EPH-International Journal of Business & Management Science

A STUDY ON SPONSORSHIP BRANDING AND ITS INFLUENCE ON FAN ENGAGEMENT IN E- SPORTS

Dr. Amlin David[1], Dr. Bindhu Ann Thomas[2], Abdul Rahman MS[3]

[1]Assistant Professor, Kochi Business School, amlincrusader@gmail.com, 0000-0002-7413-0065
[2]Principal, Kochi Business School, drbindhuannthomas@gmail.com, 0009-0006-1309-8870
[3]MBA, Saintgits College of Engineering, abdulrahmanms453@gmail.com, 0009-0003-7125-1616

Article History
Received: *2026-05-21*
Revised: *2026-10-08*
Accepted: *2026-11-02*
Published: *2026-11-24*

Abstract
With the rise in electronic sports (eSports), sponsorship branding has become a critical component in building meaningful connections between business and sport. Sponsorship branding has become very important in creating valuable links between business and sport, particularly during the rise of eSports. This study analyses the correlations between brand–fan identity, awareness of sponsorship, the credibility of the sponsor, and community and sponsorship in the context of the eSports industry and its four independent variables. The research design used was quantitative and cross-sectional, and structured questionnaires were used to gather the answers of the respondents (167) through convenience sampling. For the evaluation of the relationships between the study variables, descriptive statistics, Cronbach's alpha reliability analyses, simple linear regression and multiple regression were used. Findings revealed positive relationships and statistically significant relationships between all four sponsorship factors and fan engagement. The overall regression model accounted for 73.2% of the variation in fan engagement ($R^2 = 0.732$). Community and sponsorship were the two best predictors ($\beta = 0.496, 0.325$, respectively), followed by brand–fan identity ($\beta = 0.238$), sponsorship awareness ($\beta = 0.193$), and sponsor credibility ($\beta = 0.193$). These results underscore the significance of community-based sponsorship strategies, emotional connection, brand recognition and the credibility of sponsors when it comes to comprehending audience engagement. The research adds to the existing knowledge in the field of eSports marketing by sharing empirical findings regarding factors that influence fan engagement in the context of sponsorship and has implications for brands, eSports tournament organisers, and eSports gaming organisations.

Keywords: *Sports; Sponsorship Branding; Fan Engagement; Sponsor Credibility; Community Engagement*

Vol. 12 Issue 7s (November, 2026)
ISSN: 2208-2190 Pages- 35-48
DOI: https://doi.org/10.69023/8ybwmy56

1. Introduction

Electronic sports (eSports) is a powerful part of the global entertainment and marketing industry, driven by the quick growth of digital technologies, the availability of the internet and the booming popularity of competitive video games. eSports is an organised competitive gaming event with professional streamers, teams, tournaments and digitally connected game fans. This increasing commercial value has promoted organisations to use sponsorship branding strategies to boost the market visibility, improve consumer relationship and build meaningful relationships with gaming communities. In contrast to traditional advertising, sponsorship branding enables companies to link their products and company brandings to the feelings and passions of the viewers. These ties can help build positive consumer perceptions and boost brand positioning in competitive gaming markets. The eSports sponsorship has been shown to be a means to enhance brand image, as long as it is sponsored in a way that fits the characteristics of gaming communities and expectations of the audience (Freitas et al., 2020).

The fan participation aspect of eSports is a critical part of the game's popularity, visibility, and commercial viability, as fans play an active role in the promotion and spread of competitive video games. Engagement isn't limited to watching the tournament, but also involves joining in with online commentary, sharing content, interactions with pros, and affiliation with gaming communities. These activities create relationships between spectators and the organisations they want to support which are emotional and behavioural. This is especially pertinent for fan identity because if someone is able to create a strong connection with an eSports team and community, they may feel more inclined to engage in eSports-related events and to remain a fan. A multi-faceted approach to fan identity, fan engagement and fan motivations has been explored in research that looks at the fan participation in competitive gaming settings (Barney & Pennington, 2023). Moreover, audience-driven communication is becoming crucial to audience-oriented communication strategies due to the influence of changing preferences in media consumption on how spectators consume contents of games and interact with digital entertainment platforms (Ji & Hanna, 2020).

Sponsorship branding has therefore shifted from mere signs of companies' presence and logos to more interactive marketing strategies that aim to build an experience for customers. Brands are also getting involved in eSports events, such as eSports tournaments, gaming live streams, sponsored games and digital promotion, to build connections with eSports fans. These activities enable organisations to share their brand values as well as giving consumers an opportunity to engage with brand-sponsored content. Adopting commercial products into competitive gaming contexts can foster a sense of connection between promotional activities and entertainment experiences, as well as consumer engagement, which can deepen the customer-product relationship (Jo & Lewis, 2024). Having a knowledge of the unique marketing aspects of eSports, such as digital communication, audience preferences and competitive gaming culture, is also crucial for effective sponsorship strategies. Thus, the creation of suitable branding is significant for organisations aiming for maximisation of the promotional efficiency and building long-term partnerships with eSports consumers (Kalynets & Krykavskyy, 2022).

Another key factor affecting sponsorship-related engagement is the brand – the fan identification. Watching a team, player, tournament or community of people can lead to an emotional connection for viewers, which can affect how they view the sponsor brands. In such instances, audiences can feel a greater affinity between themselves and commercial organisations when they have a sense of those companies' values and interests being aligned with their own. However, if the sponsorship is not relevant or authentic, the brand association will be undermined, and the audience will not respond. In established sports brand markets, there is a connection between the launch of eSports and brand positioning in the context of changing entertainment landscapes (Mühlbacher et al., 2022). Therefore, knowledge about brand–fan identity is essential to examine the possibility of emotional connection, participation in the brand and further involvement of the fan.

Digital media also shape the awareness of sponsorship by boosting both the frequency of communication and accessibility to the brand. Online gaming communities, social networking sites, and streaming platforms allow viewers to come across promotional messages as they engage in activities for entertainment. These platforms can also be used to share content, make recommendations to peers and allow for interactive communication, which can help to reach a wider audience for sponsors. Interaction through digital experiences has the potential to shape the audience's involvement in video streaming platforms, as it plays a crucial role in fostering participation by engaging with consumers and creating perceived value in the process (Polat, 2022). In the context of eSports, sponsorship awareness refers to the capability of the fans to identify and remember the brands they see and hear connected with the games, teams and players. But awareness is not always enough to cause an impact unless audiences also think that the sponsoring organisations are credible, relevant and that they support gaming communities.

Vol. 12 Issue 7s (November, 2026)
ISSN: 2208-2190 Pages- 35-48
DOI: https://doi.org/10.69023/8ybwmy56

Further explanations of the engagement with eSports-related activities are provided through the psychological characteristics of the eSports audience. Competitive games are a popular pastime for many fans, who come together for entertainment, social interaction, learning, emotional engagement, and community affiliation. These motivations shape their attitudes towards sponsors, and they are receptive to branded experiences. Self-determination theory has been applied in the study of fandom related to eSports to emphasise the psychological needs that are important for understanding spectators' participation and engagement (Qian et al., 2022). Likewise, a study that synthesised spectator behaviour in eSports has shown that there are various motives for engagement with eSports competition, as this does not just equate to entertainment consumption (Rietz & Hallmann, 2023). These thoughts highlight the need for sponsorship programs to consider the psychological and social aspects of audience engagement in designing branding strategies that are focused on the audience.
This is especially important when considering eSports audiences, as they are embedded in digitally connected worlds where brand information and opinions spread quickly, along with the importance of sponsor credibility and community participation. Credibility is the trust and credibility fans attribute to sponsoring organisations, which includes being knowledgeable, authentic and competent. Sponsorship, on the other hand, has a community focus and includes sponsoring games, enabling fans to interact with one another, and sharing experiences. Qualitative research in interactive sport-related entertainment has demonstrated how positive and negative experiences can influence those involved in sport, such as fantasy football participation (Wilkins et al., 2023). While fantasy football is not an eSport, this viewpoint adds to the overall understanding of the significance of participation experiences in the understanding of engagement-related behaviour. In competitive games, credible sponsors who actively engage in community development may have more potential to create positive relationships with audiences.
Although sponsorship-branding has become more relevant in eSports marketing, the contribution of each of the sponsorship-related factors to the engagement of fans is still relevant. Previous research offers important insights into brand image, fan identity, digital media consumption, psychological motivations and participation of the audience. But looking at these dimensions in an integrated empirical approach might help to better understand the relationship between sponsorship branding and fan engagement. So, the present study focused on the relationship between the 4 independent variables (brand–fan identity, awareness of the sponsor, sponsor credibility, community and sponsorship) and the dependent variable (fan engagement) within the context of eSports and sponsorship. The study employs a quantitative research method with 167 samples of respondents to show the relationship between the above with fan engagement. The results will go towards adding to the body of sponsorship marketing literature and offer practical lessons for brands, tournament organisers and eSports organisations looking to create believable, community-driven, and effective audience engagement strategies.

2. Literature Review

As eSports becomes more commercial, it has spurred researchers to examine the connections between sponsorship branding, consumer perceptions of the sport, brand equity and audience.The rise of commercialisation of electronic sports (eSports) has prompted researchers to consider the links among sponsorship brand, consumer perceptions, brand equity and audience. Sponsorship has become a valuable marketing tool for organisations to get connected with competitive audiences. Esports sponsorship works in a different arena compared to traditional promotional strategies; a digital space that is highly interactive, where perceptions about the brand become shaped by the involvement of the community, identification with the brand and experiences of its sponsors. Research on brand equity, purchase intention, eWOM, type of sponsorship, and endemic brand attributes has suggested mediating and moderating mechanisms in the eSports industry. This viewpoint imparts the significance of comprehending the relationship between sponsorship properties and consumer reactions and brand associated results (Ergin et al., 2024).
A crucial aspect of the eSports sponsorship is the connection between the sports and the branding.The fan-brand relationship is a key factor in the effectiveness of eSports sponsorships as fans tend to form emotional and social relationships with eSports teams, players and competitive communities. Such connections can have an impact on the way in which audiences view sponsorship deals and on their assessment of the organisations that sponsor their favourite teams. The concept of role-based identity offers a theoretical approach to understanding an individual's perception of himself/herself in terms of the sponsorship-related relationships between individuals and how these perceptions can influence consumer attitudes. Studies on the eSports fan-sponsor-sponsee relationship have investigated the role of identity in the perceptions and the behavioural reactions of the eSports fans. This implies that promoting psychological associations among fans and their favored eSports groups is significantly more crucial than simply promoting the visible visibility on campaigns (Calapez et al., 2024).

Vol. 12 Issue 7s (November, 2026)
ISSN: 2208-2190 Pages- 35-48
DOI: https://doi.org/10.69023/8ybwmy56

Other factors of how audiences respond to commercial partnerships are the image and value added created by the sponsorship. A sponsorship image is the association and impression that consumers form about an organisation that sponsors an event, a team or an activity. In eSports, these perceptions can be influenced by the importance of sponsorships in the sport, the audience's perception of how sponsors contribute to the gaming community, and the congruence of sponsor-related messages with the audience's expectations. Value creation can develop when sponsorship initiatives go beyond brand exposure and offer additional value beyond enhanced entertainment experiences and opportunities for participation. The study of image and value creation in eSports has focused on the link between commercial sponsorship and value oriented towards consumers, arguing the need to consider the assessment of sponsorship in terms of audience perceptions (Cuesta-Valiño et al., 2022).

An awareness of the sponsorship is another factor to take into account as consumers need to be aware or recall the sponsoring brand before they can form an informed perception related to the brand. Within the realm of online gaming, brand recognition can manifest in various ways, such as tournament broadcasts, advertising during gameplay, brand-sponsored events, and engagement with promo content. But the value of sponsorship exposure could be contingent on the match up among the sponsoring organisation and the gaming environment. Brand congruity is a matter of perceived consistency of a brand in the context where it occurs. In-game brand congruity and eSports consumers' implicit and explicit memory has been the theme of research that explores how brand related associations relate to different types of consumers' memory. This approach is applicable in a competitive setting for the evaluation of both recognition and recall of sponsors in competitive gaming (Hwang et al., 2023).

Spectators' attachment to eSports players is also likely to affect the perception of brands that sponsor them. Competitive successes, online engagement, and exposure to gaming content create opportunities for fans to make links to professional players, which often serves to create stronger bonds.Competitive achievements, online interaction, and ongoing exposure to gaming content all help fans make connections to the professional players, which can strengthen their bonds. The emotional relations can not only be between individual players but can also affect notions of organisations connected to them. This can be done through fan-to-player, team-to-sponsor and/or team-to-commercial partner relationships. The study of the emotional bond that spectators feel towards eSports players and how it relates to the brand that is being sponsored can offer a relevant insight into how inter-personal relationships in eSports communities can influence brand induced responses. This further emphasizes the need to take the emotional aspect into account when evaluating the effectiveness of sponsorship (Navarro-Lucena et al., 2024).

Consumer brand engagement in eSports events is an overall result of interactions between the visitors and the sponsoring organisations. Engagement can include 'cognitive' (attention), 'emotional' (involvement) and 'behavioural' (action) aspects such as following branded activities, engaging with promotional content and sharing experiences within online communities. eSports events offer a chance to engage audiences in a way different from traditional advertising, by offering competitive entertainment experiences. In studying consumer brand engagement, a study that investigates the impact of eSports events on consumer brand engagement explores the linkage between the event being watched and the brand engagement. From this viewpoint, the relevance of studying sponsorship activities from a broader perspective of digital entertainment experiences and audience participation (Lääkkölä, 2024) is supported.

Another aspect of effectiveness of commercial partnerships is perceived sponsorship fit. Fit of Sponsorship is the extent to which a brand sponsors an event, team or activity is perceived to be compatible. For eSports audiences, they can assess the sponsors based on the factors such as their relevance with the gaming culture, technological skills, their product line and their contribution to the competitive gaming. Through consumer involvement, the relationship between sports and the consumer may also be shaped and consumer behavioural intention may be developed. These dimensions have been explored in research focusing on eSports tournament viewers' involvement, perceived sponsorship fit and intention to buy the sponsors' products. This study not only helps clarify the relationship between the perception of sponsorship and consumer reaction in the competitive gaming context but also serves as a basis for developing consumer perceptions of sports sponsorship.This study offers a foundation for the understanding of how the perception of sponsorship may be linked to consumer response in competitive gaming contexts and provides a foundation for the developing consumer perceptions of sports sponsorship.

Purchase intention has been identified as an important commercial result of sponsorship branding but it is not a commercial engagement conceptually. Purchase intention is a measure of the consumers' readiness to consider a purchase of products sponsored by organisations, whereas engagement addresses their involvement and emotional involvement in the audience. These outcomes could be linked as positive sponsorship perceptions can lead to positive attitudes towards commercial brands. In the context of eSports tournaments,

Vol. 12 Issue 7s (November, 2026)
ISSN: 2208-2190 Pages- 35-48
DOI: https://doi.org/10.69023/8ybwmy56

the factors that influence consumers' response to sponsoring organisations have been studied as the antecedents of their attitude towards a sports sponsorship brand. This is viewed in a broader perspective for the awareness of the sponsors, associations with the brand and perceptions of the fans as well as a separate evaluation between purchase intention and engagement (Riyadi et al., 2025).

Sponsor credibility relates to the level of trustworthiness, competence and authenticity of the organisations who engage in sponsorship activities. In the context of eSports, familiarity with the sponsor, goodwill, awareness of gaming culture and the relevance of communication for promotion can be seen as factors that impact credibility. Consumer characteristics can also impact perceptions of sponsorship arrangements. The study that investigated eSports consumers' perceptions of a sponsorship, incorporating the consideration of gender and the type of sponsor, presents a relevant basis to understand the variations in the reactions of the audience to commercial partnerships. This implies that in order to build trustworthy connections with gaming communities, sponsorship strategies must take into account the diversity of audiences and their perceived suitability of the brand.This suggests that audience diversity and perceived brand suitability should be considered when developing effective sponsorship strategies.

Community engagement and interaction with sponsors are also other aspects of sponsorship branding, as competitive game viewers often engage with connected communities online. Sponsorship activities can add value to these communities through the provision of tournaments, opportunities to communicate and shared experiences. These types of programmes can have a positive impact on the perceptions fans may have of the organisation sponsoring the event and how they react to its promotion. To understand the perceptions of the audience of the organised competitive game and their response to the sponsors, a conceptual study was conducted on the Mobile Legends Professional League regarding the sponsorship engagements and fan response to sponsors. This view indicates that the focus of the study on sponsorship should focus on it as a community-building activity and not only as a commercial communication tool (Zailani et al., 2024).

The literature reviewed shows that sponsorship in eSports has been explored from different related angles such as brand equity, fan identity, sponsorship image, brand congruity, emotional attachment, consumer engagement, sponsorship fit, purchase intention, and perceptions of a sponsor. But these studies aim to investigate various sponsorship outcomes, and conceptual relationships, so there is a need for more empirical research into factors closely linked to fans' engagement with a sponsorship. When understood within a single framework of analysis, a more integrated perspective of the relationship between brands and audience engagement will be gained by considering brand–fan identity, awareness of the brand sponsoring the event, and the credibility of the brand's sponsorship, as well as community and sponsorship in the event. The present study, therefore, examines these four independent variables in the context of the fans' engagement with the music video, with 167 participants. The research will specifically concentrate on sponsorship branding and fan engagement to provide empirical evidence to contribute to the eSports industry's strategies in the context of audience centric marketing.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This research used a quantitative research approach to study the relationship between sponsorship branding and fan engagement in the eSports industry. The cross-sectional survey design was used to gather data on respondents' perceptions of factors related to sponsorship and their involvement in eSports activities. The four independent variables of this research were brand–fan identity, awareness of sponsorship, credibility of the sponsor, and community and sponsorship, and the dependent variable was fan engagement. The quantitative approach enabled the quantitative analysis of the relationships among the constructs through the descriptive statistics, reliability analysis and regression. This study aimed to determine the relationship between the sponsorship-related factors and the difference in fan engagement.

3.2 Population and Sampling Technique

The target population consisted of people related to the eSports industry: gaming enthusiasts, eSports spectators, students, and digitally active people who know what competitive gaming activities are. A non-probability convenience sampling technique was used, where the respondents can be selected based on their availability and willingness to participate in the study. The sampling method was deemed viable given the electronic nature of eSports and the online communities and communities of interest surrounding eSports. 167 respondents were included in the study, and their answers were used for statistical analysis. Convenience sampling was used for data collection; however, this type of sampling is not random, and therefore, the results may not be generalizable to the overall eSports community.

3.3 Data Collection and Research Instrument

Vol. 12 Issue 7s (November, 2026)
ISSN: 2208-2190 Pages- 35-48
DOI: https://doi.org/10.69023/8ybwmy56

The first data gathered was primary data that was gathered through a structured questionnaire which was created to determine the respondents' perceptions of sponsorship branding and fan engagement. The questionnaire included statements of five constructs that were explored in the study. Twenty items were used, on the 4 items for each construct. The responses given were on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5, which meant that the respondent could agree with the statement from 1 to 5. The questionnaire focused on emotional connection to eSports brands, awareness of eSports brands' supporting organisations, perceptions of the credibility of the organisation sponsoring eSports, community involvement in relation to the sponsor, and involvement in eSports activities. The structure allowed for quantitative comparison of the respondents and was useful for later statistical analysis.

3.4 Measurement of Study Variables

The study incorporated four independent variables and one dependent variable to examine sponsorship branding and fan engagement.

a)Brand–Fan Identity (BF): Brand–fan identity refers to the degree to which one emotionally/psychologically connects to eSports communities, eSports brands and eSports teams. The construct was assessed by four questionnaire items (BF1–BF4) that focused on the identification and association with eSports-related brands.

b)Sponsorship Awareness (SA): Sponsorship awareness is defined as the awareness and familiarity of eSports tournaments, teams and players' associated sponsors. The perceptions regarding (sponsor) recognition and awareness were evaluated using four items (SA1 - SA4).

c)Sponsor Credibility (SC): Sponsor credibility relates to the trustworthiness, authenticity and reliability of the organisations sponsoring eSports activities. Four items (SC1 to SC4) related to the perceptions of sponsoring organisations constituted the construct.

d)Community and Sponsorship (CS): Community and sponsorship are characterised by the perceived involvement of sponsoring organisations in supporting eSports communities and enabling communication between the fans. Four items (CS1–CS4) were used to assess sponsorship-related community perceptions.

e)Fan Engagement (FE): Fan engagement is the dependent variable defined as emotional involvement, interaction and participation shown by fans in the eSports ecosystem. The construct was assessed using four items (FE1-FE4) related to perceptions and behaviours of engagement.

3.5 Research Hypotheses

Based on the research objectives and the proposed relationships between sponsorship branding and fan engagement, the following alternative hypotheses were formulated:

H1: Brand–fan identity has a significant positive relationship with fan engagement in eSports.

H2: Sponsorship awareness has a significant positive relationship with fan engagement in eSports.

H3: Sponsor credibility has a significant positive relationship with fan engagement in eSports.

H4: Community and sponsorship have a significant positive relationship with fan engagement in eSports.

The corresponding null hypotheses proposed that no significant positive relationships existed between the respective independent variables and fan engagement.

3.6 Statistical Data Analysis

The results obtained were analysed quantitatively with statistical methods to assess the distribution, reliability and relationship of the study variables. The mean, the standard deviation, the minimum, the maximum and the variance were used to summarise the respondents' perceptions on each of the items of the questionnaire. The consistency of items measuring the constructs of the study was evaluated by using Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient and was found to be at the level of internal consistency reliability.

Simple linear regression analyses were used to examine the individual relationships between each independent variable and fan engagement. These analyses gave model correlation (R), coefficient of determination (R^2), adjusted R^2, and analysis of variance (ANOVA) statistics. Multiple linear regression was then used to explore the complex relationships between brand–fan identity, sponsorship awareness, sponsor credibility, and community and sponsorship on fan engagement. When assessing the individual predictors in the combined model, regression coefficients, standardised beta values, t-statistics and levels of significance were considered. Results were considered statistically significant at the 5% level.

The multiple regression model was specified as follows:

$$FE=\beta_0+\beta_1 BF+\beta_2 SA+\beta_3 SC+\beta_4 CS+\varepsilon$$

Where:

FE = Fan Engagement

BF = Brand–Fan Identity

Vol. 12 Issue 7s (November, 2026)
ISSN: 2208-2190 Pages- 35-48
DOI: https://doi.org/10.69023/8ybwmy56

SA = Sponsorship Awareness
SC = Sponsor Credibility
CS = Community and Sponsorship
β_0 = Regression intercept
β_1–β_4 = Regression coefficients
ε = Random error term

This model enabled the examination of the statistical contribution of each sponsorship-related factor while accounting for the other independent variables.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

The research was based on information gathered through questionnaires that asked the respondents about their views and experiences of using eSports sponsorship. Since the research involved individual opinions, it is important to ensure appropriate ethical protection by explaining the voluntary nature of the research, asking for informed consent, maintaining confidentiality of the responses, and requesting that the responses be used only for research. The identity of the respondents should be shielded in handling and reporting of data. The manuscript does not include sufficient information to verify the specific consent procedure, anonymisation arrangements and institutional ethical approval; these should therefore be confirmed with the actual consent procedure, anonymisation arrangements and institutional ethical approval before publication.

3.8 Methodological Limitations

The study had some methodological weaknesses. The first one is convenience sampling, which resulted in a nonrepresentative sample and limited generalisability. Secondly, the cross-sectional research design only recorded the respondents' perceptions at one time, ruling out causal conclusions about the relationship between sponsorship branding and fan engagement. Third, the self-reported questionnaire responses allowed for the possibility of bias in responses, as well as common method bias. Additionally, the study only considered four variables related to the sponsorship phenomenon and excluded other possible demographic, behavioural or contextual factors affecting fan engagement. What should be taken into consideration when interpreting the statistical results is the fact that the data presented is limited.

4. Results

The analysis comprised 167 valid questionnaire responses. Descriptive statistics, available internal-consistency estimates, four individual regression models, and a combined multiple regression model are reported below. The statistical values are reproduced from the supplied results; discrepancies requiring verification are explicitly identified.

4.1 Descriptive Statistics of Sponsorship Branding Constructs

Table 1 consolidates the reported item-level means and standard deviations for the four sponsorship-related constructs. Sponsor credibility items had means ranging from 3.95 to 4.16, while community and sponsorship items ranged from 3.48 to 4.16. Brand–fan identity displayed greater variation across its items, with means between 3.13 and 4.11. Sponsorship awareness item means ranged from 3.30 to 4.07.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of sponsorship branding constructs (N = 167)

Item	Mean	Standard deviation
BF1	3.99	1.070
BF2	3.40	1.086
BF3	3.13	1.233
BF4	4.11	1.014
SA1	4.07	1.033
SA2	4.05	0.952
SA3	3.30	1.015
SA4	3.65	1.023
SC1	3.98	0.918
SC2	4.16	0.831

Vol. 12 Issue 7s (November, 2026)
ISSN: 2208-2190 Pages- 35-48
DOI: https://doi.org/10.69023/8ybwmy56

SC3	3.95	0.863
SC4	4.02	0.836
CS1	3.87	0.895
CS2	4.16	0.887
CS3	4.07	0.958
CS4	3.48	0.993

4.2 Descriptive Analysis of Fan Engagement

The four fan engagement items showed mean values of 3.84 (FE1), 4.13 (FE2), 4.03 (FE3), and 3.65 (FE4). As illustrated in Figure 1, FE2 received the highest average response, whereas FE4 received the lowest. The corresponding standard deviations were 0.806, 0.902, 0.860, and 1.000, respectively.

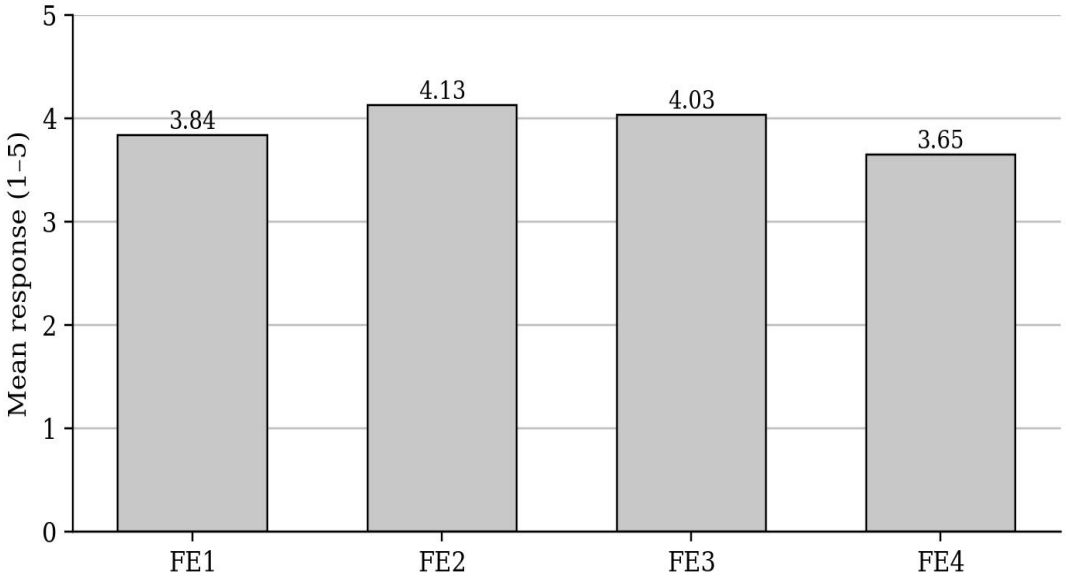

Figure 1. Mean scores of the four fan engagement items (N = 167).

4.3 Reliability Analysis of Study Constructs

Table 2 summarises the internal consistency results available in the supplied output. Cronbach's alpha was 0.837 for sponsor credibility and 0.815 for both community and sponsorship and fan engagement. The corresponding standardised-item alpha estimates were 0.836, 0.820, and 0.824. Results for brand–fan identity and sponsorship awareness were not provided in the available reliability tables and therefore cannot be independently reported here.

Table 2. Available internal consistency reliability estimates

Construct	Cronbach's α	Standardised α	Items
Sponsor credibility	0.837	0.836	4
Community and sponsorship	0.815	0.820	4
Fan engagement	0.815	0.824	4

4.4 Individual Regression Analysis of Sponsorship Branding Factors

Table 3 presents the four individual regression models predicting fan engagement. The reported R values were 0.518 for brand–fan identity, 0.734 for sponsorship awareness, 0.746 for sponsor credibility, and 0.835 for community and sponsorship. Each model was reported as statistically significant ($p < .001$). However, the brand–fan identity model reports $R^2 = 0.369$ despite $R = 0.518$; this is mathematically inconsistent and should be checked against the original output.

Table 3. Comparative summary of individual regression models predicting fan engagement

Vol. 12 Issue 7s (November, 2026)
ISSN: 2208-2190 Pages- 35-48
DOI: https://doi.org/10.69023/8ybwmy56

Predictor	R	Reported R^2	Adj. R^2	F(1,165)	p
Brand–fan identity	0.518	0.369	0.264	60.622	< .001
Sponsorship awareness	0.734	0.539	0.536	192.625	< .001
Sponsor credibility	0.746	0.556	0.553	206.678	< .001
Community and sponsorship	0.835	0.697	0.695	378.933	< .001

4.5 Comparative Explanatory Power of Sponsorship Branding Factors

Figure 2 compares the reported coefficients of determination from the individual regression models. Community and sponsorship showed the largest reported R^2 (0.697), followed by sponsor credibility (0.556) and sponsorship awareness (0.539). The brand–fan identity value is displayed as originally reported solely for comparison and remains subject to correction.

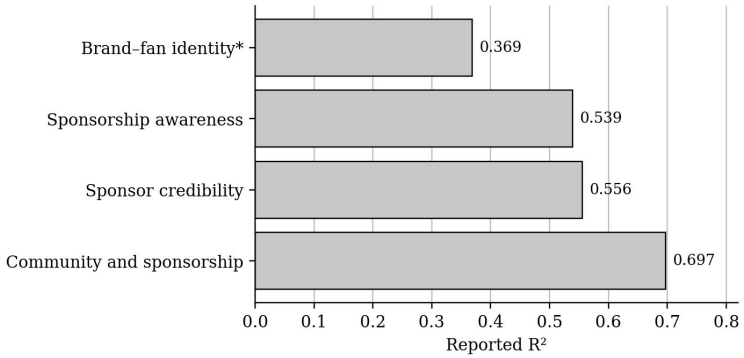

Figure 2. Reported R^2 values of the four individual regression models.

4.6 Multiple Regression Analysis of Fan Engagement

The combined multiple regression model included brand–fan identity, sponsorship awareness, sponsor credibility, and community and sponsorship as predictors of fan engagement. As shown in Table 4, the reported model correlation was R = 0.856, with R^2 = 0.732 and adjusted R^2 = 0.726. Thus, the model accounted for a reported 73.2% of the observed variance in fan engagement. The standard error of the estimate was 0.37579. All four predictors were reported as statistically significant in the combined model.

Table 4. Combined multiple regression model summary and predictor coefficients

Predictor/statistic	B	SE	β	t	p
Intercept	0.432	0.181		2.383	0.018
Community and sponsorship	0.475	0.083	0.496	5.736	< .001
Brand–fan identity	2.621	0.047	0.325	4.201	0.001
Sponsorship awareness	0.224	0.064	0.238	3.473	0.001
Sponsor credibility	0.196	0.072	0.193	2.728	0.007
Model R	0.856				
Model R^2	0.732				
Adjusted R^2	0.726				
Std. error of estimate	0.37579				

4.7 Relative Contribution of Sponsorship Branding Predictors

Vol. 12 Issue 7s (November, 2026)
ISSN: 2208-2190 Pages- 35-48
DOI: https://doi.org/10.69023/8ybwmy56

Figure 3 presents the standardised coefficients reported in the combined regression. Community and sponsorship showed the largest standardised coefficient (β = 0.496), followed by brand–fan identity (β = 0.325), sponsorship awareness (β = 0.238), and sponsor credibility (β = 0.193). These values indicate the relative associations within the reported multivariable model, although the inconsistent brand–fan identity unstandardised coefficient warrants caution.

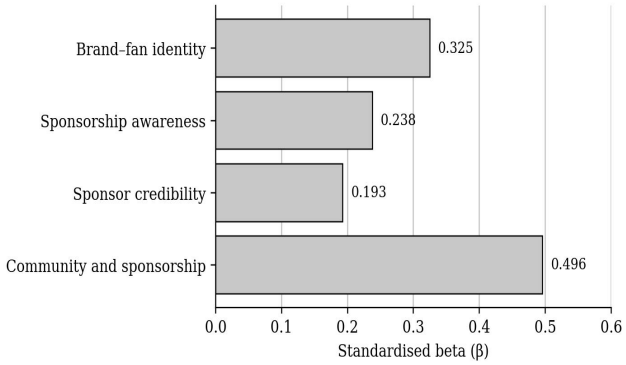

Figure 3. Standardised regression coefficients of the four predictors of fan engagement

4.8 Overall Pattern and Summary of Empirical Findings

Figure 4 provides a descriptive comparison of the five constructs using the arithmetic mean of their four reported item means. Sponsor credibility showed the highest approximate construct-level mean (4.03), followed by fan engagement (3.91), community and sponsorship (3.90), sponsorship awareness (3.77), and brand–fan identity (3.66). These descriptive averages are derived from the published item means rather than directly calculated respondent-level composite scores and should be interpreted accordingly.

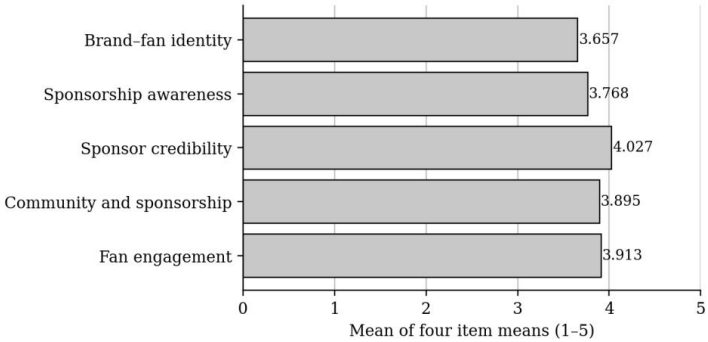

Figure 4. Approximate construct means calculated from the four reported item means per construct.

Overall, the findings indicate moderate-to-high self-reported perceptions across the study constructs and statistically significant associations between the four sponsorship branding factors and fan engagement in the reported regression models. Community and sponsorship were the strongest predictors in both the individual and combined analyses. The unresolved brand–fan identity regression discrepancies should be corrected before definitive publication-level interpretation.

5. Discussion

The current study explored the correlation between sponsorship branding and fan engagement in the eSports industry by analysing the relationship between four factors: brand–fan identity, sponsorship awareness, sponsor credibility, and community and sponsorship. The results showed positive and statistically significant relationships between these factors and the fans' engagement with the brand for 167 respondents. The multiple regression model explained 73.2% of the variance in an audience's engagement with the sport ($R^2 = 0.732$), indicating that perceptions related to the sponsorship explained a significant amount of variance in audience engagement. The four predictors had standardised betas of 0.496, 0.325, 0.238, and 0.193, respectively, with fan engagement. The four predictors were ranked from highest to lowest in relation to fan engagement, and standardised betas were 0.496 for community, 0.325 for brand–fan identity, 0.238 for sponsorship awareness, and 0.193 for sponsor credibility. These findings highlight the importance of sponsorship strategies that extend beyond promotional exposure and contribute to meaningful relationships between brands and gaming audiences. Previous literature has highlighted the relevance of sponsorship branding to support the brand image

Vol. 12 Issue 7s (November, 2026)
ISSN: 2208-2190 Pages- 35-48
DOI: https://doi.org/10.69023/8ybwmy56

through positive association with competitive gaming settings, which reinforces the potential of eSports sponsorship to boost the brand image (Freitas et al., 2020).

One of the most significant results of the study is the strong relation between the community and the sponsorship and engagement from the fans. Individual regression analysis showed that community and sponsorship explained 69.7% of the variance in fan engagement ($R^2 = 0.697$), and the standardised coefficients for community and sponsorship were the largest in the regression equation when the two variables were combined. The results indicate that fans who feel that an organisation's sponsorship is actively contributing to gaming communities are more likely to report being more engaged. Sponsorship in the community could help to improve bonds by supporting the tournament, engaging in interactive events, and enabling a chance to join in on common video gaming experiences. This type of engagement can help shape the perception that sponsors are dedicated to building the eSports industry and not just gaining visibility. Studies that explore the function of Team Liquid have also focused on the sponsorship relationships' strategic significance for brand development, the allocation of resources, and the generation of revenue, highlighting the role of sponsorship partnerships in supporting professional eSports organisations' overall strategies (Fatema & Koirala, 2025).

The study also found that brand–fan identity had a positive correlation with the fans' engagement, highlighting the importance of emotional connection to eSports teams, brands and communities for audience engagement. The second largest standardised coefficient ($\beta = 0.325$) was that of brand–fan identity in the combined regression model. This implies that people with a stronger connection with the eSports brand or community may exhibit higher engagement even while taking other sponsorship-related factors into account. This identification can help keep the audience engaged with the game, game interactions, and positive attitudes toward sponsorship relationships. Previous studies on eSports sponsorship and consumers' purchasing behaviour offer a relevant background to understand the possible correlation among commercial relations and consumer attitudes and purchasing behaviour. However, although there is a difference between purchasing behaviour and fan engagement, both are related to fans' relationship with the sponsoring organisation (Saarnisto, 2017).

The results also suggest that the concept of sponsorship branding is part of a broader sponsor-commercial partner relationship. Sponsorship arrangements can help organisations in creating an identity, positioning in competition, and establishing audience connections as a game community. In the context of the relatively high correlation between brand–fan identity and engagement, it seems that sponsors ought to keep some of the values, interests, and identity established fans have in mind when making their choices. Inconsistent sponsorship relationships with an eSports organisation may have less impact on fostering meaningful relationships with the audience. Qualitative studies on eSports branding and sponsorship agreements have covered aspects of brand development and business collaboration, which is important to consider when interpreting the significance of identity alignment for sponsorship strategies (Sahlberg, 2024).

Sponsorship awareness was positively correlated with fan engagement, and the regression model with fan engagement was statistically significant ($R^2 = 0.539$). However, in the combined model, sponsorship awareness was still positively related to engagement ($\beta = 0.238$). The results indicate that there is a positive relationship between respondents' recognition and familiarity with eSports sponsors and their level of engagement, which means that those who said that they noticed and knew more about eSports brands were more engaged in their products. Awareness of the brand can grow over time with exposure to the brand name, tournament promotions, streaming and digital exposure. The smaller standardised coefficient compared to community and sponsorship, however, indicates that awareness is not as closely tied to engagement as is perceived community involvement. The opportunities and challenges of bringing commercial partnerships into the eSports arena have been explored in the field of sponsorship research (Xing, 2019), further highlighting the need to be mindful of the interpretation of sponsorship exposure by gaming audiences.

There can also be differences in how that sponsorship brand is associated with engagement based on the type of audience. The present study focused on the four types of sponsorship constructs but the factors that led to the extent to which the spectators assessed the commercial partnership could depend on individual characteristics and experience. This is because fans may not be as familiar with gaming brands, feel more attached to professional teams and have varying expectations of the involvement of the sponsor. These differences also need to be considered when evaluating the observed associations since perceptions of sponsorship might not be homogeneous for the wider eSports audience. Previous studies that focused on gender and sponsor perception with the Mobile Legends fan base in the Professional League have shed light on the significance of the audience's characteristics in studying the sponsorship reactions. The results indicated that the demographic and behavioural characteristics of the audience do not moderate the relationship between sponsorship branding and audience engagement, which suggests that future research can build on this model

Vol. 12 Issue 7s (November, 2026)
ISSN: 2208-2190 Pages- 35-48
DOI: https://doi.org/10.69023/8ybwmy56

by investigating the moderating effect of demographic and behavioural characteristics on the relationship between sponsorship branding and audience engagement (Zaidi & Sazali, 2024).

Sponsor credibility also had a positive and statistically significant relationship with fan engagement. The individual regression model had an R^2 of 0.556, and the combined regression analysis had a standardised coefficient of $\beta = 0.193$. Despite being the least predictive variable in the combined model with standardised coefficients, the positive relationship with fan engagement indicates that trustworthiness, authenticity, and reliability are still important factors when it comes to fans. Sponsorship arrangements can foster positive assessments when they are credible; that is, when there is congruence between the sponsorship communication and the amount of competitive game involvement. However, this does not mean that credibility is the best predictor because its own regression model had a lot of explanatory power. A related study on the impact of authentic commercial relationships on consumer reactions to brand-sponsored eSports events explore this issue by examining the concepts of brand authenticity, brand equity, and purchase intentions in eSports event sponsorship (Silva & Almeida, 2024).

This is especially true for sponsorship deals between brands that are not directly involved in the gaming space. These organisations may struggle to be relevant to eSports fans, particularly as they are not considered to be doing sponsorship outside of a promotional campaign. Non-endemic sponsors, however, can have "good relationships" when their involvement is suitable to the game and provides a worthwhile value to the viewer. The positive relationship found between sponsor credibility and fan engagement suggests that the assessment of the perceived credibility of sponsoring organisations is relevant. Empirical research that investigates the perceptions of non-endemic sponsors of eSports consumers gives insight into the role of sponsor characteristics and audience evaluations on sponsorship-related responses (Huettermann et al., 2023).

The results of the two studies suggest that brand visibility, credible communication to the audience and community involvement should be combined in the sponsorship strategy. While all four predictors were positively related to fan engagement, the relative impact of these predictors varied. Community and sponsorship were the strongest predictors in both the individual and combined regression analyses, indicating that community-based interventions might be particularly important in relation to engagement-related outcomes. Then, sponsoring companies may focus on those things that will benefit fans, such as backing competitions, enabling online interaction, and helping to build gaming communities. A study on added value, which should be relevant to eSports sponsorships, further confirms that the provision of benefits that audiences feel are of value is an important consideration, as well as traditional promotional presence (Freitas et al., 2021).

The results also have implications for digital marketing and communication of sponsorship. Online platforms are the primary mediums preferred by eSports fans and where meaningful information regarding the sponsorship can be shared, discussed, and assessed. Brands can thus benefit from communication strategies that aim to encourage interaction and to facilitate ongoing audience participation. In the present study, however, it is not meant to be interpreted as establishing that sponsorship activities increase engagement; the cross-sectional study design only establishes statistical associations, not causation. The findings from the study of sponsorship and social media engagement within professional sporting teams offer a wider context of the connection between sponsorship activity and digital audience engagement, which is applicable beyond the sport setting, which was the focus of the engagement approach (Naraine et al., 2022).

In general, the study fills the research gaps in the field of sponsorship branding in eSports by exploring four sponsorship-related factors under a common quantitative lens. The results indicate that there is a positive relationship between the community and the other variables, such as brand – fan identification, sponsor awareness and sponsor credibility. The results highlight that the community has a positive relationship with the remaining variables: brand – fan identification, sponsor awareness and sponsor credibility, with the strongest relationship between community and the remaining variables in the combined model. Still, the findings of this study must be considered with the above-mentioned limitations in mind, such as convenience sampling, self-report measurements, and the cross-sectional design. In addition, the brand–fan identity regression statistics reported are numbers that need to be verified before the results can be final. Larger probability-based samples, longitudinal designs, and other factors like perceived sponsorship fit, fan loyalty, and audience demographics would be utilised in future research to investigate whether these relationships are robust and generalizable.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the connection between sponsorship branding and fan engagement in the eSports industry with a focus on the brand–fan identity, awareness of sponsorship, credibility of the sponsor, and community and sponsorship. The results of the questionnaires showed positive and statistically significant relationships between all four independent variables and fan engagement. The overall regression model accounted for 73.2%

Vol. 12 Issue 7s (November, 2026)
ISSN: 2208-2190 Pages- 35-48
DOI: https://doi.org/10.69023/8ybwmy56

of the variance in fan engagement, which suggests that it has a significant explanatory power within the researched sample. Community and sponsorship were found to be the highest predictors, along with brand–fan identity, awareness of sponsorship, and credibility of the sponsor. The results indicate that the involvement of the audience and an emotional connection to the sport are especially important in the context of eSports fans. The study identifies the need for sponsorship strategies going beyond traditional promotional exposure. It is important for brands and eSports companies to foster stronger connections with communities, promote gaming, ensure good communication, and develop audience interactive experiences that align with the interests of the audience. These could help to shape positive sponsorship experiences and enhanced connections with fans. However, the study should be interpreted considering the convenience sampling method, cross-sectional research design and self-reported data. Such restrictions hinder generalisation and impede causal inferences. Future studies should use larger and more varied samples, longitudinal designs, and include more variables, including the fit of the sponsorship, fan loyalty, and demographic characteristics. Overall, it is an empirical study with valuable insights into sponsorship branding and practice for building audience-centred engagement strategies in the dynamic world of eSports.

References

1. Freitas, B. D. A., Contreras-Espinosa, R. S., & Correia, P. Á. P. (2020). Sponsoring esports to improve brand image. Scientific annals of economics and business, 67(4), 495-515.
2. Barney, J., & Pennington, N. (2023). An exploration of esports fan identity, engagement practices, and motives. Telematics and informatics reports, 11, 100081.
3. Ji, Z., & Hanna, R. C. (2020). Gamers first–how consumer preferences impact eSports media offerings. International journal on media management, 22(1), 13-29.
4. Jo, W., & Lewis, M. (2024). Sponsored product-based competition and customer engagement: A study of an esports competition in the video game industry. Production and Operations Management, 33(3), 795-816.
5. Kalynets, K., & Krykavskyy, V. (2022). Marketing solutions to promote branding in eSports. Technology audit and production reserves, 3(4 (65)), 20-25.
6. Mühlbacher, H., Bertschy, M., & Desbordes, M. (2022). Brand identity dynamics–reinforcement or destabilisation of a sport brand identity through the introduction of esports?. Journal of Strategic Marketing, 30(4), 421-442.
7. Polat, V. (2022). Customer benefits and sharing behaviour in video streaming services: the mediation effect of value creation. Marketing i menedžment innovacij, 13(3), 34-43.
8. Qian, T. Y., Wang, J. J., Zhang, J. J., & Hulland, J. (2022). Fulfilling the basic psychological needs of esports fans: A self-determination theory approach. Communication & sport, 10(2), 216-240.
9. Rietz, J., & Hallmann, K. (2023). A systematic review on spectator behavior in esports: why do people watch?. International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship, 24(1), 38-55.
10. Wilkins, L., Beukes, E., Dowsett, R., & Allen, P. M. (2023). A qualitative exploration of the positive and negative experiences of individuals who play fantasy football. Entertainment Computing, 45, 100547.
11. Ergin, V., Ataman, G., & Tuncalı, T. (2024). Brand equity, purchase intention, e-WOM, sponsorship type, and endemic in the esports industry: A study on mediating and moderating effects. SSRN.
12. Calapez, A., Ribeiro, T., Almeida, V., & Pedragosa, V. (2024). Esports fan identity toward sponsor–sponsee relationship: an understanding of the role-based identity. International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship, 25(1), 42-66.
13. Cuesta-Valiño, P., Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, P., & Loranca-Valle, C. (2022). Sponsorship image and value creation in E-sports. Journal of Business Research, 145, 198-209.
14. Hwang, Y., Watanabe, N. M., & Nagel, M. (2023). Effects of in-game brand congruity on esports consumers' implicit and explicit memory. International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship, 24(1), 108-128.
15. Navarro-Lucena, F., Molinillo, S., & Anaya-Sánchez, R. (2024). Effects of the spectator's emotional attachment to esports players on the sponsoring brand. Academia Revista Latinoamericana de Administración, 37(4), 513-528.
16. Lääkkölä, E. (2024). Influence of eSports events on consumer brand engagement (Master's thesis, E. Lääkkölä).
17. Polyakova, O., Karagiorgos, T., Anagnostopoulos, C., & Alexandris, K. (2024). Testing the relationships among involvement, sponsorship perceived fit and intention to purchase sponsors'

products: The case of esports tournament viewers. International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship, 25(5), 1000-1017.
18. Riyadi, I., Kurniawati, K., & Masnita, Y. (2025). Antecedents of sponsorship-brand purchase intention in esports tournaments. Jurnal Economic Resource, 8(2), 1263-1276.
19. Wu, Y. (2024). eSports sponsorship: An empirical study on the perception of eSports consumers: Investigation on gender and sponsor type effects [Master's thesis, University of Zurich]. Zurich Open Repository and Archive.
20. Zailani, F., Wee, Z., & Albattat, A. (2024). A conceptual paper on the influence of sponsorship engagements towards fans sponsor response in Mobile Legends Professional League (MPL) esports event. 27, 57–63.
21. Fatema, N., & Koirala, M. (2025). The impact of sponsorship on brand development and revenue generation in esports: A case study of Team Liquid.
22. Saarnisto, M. (2017). Impact of Sponsorships in eSports on the Buying Behavior.
23. Sahlberg, P. (2024). Esports branding and sponsorships–A qualitative study of the relationship between esports brands and their sponsorship deals.
24. Xing, B. (2019). Sponsorship in eSports welcome to the brave new world.
25. Zaidi, S., & Sazali, R. (2024). Gender dynamics in esports fan: exploring sponsorship perception in mobile legends professional league (MPL). Malaysian Journal of Sport Science and Recreation, 20(2), 1-8.
26. Silva, L. R. D., & Almeida, V. M. C. D. (2024). eSports' event sponsorship: Sponsor's brand authenticity, brand equity and purchase intention. BAR-Brazilian Administration Review, 21(suppl 1), e240138.
27. Huettermann, M., Trail, G. T., Pizzo, A. D., & Stallone, V. (2023). Esports sponsorship: An empirical examination of esports consumers' perceptions of non-endemic sponsors. Journal of Global Sport Management, 8(2), 524-549.
28. Freitas, B. D. A., Contreras-Espinosa, R. S., & Correia, P. Á. P. (2021). The importance of incorporating relevant-added value into esports sponsorships. Journal of contemporary marketing science, 4(3), 397-423.
29. Naraine, M. L., Bakhsh, J. T., & Wanless, L. (2022). The impact of sponsorship on social media engagement: A longitudinal examination of professional sport teams. Sport Marketing Quarterly, 31(3), 239-252.