigroup analysis was applied to investigate the moderating effects ([Hair et al., 2009](#)).

To test the validity of the measurement model, a group of five goodness-of-fit indicators were utilized: chi-square (χ^2), normed chi-square (χ^2/df), comparative fit index (CFI), and the root mean squared error of approximation (RMSEA). The composite reliability test was used to examine the construct reliability of each construct in the conceptual model ([Hair et al., 2009](#)). The convergent validity was verified through the average variance extracted and the discriminant validity was verified by comparing the average variance extracted of two separate constructs of the model to the estimated squared covariance between these two constructs ([Hair et al., 2009](#)).

RESULTS

A total of 1,137 responses were collected. From those, 697 had to be discarded for the following reasons: 31 for having classified themselves as indifferent toward the game, 34 for having classified themselves as professional athletes, which was considered as a mischaracterization for a consumer of the game, 111 for not being frequent viewers of live or prerecorded content from the game, 123 for not having watched any of the last three tournaments (2019, 2020, 2021), 165 for not remembering the name of any sponsoring brand from the event, 139 for not remembering the correct name of a sponsoring brand from the event, and 47 for being under 18 years old. As such, 440 questionnaires were considered valid (Tables 1 and 2 show the descriptive statistics).

Table 1. Characteristics of the sample.

Variable	F	F%
Respondents	440	100%
Male	358	81%
Female	72	16%
Others	5	1%
Non-informed	5	1%
Young ($\leq 22y$)	235	53%
Adult ($> 22y$)	205	47%
Casual gamers	158	36%
Hardcore gamers	282	64%

Table 2. Item descriptive statistics — Mean, skewness, and kurtosis.

Variable	Mean	Skewness	Kurtosis
Aut1	4.136	-0.974	0.727
Aut2	4.032	-0.556	-0.541
Aut3	3.409	-0.246	-0.698
Aut4	3.452	-0.310	-0.508
OBE1	3.677	-0.600	-0.019
OBE2	3.418	-0.493	-0.558
OBE3	3.070	-0.126	-0.993
OBE4	3.595	-0.639	-0.267
Pln1	3.823	-0.961	0.874
Pln2	3.350	-0.412	-0.759
Pln3	3.764	-0.798	0.382

To estimate the measurement model, the maximum likelihood technique was used. From the goodness-of-fit indicators, the chi-square (χ^2) presented a value of 155,016 and the normed chi-square (χ^2/df) had a value of 3.781, both evidencing an adjusted model. The GFI and CFI returned values of 0.939 and 0.948, respectively, both higher than 0.9, suggesting an acceptable fit.

Lastly, the RMSEA test returned a value of 0.08, which is between 0.05 and 0.08, thus indicating that the model presented an acceptable fit.

After the analysis of the fit indicators, the model was evaluated regarding its reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity (see Table 3).

Table 3. Reliability analysis, convergent validity, and discriminant validity.

		Authenticity	Brand equity	Purchase intention
Item		CR = 0.805	CR = 0.846	CR = 0.832
Aut1		0.490		
Aut2		0.605		
Aut3		0.885		
Aut4		0.833		
OBE1			0.685	
OBE2			0.873	
OBE3			0.818	
OBE4			0.655	
Pln1				0.779
Pln2				0.664
Pln3				0.912
	Authenticity	0.703	0.464	0.430
	Brand equity	0.215	0.758	0.567
	Purchase intention	0.185	0.321	0.785

Note. Values on the diagonal describe the average variance extracted (AVE); values above the diagonal describe the correlation; values below the diagonal describe the squared correlation.

The reliability of the constructs was verified through construct reliability (CR). In the case of the measurement model, all CR indicators were above 0.7, evidencing scale reliability. The convergent validity was examined by analyzing the average variance extracted (AVE) for the item loadings and the individual standard coefficients of the indicators within each construct. The AVE of all constructs returned values above 0.7, indicating good convergence. Additionally, most of the standard coefficients presented values above or close to 0.7, except for Aut1, which are considered good. The discriminant validity was examined by comparing the AVE from each construct to the squared correlation of this construct with the remaining others. All correlation pairs successfully attended the criteria since no squared correlation of any two constructs surpassed the AVE value of each of those two constructs.

The structural model (see Figure 2) successfully supported the significance of relationships in all estimated paths.

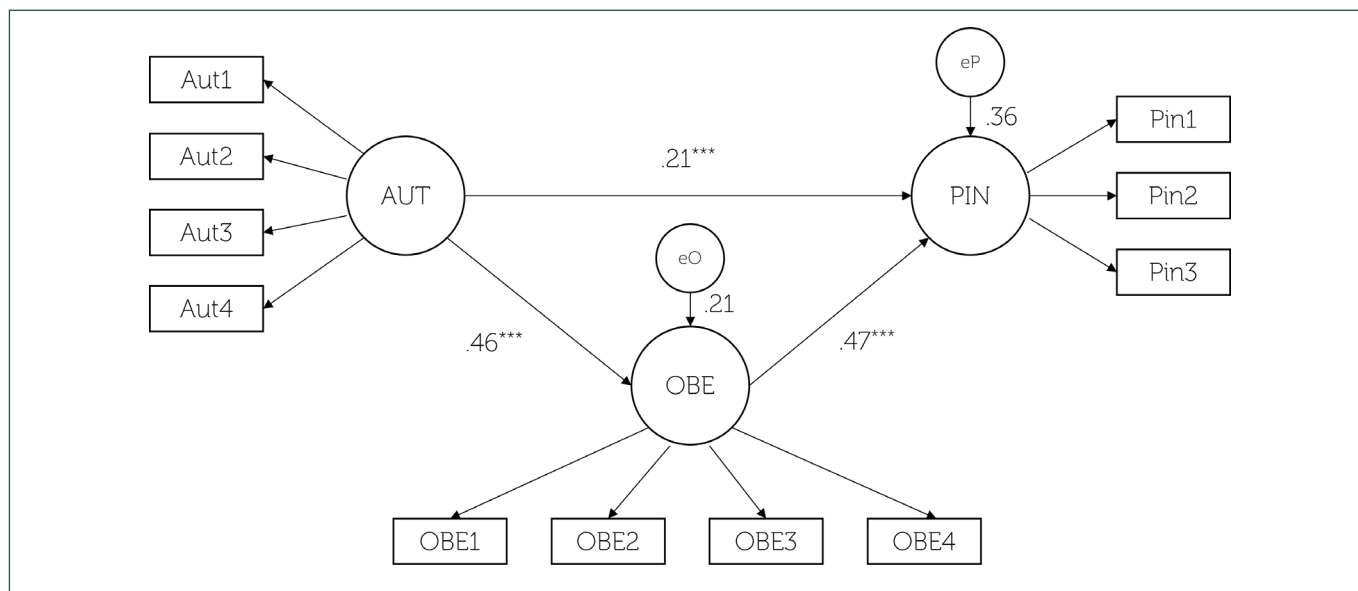


Figure 2. Structural model.

The explained variance of OBE and PIN are, respectively, 21% and 36%. Table 4 summarizes the results of each path. As can be seen, there was a significant effect of AUT on PIN (0.213), a significant

effect of AUT on OBE (0.464), and a significant effect of OBE on PIN (0.468). Thus, it was possible to empirically support the hypotheses H1, H2, and H3.

Table 4. Summary of the hypotheses results.

Hypothesis	Path	Estimates	Sig	Results
H1	PIN <- AUT	(+) 0.213	***	Supported
H2	OBE <- AUT	(+) 0.464	***	Supported
H3	PIN <- OBE	(+) 0.468	***	Supported

Note: *** $p < 0.01$.

In order to verify the mediation role of OBE, at first, the total effect of AUT on PIN was supported (0.430 $p < 0.001$). Then the indirect effect of AUT → OBE → PIN was supported (0.217 $p < 0.001$), sug-

gesting the partial mediation role of OBE. A bootstrap procedure (2,000 samples at 95% confidence interval) was utilized to support the partial mediation effect (see Table 5).

Table 5. Summary of the H4 hypotheses results.

Effect Bootstrap (2,000 samples)	Stand. regr. weights	Two-tailed 95% confidence interval			Results
		Lower	Upper	Sig	
Direct effect (Purchase intention <- Authenticity)	0.213	0.092	0.328	***	The direct and indirect effects are significant, supporting the partial mediation.
Indirect effect (Purchase intention <- Brand equity <- Authenticity)	0.217	0.145	0.301	***	
Total effect (Purchase intention <- Authenticity)	0.430	0.311	0.536	***	

Note. *** $p < 0.001$

In order to verify the gamers' experience effect, a t-test was performed to verify if there were significant mean differences between the groups Casual Gamer and Hardcore Gamer. The Levene test supported the assumption for homogeneity of variances and the t-test returned a p-value above 0.05 for all variables. Then, it was supported that the mean

can be considered equal across the two groups (see <https://doi.org/10.17632/hswg9pwg8v.1>).

A multi-group analysis was performed to check for evidence of model invariance for the Casual Gamer and Hardcore Gamer groups. In all invariance tests performed, the difference of chi-square ($\Delta\chi^2$) was very low. Alongside this, all the resulting p-values were

above 0.05, which evidenced invariance in the model. Next, the moderation tests were performed for the constrained paths (equal across groups). The p-value of the difference of chi-square ($\Delta\chi^2$) for PIN <- AUT path (0.071) and OBE <- AUT path (0.065) was significant at

$p < 0.10$, proving evidence of moderation. The p-value of the difference of chi-square ($\Delta\chi^2$) for PIN <- OBE path was not significant, which evidenced a lack of moderation effect (see Table 6).

Table 6. Measurement invariance tests for gamer experience as a moderator.

Model tested	Model fit measures							Model differences		
	χ^2	p	χ^2/df	GFI	CFI	RMSEA	PCLOSE	$\Delta\chi^2$	Δdf	p
Casual gamer	65.995	***	1.61	0.928	0.965	0.062	0.221			
Hardcore gamer	133.204	***	3.249	0.921	0.937	0.089	***			
Configural (unconstrained)	199.183	***	2.429	0.924	0.946	0.057	0.118			
Metric (measurement weights)	202.158	***	2.246	0.923	0.949	0.053	0.277	2.975	8	0.936 ^a
Scalar (structural weights)	208.706	***	2.244	0.921	0.947	0.053	0.276	6.548	3	0.088 ^a
Factor covariance (structural covariances)	208.708	***	2.220	0.921	0.948	0.053	0.305	0.001	1	0.969 ^a
Factor variance (structural residuals)	213.572	***	2.225	0.919	0.946	0.053	0.298	4.865	2	0.088 ^a
Error variance (measurement residuals)	222.171	***	2.076	0.916	0.947	0.050	0.517	8.599	11	0.659 ^a
PIN <- AUT constrained (equal across groups)	202.448	***	2.439	0.923	0.945	0.057	0.110	3.264	1	0.071 ^c
OBE <- AUT constrained (equal across groups)	202.585	***	2.441	0.923	0.945	0.057	0.109	3.401	1	0.065 ^c
PIN <- OBE constrained (equal across groups)	199.183	***	2.400	0.924	0.947	0.057	0.137	0.000	1	0.999 ^d

Note. *** $p < 0.01$; ^a Invariance was supported at $p > 0.05$; ^b Invariance was not supported; ^c Moderation effect was supported at $p < 0.10$; ^d Moderation effect was not supported.

Additionally, the critical ratios (CR) were analyzed to grant further evidence of the moderation effect of gamers' experience. For the paths PIN <- AUT and OBE <- AUT, the results presented CR values of -1.786 and 1.886, respectively. Both results are significant at $p < 0.10$, providing support for moderation effect from gamers' experience on these paths. The result from PIN <- OBE is not significant, providing support for a lack

of moderation effect from gamers' experience on this path. Thus, it was not possible to empirically support hypothesis H5c. In other words, the gamers' experience of a League of Legends fans does moderate the relationship between brand authenticity and purchase intention of its products and the relationship between brand authenticity and the sponsor's overall brand equity (see Table 7).

Table 7. Summary of the support for the hypothesis H5 — Gamer experience as a moderator.

Hypothesis	Path	Casual gamer				Hardcore gamer				Critical ratios for differences between parameters	Results
		Regression weights (estimates)				Regression weights (estimates)					
		Stand.	Unstand.	C.R.	p	Stand.	Unstand.	C.R.	p		
H5 _a	PIN ← AUT	0.356	0.491	4.300	***	0.126	0.109	1.762	0.078	-1.786 ^a	Supported
H5 _b	OBE ← AUT	0.365	0.260	3.683	***	0.508	0.442	6.763	***	1.886 ^a	Supported
H5 _c	PIN ← OBE	0.452	0.491	4.300	***	0.493	0.491	6.000	***	-0.002 ^b	Not Supported

Note. *** $p < 0.01$; ^a Moderation effect was supported at $p < 0.10$; ^b Moderation effect was not supported.

CONCLUSIONS

Theoretical implications

Does perceived authenticity of the sponsoring brand positively affect the purchase intention of its products?

Yes, it does. The authenticity of the sponsoring brand positively affects the purchase intention of its products. This finding offers additional support to the literature that sustained that sponsor's actions that are perceived

as authentic helps establish a logical justification for its support and form a trustworthy image that influences fans' decision-making process in purchases (Lafferty, 2007; Ndasi & Ackay, 2020) since they are more likely to occur when consumers understand (Dees et al., 2008) and believe (Kim et al., 2011) the sponsoring company's motives.

Does perceived authenticity of the sponsoring brand positively affect the sponsor's overall brand equity?

Yes, it does. The authenticity of the sponsoring brand positively affects the sponsor's overall brand equity. This finding offers additional support to the literature that defines authenticity (or sincerity/credibility) as the perception of a brand held in consumer's minds where its image is perceived as being more altruistic (Rifon et al., 2004) and sincerely motivated (Speed & Thompson, 2000), which works as a source of positive information for the corporate image (Koo & Lee, 2018) aside from its relevance in generating brand engagement (Becker-Olsen & Hill, 2006), improving brand attitude (Rifon et al., 2004) and directly or indirectly influencing its equity (Speed & Thompson, 2000; Wang, 2017).

Does a sponsor's overall brand equity positively affect the purchase intention of its products?

Yes, it does. The sponsor's overall brand equity positively affects the purchase intention of its products. This finding offers additional support to the literature that demonstrates the various elements that account for the total value of a brand that affect the intention to purchase its product, such as awareness (Ko et al., 2008), integrity (Smith et al., 2008), attitude (Spears & Singh, 2004), and overall equity (Cobb-Walgren et al., 1995).

The good explanatory power of overall brand equity on purchase intention in this study might be linked to the value that eSports fans perceive in the sponsoring brands within eSports events, which may have a considerable influence over the likelihood to buy that brand's product over similar others.

Does the sponsor's overall brand equity mediate the relationship between the sponsor's brand authenticity and the purchase intention of its products?

Yes, it does. The sponsor's overall brand equity does mediate the relationship between brand authenticity of sponsors and purchase intention of sponsors' products and services. In fact, sponsor's brand authenticity has a strong positive total effect on the purchase intention of its products. Besides the direct effect on purchase intention, sponsor's brand authenticity also has a direct effect on sponsor's overall brand equity, meaning that sponsor's brand authenticity has an indirect effect on purchase intention through sponsor's overall brand equity. In conclusion, it is possible to assert that sponsor's overall brand equity plays a partial mediation role in the relationship between the sponsor's brand authenticity and the purchase intention of its products. This finding offers additional support to the literature that demonstrates how the authenticity of a sponsoring brand is

considerably relevant in determining its value from the perspective of fans (Koronios et al., 2021) and leads to an improvement in attitudes toward said brand, leading to purchase intention (Koo & Lee, 2018; Wang et al., 2012). This conclusion contributes to the current literature of sponsorship since a slim amount of research has previously adopted overall brand equity as a mediating effect for both purchase intention (Buil et al., 2013) and brand authenticity.

Does the gamers' experience of eSports fans moderate the relationship between the authenticity, overall brand equity and purchase intention of the sponsoring brand products?

Gamers' experience does moderate the relationship of authenticity on overall brand equity; however, it does not moderate the effect of overall brand equity on purchase intention. The findings on the first moderation effect show a positive effect that offers additional support to the literature that presents the involvement of the fan with the sport or sport event as a crucial characteristic that affects his perception of a brand's value (Kim et al., 2015; Ko et al., 2008) and even the tendency to use the sponsoring brands (Bennett et al., 2009) or purchase their products or services (Kim et al., 2015; Ko et al., 2008), although it conflicts with previous studies that examined brand sincerity and fan involvement (Olson, 2010) by sustaining the presence of a moderation effect. In comparison, the lack of moderation on the second effect conflicts with the findings on the mentioned studies.

Moreover, the findings support that gamers' experience negatively moderates the effect of brand authenticity on purchase intention, which conflicts with the literature that discusses fan involvement and purchase intention (Kim et al., 2015; Ko et al., 2008). This result may be partially explained by the characteristics of the event sponsoring brands and eSports fans. The eSports literature describes sponsors whose products/services are not associated with the market as being non-endemic (Huettermann et al., 2020; Rogers et al., 2020), which is a relevant characteristic since eSports fans hold more positive attitudes toward endemic sponsors (Rogers et al., 2020). Additionally, authenticity is more relevant for eSports fans since they present higher demands for it (Pizzo, et al., 2019) and tend to perceive non-endemic sponsors with more skepticism (Huettermann et al., 2020; Rogers et al., 2020). Since four out of five of the sponsoring brands examined in this study can be considered non-endemic, it can be inferred that hardcore fans are less likely to be affected by the sponsors' authenticity than a casual fan.

Managerial implications

While the sponsorship of traditional sports is a consolidated industry, eSports consists of a new and popular field to engage with (Duran, 2021). For example, countries' governments are improving legislation (The Straits Times, 2021) and creating national tournaments (MENAFN, 2021) to instigate its growth. However, uncertainty persists because many structural elements are not fully understood by investors (Studholme, 2021), nor is it clear whether any applied investments will truly return in a reasonable timeframe (Duran, 2020). The profile of video games and eSports fans is very diversified, ranging from average consumers to more serious levels of engagement (Almeida et al., 2018), which leads to the reliance on the services of specialized marketing agencies that connect brands with the gaming scenario (Druid Creative Gaming, n.d.). Moreover, the controlling power of game publishers of each eSports gives them the right to shape and influence many elements associated with their games, including sponsor partnerships, which can lead to unilateral cancellations (Stubbs, 2020).

Considering that the knowledge of these elements is crucial for investors to achieve objectives such as enhancement of brand awareness (Cornwell et al., 2001), brand image (Gwinner, 1997), and increase of sales alongside more engagement with the audiences (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003), the current study focused on examining the perspective of consumers concerning the value of sponsoring brands within the eSports events in Brazil.

Results from the study show that, even though sports sponsors are engaging in events and striving to create a positive and authentic image within the scenario, they must be aware that parallel projects or actions in other segments also rub off in their overall brand image, which can create inconsistencies from the perspective of fans and harm the development of the brand as authentic (Speed & Thompson, 2000).

Based on the results, and similar to the case of traditional sports, companies that seek to create an image that associates itself well and authentically to the context of eSports and the sponsored game may achieve more positive results than brands with no initiative. As the eSports industry expands its horizons toward different geographies, so do the opportunities to reach a wider audience, leading to more brands seeking their attention. As such, firms that develop strategies that create authentic and legitimate bonds with the sponsored games may more easily approach fans, especially those with an intense involvement with the game, who are more likely to form stronger bonds with the sponsoring brands.

In summary, it is recommended that future eSports sponsors develop creative and innovative ways to present themselves to fans as a method to create intertextuality with unique attributes of the game to clearly transmit the intention of mutual support between the brand and sponsored event.

Limitations and suggestions

One issue faced in this study was the final sample size, which was not large enough to compare certain groups or estimate other moderation effects. First, it was not possible to verify the differences based on the chosen brands by respondents since the sample did not present the minimum size necessary for each brand. Second, it was not possible to verify the differences based on respondent's gender considering the sample presented an unbalanced number of male and female respondents. Third, an endemic vs. non-endemic test was not able to be performed due to the fact that the number of non-endemic and endemic brands sponsoring the Brazilian League of Legends Championship was unbalanced and belonged to different industries.

Respondents whose age was below 18 years were discarded from the sample. This was opted to establish a base value for economically active individuals since one of the dependent variables utilized was purchase intention. However, the demographics of eSports fans are generally of young adults and individuals under 18 years old, a considerable percentage of the total. Disregarding their responses reduced the diversity of the study's sample, making it infeasible to test for possible group differences from this underage group.

The current model was applied for fans of a specific eSports game: League of Legends. It is suggested that future studies in the field of eSports sponsorship reapply the proposed model in the context of other games.

As discussed before, some moderation effects were not able to be estimated, such as the demographics of gender and the distinction of endemic vs. non-endemic brands, alongside other equally important moderating variables like geographic region, level of schooling, and socioeconomic class. It is suggested that future research attempts to collect more social and economic information to verify possible moderation effects.

eSports carry many characteristics from the structure of traditional sports. However, they still differ in aspects that may affect the type of relationship with sponsoring brands and their value from the perspective of the audience. eSports' events, for example, include more technological assets such as augmented reality for the audience (Immersiv.io, 2021), which can affect the cognition and attitude of consumers (Vieira et al., 2022). Also, eSports fans are much more en-

gaged in the sport and use different media and community channels, which influences the strategies that sponsors develop to engage with them. This may help form stronger bonds between fans, eSports and sponsors, which is not a reality in the context of traditional sports. Thus, comparing fan's level of engagement and the sponsoring brand strategies between traditional sports and eSports may be a relevant contribution to the literature.

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