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Attitudes and intentions toward purchasing sponsors' products among users with different involvement profiles: the case of esports

Olga Polyakova and Kostas Alexandris

Aim and research questions

This study aimed to investigate if the level of individuals' involvement with esports games/events relates with the development of positive sponsorship outcomes. The research objectives were to investigate whether users' involvement with esports games/events is associated with: a) attitudes towards purchasing sponsors' products, and b) purchasing sponsors' products intentions.

Theoretical Background and Literature Review

There has been an ongoing debate as to whether esports can be considered as sports (Polyakova and Alexandris, 2022). Unlike traditional sports, esports take place in virtual worlds, can be accessed quickly and have a shorter game length. Furthermore, the market of esports consumers is becoming ever more fragmented as it involves not only those who play esports, but also those who watch esports and game video content.

Research suggested that highly involved sport consumers are more likely to recall sponsors, to develop a positive image of them and report an intention to purchase their products (Ko et al., 2008). Huettermann et al. (2020) reported that the attitudes towards esports events significantly predicted attitudes toward the sponsor; their results also suggested that sponsors of esports events are likely to develop goodwill. However, the role of involvement with esports (which has unique characteristics and distinctive user profiles) on the development of consumer attitudes towards sponsors and subsequent consumer behavioural intentions has not yet been examined.

Research Design, Methodology and Data Analysis

Participants were asked to name an event or game that they participated in the past 12 months and its sponsor. Purchase intentions were measured with Kim and James' (2016) scale ("In relation to the event I took part or the game I played in the past 12 months, I intend to purchase the product(s) of a sponsor"). Involvement with esports games/events was measured with attraction, centrality and expression (Kyle et al., 2004). Attitudes toward purchasing the sponsor's product were measured with Kim and James' (2016) scale using seven-point semantic differential scales.

The data were collected via an online survey on Prolific platform and recruited a convenience sample of global participants (163 males, 52%; 136 females, 44%). A total of 311 responses were received from adult esports users.

Results

Involvement, attitudes and purchase intentions scales had acceptable reliability scores (i.e. Cronbach's $\alpha > 0.7$). A cluster analysis, using the involvement factors, was employed to classify participants into groups with different involvement levels, as it has been done in previous studies. The Ward method using K-means clustering was used.

A three-group solution was the most meaningful as supported by the ANOVA. The three groups (Low, Medium and High Involvement) significantly differed in all the involvement dimensions. Low Involvement participants (N=89) rated the attraction dimension as the most important, with low scores in the other two dimensions. Medium Involvement participants (N=130) had average scores in all the dimensions; High Involvement participants (N=92) had high mean scores in all the dimensions which shows that perceive activity as fun and having an important role in their life.

The results of the One-way ANOVA indicated statistically significant differences among the groups in terms of the attitudes scale ($F = 17.02$, $p < .001$). Post-hoc Bonferroni analysis revealed that the score for attitude in Low Involvement group was significantly lower than both in the Medium and High Involvement groups ($p < 0.05$). Similarly, the three involvement groups scores in the intention variable showed statistically significant differences among the groups ($F = 17.95$, $p < .001$). The score for intention in Low Involvement group was significantly lower than in both the Medium and High Involvement groups ($p < 0.05$).

Discussion and Conclusion

The current study is the first one which tested the relationship between involvement with esports and sponsorship outcomes. The results indicated that involvement is a useful segmentation variable for understanding esports sponsorship outcomes. The low involvement cluster operates differently than the other two clusters on sponsor attitudes and intentions; these users do not perceive esports as an important part of their life and do not identify strongly with any specific game or event.

The results also showed that the more involved with esports users are, the more likely they are to develop positive attitudes and intentions towards buying sponsors' products. These results are in line with Ko et al.'s (2008) study in traditional sports, in which a theoretical link among attitude towards sponsors, purchasing intentions and involvement was established. Profiling esports users in terms of their involvement levels is, therefore, useful for perspective sponsors when deciding which esports events or games to invest in. It has been recently reported that esports users might develop higher involvement levels than typical sport participants/spectators (Brevers, King & Billieux, 2020); and this is one of the reasons that sponsorship investment in esports is predicted to grow in the following years.

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