

# A CONCEPTUAL PAPER ON EXAMINING SPONSOR RESPONSE BEHAVIOUR IN ESPORTS EVENT: THE ROLE OF SPONSOR FACTOR AND TEAM IDENTIFICATION

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**Abstract:** *The popularity of esports has grown exponentially in recent years, attracting significant attention from corporate sponsors. However, understanding the factors that influence sponsor response behaviour in the esports context remains a critical research gap. This study aims to examine the role of sponsor factors, team identification in shaping sponsor response behaviour among esports fans. The study aims to understand how sponsor attributes and fan-team identification influence sponsor response during esports events. This approach is particularly relevant given the unique characteristics of the esports environment which includes its digital nature and the varying levels of fan engagement and sponsor awareness. These factors are crucial in shaping audience attitudes and behaviours towards sponsors in this digital and interactive domain. Methodologically, the study employs an exploratory and descriptive research design, utilizing a cross-sectional approach with data collected through online questionnaires. This design is suitable for uncovering new relationships and patterns in the complex esports sponsorship landscape. By exploring these dynamics, the study aims to offer fresh insights into the psychological mechanisms underlying sponsor effectiveness in esports, contributing to both theoretical knowledge and practical applications for sponsors and marketers in this rapidly evolving field. The findings are expected to be valuable for companies sponsoring esports events and organizers seeking to enhance fan engagement and value creation.*

**Keywords:** *Esports, Sponsor Response Behaviour, Sponsor Factor, Team Identification*

## Introduction

Esports is one of the fastest-growing types of digital entertainment. Its growth has been driven by better technology, easier access, and the chance to compete against the best (Cranmer et al., 2020). Industry reports say that by the end of 2020, the world audience for esports will have grown to 495 million, which is more than the number of people who watch many traditional sports events (Cranmer et al 2020). The acknowledgment of esports by esteemed organizations, including the International Olympic Committee and the US National Collegiate Athletic Association, reinforces the trustworthiness and popularity of this emerging form of competitive gaming. The development of videogame streaming has reduced the necessity for traditional television contracts, allowing for global access to competitive videogaming (Allison, 2020). Moreover, esports have become a powerful force in the gaming world, offering engaging entertainment for a diverse audience and presenting significant opportunities for businesses and stakeholders in the industry (Huettermann & Pizzo, 2022). The growing popularity of esports has attracted the attention of researchers looking to better understand the factors that influence fan behaviour. The entertainment landscape in Malaysia has been significantly impacted by esports, a rapidly growing industry. In recent years, event organizers and organizations in Malaysia have increasingly relied on sponsors to support their activities (Ho & Sia, 2020) The rise of live streaming services has aided the expansion of the esports sector by allowing for increased accessibility and engagement with audiences (Hasim et al., 2023).

Sponsors play an extremely important role in the esports business. Sponsors supply the funds required for clubs and event planners to stage and advertise their events, as well as to make investments in team infrastructure and player development. Additionally, sponsors may offer valuable in-kind contributions, including marketing support, merchandise, and equipment, to improve the overall experience for both participants and spectators. Sponsorship has emerged as a crucial marketing tool for businesses looking to improve their brand image, increase exposure, and generate sales (Feng et al., 2022). The success of sponsorship, however, is not exclusively determined by the amount of publicity. The perceived fit between the sponsor and the sponsored activity, as well as consumer participation with the event, can all have an important impact on the sponsor's image (Campbell, 2022). In summary, the background of the research on examining response behaviour outcomes in esports event highlights the importance of understanding the role of sponsor factor, team identification in influencing esports consumption behaviour. One of the primary obstacles faced by esports organizers is the high expenditures associated with hosting these events (Zhang & Liu, 2022). Second issue is the digital-native nature of esports, where the prominence of streamers and influencers, as well as the inherent interactivity of esports viewership, may introduce new dynamics that shape sponsor response behaviour (Huettermann et al., 2020 ; Lehnert et al., 2020). Historically, traditional sports have been a valuable avenue for brands to extend and enhance their marketing strategies (Gawrysiak et al., 2020). However, the rise of esports has introduced a new demographic of sport consumers that have not been effectively reached by traditional sports and marketing models (Gawrysiak et al., 2020). Thirdly, this study highlights that fans prioritize sponsors who are genuinely committed to supporting tournaments, professional players, and maintaining the sport's integrity (Freitas et al., 2020). Fans are discerning and can easily identify which brands are authentically contributing to the esports community and which are merely seeking to capitalize on its popularity. This trend has only intensified, with fans becoming increasingly vocal about their expectations from sponsors. By bridging this crucial concept, the research addresses a significant gap in understanding the psychological mechanisms underlying sponsor effectiveness in the rapidly evolving esports industry, thereby offering a fresh perspective in sports marketing and consumer behaviour literature.

## Literature Review

### Definition of Esports

Electronic sports, also known as esports, are competitive (amateur and pro) video gaming events that are frequently organized by tournaments, leagues and ladders and in which players typically belong to “sporting” organizations or teams that are sponsored by a variety of businesses (García-lanzo et al., 2020). In contrast to traditional sports like baseball, soccer and hockey, esports is a multiplatform collaboration, esports is a terminology which comprises electronic sports, cybersports, gaming, competitive computer gaming, and virtual sports (Hasyim, 2023). The word ‘esports’ has a wide range of meanings that may be construed in a variety of ways. The components of esports, according to Bányai et al., (2019), comprise the aspect of competition (winner and loser) and structured events regulated by regulations. Esports is defined by Ke et al., (2022) as "professional gaming" involving electronic systems. Esports, according to Ahir et al., (2020), are competitive sports that take place in virtual reality and are supported by technology. As a result, the authors define esports as "organized video game tournaments" for the purposes of this article.

Esports is not a new industry in Malaysia. The Malaysia Digital Economy Corporation or MDEC plays a crucial role to bring together these players, community and industry to network, share views and grow business value. At present, Malaysian games studio have showcased their capabilities by developing and contributing to the art and design for renowned Triple A games such as ‘Final Fantasy’, ‘Street Fighter V’ and ‘Uncharted 4’. In order to sustain the momentum, LEVEL UP Inc, an initiative under MDEC was established as an accelerator for games, providing an integrated support eco-system consisting of physical infrastructure, competency and capability development programmes. Mobile game developers such as Moonton were quick to recognize esports’ potential. Moonton hooked up with eGG Network to produce the Mobile Legends Professional League Malaysia/Singapore (MPL MY/SG), which is now in its third season. The league’s popularity is evident in the more than 1,000 team registrations it attracts. Another huge success was the 2018 Kuala Lumpur Major. A Dota 2 tournament hosted by eGG Network in partnership with international esports companies, saw Stadium Axiata Arena filled for three days with fans happy to camp there for hours on end, easily exceeding 12 hours a day. The merchandise was sold out is yet another telling point. This is indeed very encouraging for the industry. The players are sponsored, paid to play and train and have taken Malaysia’s esports industry to another level by proving that ordinary gamers can make it a thriving industry.

### Sponsor Response Behaviour

Esports sponsorship involvement is influenced by a range of factors pertaining to sponsors. A comprehensive literature review on the esports sponsorship environment reveals key insights into maximizing sponsor response behaviour in fans. Esports sponsorship environment significantly influences sponsor response. Studies highlight the importance of factors like sponsorship image, consumer participation, and brand interactivity in shaping fans' attitudes and behaviours towards sponsors (Rogers et al., 2020; Freitas et al., 2020). Furthermore, studies highlight the benefits of sponsoring professional players and tournaments, in-game branding, and creating rapid relevant added value to enhance brand recognition and sales (Huettermann et al., 2023; Freitas et al., 2020).

According to Freitas et al., (2020), studies indicate that sponsor antecedents play a crucial role in altering sponsorship image and driving sponsorship response, emphasizing the need for

effective engagement strategies. Additionally, the type of sponsor (endemic vs. non-endemic) and the level of engagement with sponsors' activation communications directly impact brand loyalty among consumers, showcasing the intricate relationship between engagement and response in esports sponsorships (Huettermann et al., 2023). Research has highlighted the importance of promoting good practices, integrity, and effective stakeholder engagement to mitigate risks associated with negative media influence and dishonorable behaviour in various sectors (Galli, 2019; Hernández et al., 2019; Lee & Li, 2021; Hadeed et al., 2024). Transparent and ethical communication practices are crucial for building public trust and confidence, particularly during challenging times such as public health crises (Lee & Li, 2021).

Thus, the review underscores the need for brands to align with the esports industry's growth, support the development of the sector, and commit to long-term engagement to effectively engage fans and optimize sponsorship outcomes. Overall, understanding and effectively engaging with esports fans through sponsorship can lead to enhanced sponsor response behaviour and brand image in the esports industry.

### **Sponsor Factor**

Esports sponsorship involvement is influenced by a range of factors pertaining to sponsors. Rogers (2020) further emphasized the significance of credibility and audience perception, with endemic sponsors generally being viewed more positively. This study explores the audience's perceptions of endemic versus non-endemic sponsors of esports events, which have a significant impact on attitudes towards sponsors. Huettermann et al. (2023) highlighted the importance of understanding audience perceptions of endemic versus non-endemic sponsors, revealing that sponsors' endemic nature tends to suggest more positive reactions from viewers.

Hsiao et al., (2021) discovered that there is a substantial impact on purchase intention from experiential marketing activation and brand equity, while satisfaction has a relatively minor role. This implies that it would be beneficial for sponsors to concentrate on developing distinctive and memorable experiences for participants. The present study will also investigate the same issues that have been explored by the previous researcher which focus on the relationship between sponsor factor towards sponsor response behaviour but in different study setting. According to the study conducted by Rogers et al. (2020), sponsor antecedents, including the ubiquity of the sport, sincerity of the sponsor, and attitude towards the sponsor, play a crucial role in influencing sponsorship image and affecting outcomes such as interest, purchase intention, and word of mouth (Shoffner et. al., 2020). In addition, this study will investigate the interplay between sponsors and esports events as a mutually beneficial relationship, enhancing brand recognition, enabling communication with the target demographic, and supporting esports events.

Previous investigations have reported that sponsor brand equity is influenced by consumer perceptions of the congruity between the sponsor and the event (Thompson et al., 2018 ; Lee & Jin, 2019 ; Huettermann et al., 2023 ; Rogers et al., 2020). The perception of congruity, whether functional or image-related, is crucial in determining the effectiveness of image transfer from the event to the brand. Consumers' recognition of the similarities between the sponsor and the event has been found to result in more favourable attitudes towards the sponsoring brand. As an emerging and rapidly growing field, esports present a unique opportunity for sponsors to connect with a highly engaged and tech-savvy audience. Furthermore, past studies examining sponsorship have primarily focused on the sponsor and not the sporting event, with the current study seeking to analyse how sponsorship associations are interpreted by consumers toward the event. This study aims to provide a more holistic understanding of the sponsorship relationship



by examining both the sponsor and the esports event. It will investigate how consumers perceive and respond to the interplay between the sponsor and the event, contributing to the existing body of knowledge on sponsorship effectiveness.

Prior studies have indicated that sponsor-related variables play a crucial role in influencing sponsor response behaviour within esports sponsorship involvement (Fidan et al., 2024; Cuesta-Valiño et al., 2022; Rogers et al., 2020). Similarly, in the present study, an examination of sponsor factor such as the ubiquity of sport, sincerity of sponsor, and attitude will be highlighted the importance of sponsor antecedents for engagement. As highlighted by Kalynets K., & Krykavskyy V., (2022), it is proposed that the activation of sponsors' initiatives is essential for driving customer engagement towards the sponsor, with sponsorship authenticity and attitudes towards the sponsor serving as key determinants. Moreover, the partnership between sponsors and esports events is mutually beneficial, enhancing brand awareness, facilitating interaction with the target audience, and supporting esports events.

Thus, this study aims to investigate the relationship between sponsor factor towards sponsor response behaviour. This thorough investigation highlights the importance of sponsor factor in shaping sponsor response behaviour and overall involvement in esports sponsorships. These findings will establish the basis for additional research into the interaction between sponsor factors and their impact on sponsor response behaviour.

### **Team Identification**

Team identification is an important consideration in esports sponsorship. Several studies have shown the importance of team identification. Esports sponsorship environment is influenced by team identification, affecting fans' responses to sponsor activations. Prayag et al., (2020) highlight the role of team identification in influencing fans' attachment to a team and their attitudes towards team sponsors, respectively. In this study also will be investigating on the evaluation of the team identification influences fans' emotions and attachment to an esports event towards sponsor response behaviour. Team sponsorship is one of the most popular and familiar avenues for esports partnerships becoming an official sponsor of a team (Rogers et al., 2020). All esports' teams wear jerseys featuring their organization name/brand as well as any sponsored brand logos whenever they compete. As a partner, the sponsor's brand will typically be associated with the team and its fan base.

Smith & Smith (2021) found that stressors such as communication issues and lack of shared team goals can impact esports competitors, suggesting that these factors may also influence team identification. The paper examines stressors and coping strategies of esports competitors to guide applied practitioners in supporting players for performance enhancements. According to Maldonado-Murciano et al., (2022), high team identifiers exhibit more favourable attitudes towards sponsors even after a loss, while low identifiers show fewer positive evaluations. Additionally, studied by Fidan et al., (2024) stated that sponsorship involvement is positively related to brand loyalty, with fan involvement and brand interactivity driving the interaction. Understanding the interplay between team identification and sponsor response behaviour is crucial for sponsors to tailor their messaging strategies effectively in esports sponsorships. Other than that, naming rights agreements are another way for sponsors to associate their brand with a team (Pan & Phua, 2021). These agreements involve the sponsor's brand being included in the team's name, such as the TSM FTX team in League of Legends. A study explored how satellite fans' identification with their favourite foreign team influences sponsorship outcomes in Malaysia (Tsordia et al., 2024). The study found that team identification can influence sponsorship outcomes, such as purchase intention and brand loyalty.

Moreover, the strategic plan for esports development in Malaysia 2020-2025 includes increasing non-endemic and endemic brand sponsorships for esports. This suggests that the Malaysian government is interested in promoting esports sponsorships in the country. The esports industry has experienced rapid growth in recent years, attracting a large and dedicated fan base (Lehnert et al., 2020). This has piqued the interest of various companies, including food and beverage brands, who see the potential for effective sponsorship and marketing within this emerging space (Huettermann et al., 2023; Gawrysiak et al., 2020). One such example is the partnership between Nestle-owned chocolate brand KitKat Chunky and the Malaysian esports competition, the University e-League (Lehnert et al., 2020; Gawrysiak et al., 2020). The sponsorship deal, in which KitKat Chunky was named the main sponsor for the league's 2021 season, suggests that food and beverage companies are increasingly interested in leveraging esports to reach their target audiences (Lehnert et al., 2020). This aligns with research indicating that non-endemic companies can benefit from esports sponsorship through enhanced brand attitudes, perceived goodwill, and purchase intentions from esports consumers (Huettermann et al., 2023). Moreover, the strong connection between fans and their favourite teams or players, particularly after a team's success, can translate to increased sponsor brand trust and loyalty. (Lehnert et al., 2020). Analysing the KitKat Chunky-University e-League partnership through the lens of existing esports sponsorship literature can provide valuable insights into the potential impact and best practices for brands seeking to enter this dynamic market.

These studies collectively suggest that team identification in esports events in Malaysia may be influenced by a range of factors, including stressors, social connections, and attachment points. Overall, these findings suggest that team identification is an important factor to consider in esports sponsorship in Malaysia such as telecommunications, food and beverage, and other companies who are interested in sponsoring esports teams and competitions in Malaysia, and the Malaysian government is interested in promoting esports sponsorships in the country. Therefore, it is important for sponsors to carefully consider their alignment with the values of the gaming community and the team's fan base when sponsoring esports in Malaysia.

In conclusion, Malaysia's esports industry has shown impressive growth and potential, becoming a key part of the country's digital entertainment landscape. With support from government initiatives, like those led by the Malaysia Digital Economy Corporation (MDEC), and investments from both local and international players, Malaysia is quickly establishing itself as a major esports hub in Southeast Asia (Malaysia Ministry of Youth and Sports, 2020). The success of Malaysian esports athletes on the global stage and the hosting of significant tournaments further highlight this progress.

### Research Methodology

This conceptual paper adopts a quantitative research approach to examine how sponsorship engagements impact fan responses within Mobile Legends Professional League (MPL) esports events. Data will be gathered through structured online surveys targeting MPL fans and collecting key demographic information such as age, gender, and gaming frequency. The survey will assess variables related to sponsorship engagements (e.g., in-game advertising, branded content, social media interactions), fan responses (e.g., brand recall, brand perception, loyalty), and moderating factors (e.g., fan involvement, brand fit, perceived authenticity). Data analysis will be conducted using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with software like SmartPLS or AMOS, allowing for the exploration of complex relationships among multiple independent and dependent variables, fitting the study's exploratory nature and incorporation of latent constructs. The data analysis process will include evaluating the

measurement model for reliability and validity, followed by testing the structural model to confirm hypothesized relationships. The PLS-SEM method will help identify direct and indirect effects, mediators, and overall model fit. This quantitative approach offers a comprehensive framework for analyzing the influence of sponsorship engagements on fan responses, providing empirical insights to guide future research and practical strategies for enhancing sponsorship effectiveness in esports.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this conceptual research aims to contribute valuable insights to the field of esports sponsorship and marketing. By examining the interconnections between event sponsor factors, team identification and sponsor response, this study presents a comprehensive perspective that moves beyond isolated variables. As the esports industry continues to evolve, the findings from this study are expected to inform strategic decision-making for sponsors, teams, and event organizers. The insights gained will help stakeholders refine their approaches to sponsorship, event management, and fan engagement, fostering mutually beneficial relationships. This holistic approach encourages a shift from fragmented views to a more integrated understanding of how various elements interact to influence sponsor and fan engagement. As such, this study promises to advance both academic understanding and practical strategies within the industry. By adopting a comprehensive view, this research broadens the scope of esports marketing and sponsorship, establishing a foundation for future initiatives and enhancing engagement quality between sponsors and the esports community.

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