Testing the relationships among involvement, sponsorship perceived fit and intention to purchase sponsors' products: The case of esports tournament viewers

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Submitted to:

International Journal of Sport Marketing and Sponsorship

Initially submitted:

8 December 2023

Revised version submitted:

27 April 2024

Revised version (2nd round) submitted:

May 20204

Abstract

Purpose: Despite fast developments in esports sponsorship, limited research exists in the area of sponsorship evaluation in the esports context. The purpose of the present study was to test the relationships among esports involvement, sponsorship perceived fit, and viewers' intention to buy the sponsor's products, and examine the degree to which perceived fit mediates the relationship between the involvement dimensions and intention.

Design/methodology/approach: The study draws on the theoretical model of sponsorship effects proposed by Wakefield *et al*. (2020) and obtained quantitative data from sampling esports viewers (*n*=285). Statistical analysis was carried out in three steps. Beyond the descriptive statistics, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to assess the goodness of fit of the measurement model. The mediation analysis was performed at the end of the study.

Findings: The results supported the impact of one of the esports involvement dimensions (i.e., self-expression) on both perceived fit and esports viewers' intentions to buy sponsors' products. Involvement (self-expression) was found to have both direct and indirect relationships, through perceived fit, on purchase intentions. The study provided support for the associations among esports involvement dimensions, sponsorship perceived fit and purchase intentions.

Originality/value: It is the first study to test a sponsorship evaluation model in the context of esports users. It does so by including a more detailed measurement of involvement (with three-dimensions) in the hypothesized model.

Practical implications: The practitioners should first consider the involvement profile of esports viewers. The more involved viewers will be more likely to have positive perceptions about the fit between the esports tournament and the sponsor.

Keywords: consumer-related experiences; e-gaming; digital anthropology; self-expression; sponsorship evaluation

Paper type: Research paper

Over the past few years, the esports industry has developed exponentially and transformed from a niche into a mainstream sector (Reyes, 2021). It was estimated that esports industry revenue was $1,380 million at the end of 2022 - set to grow to $1,870 million by 2025 - and the esports audience comprised 532 million viewers (Newzoo, 2022a). Latest estimates put the value of the global esports market at $942.34 million in 2020, projecting growth to $4,758.99 million by 2030 (Kilani, 2023). Scholars and reporters attributed the growth of esports and its increasing market size to such factors as the growing acceptance of esports as a 'sport' in society, celebrity investors in esports, institutionalization and professionalization within esports (Ahn *et al*., 2020). By the end of 2022, esports sponsorship generated 837.3 million dollars, accounting for 60 percent of global esports revenues (Newzoo, 2022a). As more channels for watching esports emerge (e.g., mobile gaming) and technological means advance the overall esports landscape (Frevel *et al*., 2022), the attractiveness of esports to sponsors continues to grow (Newzoo, 2022a). Add to this that in 2017, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) recognized esports as a sporting activity (Ribeiro *et al*., 2023), with the inaugural Olympic Esports Week held in Singapore in June 2023.

Sponsorship has been long established as a powerful marketing medium for generating value to both the sponsor and the property being sponsored (Parganas *et al*., 2017). The question about which factors positively influence sponsorship outcomes and the effectiveness of a sponsorship program continues to be topical today (Funk *et al*., 2022; Wakefield *et al*., 2020); especially in the context of esports, where research is still limited (Rogers *et al*., 2020). While the body of traditional sponsorship literature predominantly focused on methods of evaluating sponsorship effectiveness (i.e., ROI, direct impact on sales), there is a potential to further to

investigate the area of sponsorship with customer-driven concepts. For example, due to their ability to create rich emotional experiences for consumers (Bal *et al*., 2009), sponsorship activations have been considered as means to enhance the effectiveness of the sponsorship (O'Reilly & Horning, 2013, Næss, 2019) and to be a specific component of sponsorship engagement (Buser *et al*., 2022). This can be even more relevant to esports consumers since that the process by which they perceive, organize, and interpret stimuli provided by esports can stir emotions and influence their perceptions (Hallmann & Giel, 2018).

Some studies proposed sport fans' involvement and sponsorship perceived fit to be among the two key factors for helping sport consumers to process sponsorship information in their minds (Alonso-Dos-Santos *et al*., 2016) and develop positive attitudes and behavior towards sponsors (Alexandris, 2012; Maanda *et al*., 2020). However, consumer-related experiences and behaviours of esports viewers are influenced by the uniqueness of the esports context - e.g., digital anthropology (Funk *et al*., 2018), multiple roles of viewers (Seo & Jung, 2016), liquid nature of consumption (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017; Huston *et al*., 2022) - which make them different from a traditional sport consumer (i.e., active sport participant or spectator) and requires further research attention.

While both involvement and perceived fit were shown to influence positive sponsorship outcomes (Alexandris, 2012; Maanda *et al*., 2020), previous literature did not look at the direct impact between fit and/or involvement on behavioral intentions simultaneously (Visentin *et al*., 2016; Wakefield *et al*., 2020). Following Kyle and Chick's (2004) conceptualization of involvement, we define esports involvement as the extent to which an individual is immersed in online esports viewership. We argue that despite technology-based nature of interactions with the

online content perceived fit mediates the relationship between esports involvement and purchase intentions, as literature has demonstrated outside of esports contexts (e.g., Papadimitriou et al., 2016). We draw on the theoretical model of sponsorship effects proposed by Wakefield *et al*. (2020) to study these relationships. Their model offers a conceptualization of sponsorship effects in terms of antecedent factors (brand, property, and consumers), mediators (consumer thoughts, feelings, and actions), and potential consequences of sponsorship (for consumers and brands).

This research makes an academic contribution in three directions. First, the model was tested on a sample of esports viewers, whose roles, experiences, and behaviors are influenced by the uniqueness of the esports context (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017; Huston *et al*., 2022) and therefore are different from a traditional sport fan. As previously noted, despite fast developments in esports sponsorship, limited research exists in the area of sponsorship evaluation in the esports context (Huettermann *et al*., 2020). Second, we tested the relationships between involvement dimensions, perceived fit, and intention in an integrated model, which had not been done before. Finally, involvement was measured on a more detailed level, with a three-dimensional model, including centrality, attraction, and self-expression (Kyle *et al*., 2003). There have been no published studies so far to test the impact of esports involvement dimensions on perceived fit and sponsorship outcomes. Our research has implications for sponsorship practitioners. If the proposed model is empirically verified, it would mean that practitioners should first consider the involvement profile of esports viewers. More involved viewers will be more likely to have positive perceptions about the fit between the game/event and the sponsor.

In this line, the purpose of the present study was to test the relationships among esports involvement dimensions, sponsorship perceived fit, and viewers' intention to buy the sponsor's

products and examine the degree to which perceived fit mediates the relationship between involvement dimensions and intention.

Theoretical background

The uniqueness of the esports context

Previous studies supported similarities between esports and traditional sports (e.g., Cunningham *et al*., 2018; Hallmann & Giel, 2018) and suggested that research on esports could utilize this expected association to investigate the esports phenomenon from different perspectives. Several scholars, however, have suggested that esports online viewership may contain additional dimensions (Funk et al., 2018; Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017) since it is based on technology interactions and, unlike traditional sports, matches and tournaments do not necessarily provide the main attraction.

In addition to digital anthropology, esports' uniqueness comes from the fact that esports viewers can embrace multiple roles, i.e., playing, spectating, and governing (Seo & Jung, 2016). For example, esports spectatorship is associated with other roles, such as improving one's own skills (Carter *et al*., 2017; Seo & Jung, 2016), actively promoting esports via laborious spectatorship (Cumming *et al*., 2021), and expressing patriotic support and partisan fandom (Carter *et al*., 2017; Johnson & Woodcock, 2017). In turn, acquiring knowledge of the games being played, their novelty, and participant aggressiveness increases viewership (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017). Simultaneous roles form multiple consumption practices and create a basis for the various consumer journeys (Huston *et al*., 2022) and liquid consumption – consumption that is ephemeral, dematerialized, and access-based (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). The concept of the consumer journey explains the multiple touchpoints that consumers interact with over a period of

time, during which the consumption goal may change depending on the individual's context. This means that viewers may shift their interest and investment in esports depending on broader changes to the game or their lives. For example, high involvement with the game often coincides with overall high engagement with the esports, whereas poorly balanced or unengaging gameplay discourages viewers from playing or spectating esports (Huston *et al*., 2022).

To study the relationships among involvement, perceived fit and intention, we draw on the theoretical model of sponsorship effects proposed by Wakefield *et al*. (2020). Their model offers a conceptualization of sponsorship effects in terms of a) antecedent factors, which include the sponsoring brand, the sponsored property (i.e., the event), and the characteristics of the consumer, b) mediators, which include thoughts, feelings, and actions of consumers as they process information from interactions with the brand and/or property during the experience and c) outcome factors which include purchase intentions, sponsor image, sponsor knowledge and loyalty. In the current study, in terms of antecedents, we focused on esports involvement as a defining factor of the esports consumer. It has been proposed that consumer-property factors are defined by measuring consumers' involvement and social identification (Wakefield, 2016). Regarding the mediators, we used the construct of perceived fit since it is one of the factors that generate thoughts and feelings and facilitates better processing of sponsorship information by consumers. This is in line with Visentin *et al*. (2016) who suggested that fit and involvement must be addressed together as both are relevant but operate differently. A review of the two constructs (involvement and perceived fit) follows.

Sport involvement and sponsorship outcomes

In the context of sport and leisure, involvement represents the 'personal relevance' that activity holds for an individual (Kyle & Chick, 2004). It describes how an individual and the external stimulus are related (Kyle *et al*., 2007) and to which extent an individual is immersed in it. The construct of involvement has been studied in various leisure (Alexandris *et al*., 2012; Kyle & Chick, 2004), recreation (e.g., Alexandris *et al*., 2008, 2013; Kyle *et al*., 2004a) and sport settings (Tsiotsou & Alexandris, 2009) and event settings (Helsen *et al*., 2022a). The first two models developed for measuring involvement were the personal involvement inventory (Zaichkowsky, 1985) and the consumer involvement profile (Laurent & Kapferer, 1985). The most widely used model was developed by McIntyre and Pigram (1992) and subsequently adapted by Kyle *et al*. (2003, 2004a, 2004b) in a series of sport and leisure studies both in the contexts of sport/leisure participants and sport spectators (i.e., Helsen *et al*., 2022b; Sato *et al*., 2019; Tsiotsou & Alexandris, 2009). The model proposes three involvement dimensions: attraction, self-expression, and centrality to one's lifestyle. Attraction refers to the concepts of importance and pleasure, implying activities that are important to an individual. Self-expression refers to personal impressions that individuals convey to others through their participation in sport activities (Roger & Schneider, 1993). Finally, centrality to life relates sport participation to an individual's overall lifestyle by judging the extent to which an individual's life is organized around that activity. Previous studies established that involvement is associated with positive behavioral and attitudinal consequences, such as commitment, attachment, increased participation levels, and loyalty (Alexandris, 2012; Beaton *et al*., 2011; Kyle *et al*., 2004b).

In the context of sport sponsorship, research has provided evidence supporting the positive relationship between sport involvement and sponsorship outcomes. Studies on sport

consumers (including fans and spectators) suggested that highly involved consumers with the sport object are more likely to be aware of sponsoring companies (Koronios *et al*., 2021; Lascu *et al*., 1995) to develop a positive image of those sponsors (Javalgi et al., 1994; Turco, 1995) and to report an intention to purchase sponsors' products (Ko *et al*., 2008). Involvement with an event also impacts the sponsor's brand image and attendees' purchase intentions towards sponsors' products (Singh & Singh, 2018). There is evidence that sponsors' activations increase customer engagement toward the sponsors (Schönberner & Woratschek, 2023), which in turn can increase personal involvement, making attendees or customers part of the co-creation process.

Over the years, there has been a growing recognition in the body of literature that research on sponsorship-related effects needs to account for a higher level of complexity in sponsorships (Biscaia *et al*., 2013), especially in terms of purchasing behaviors (Tsordia *et al*., 2018) and involvement (Koo & Lee, 2019). The relationship between involvement and behavioral outcomes (e.g., sponsor awareness and purchase intentions) has been supported in several studies (e.g., Gwinner & Swanson, 2003; Koronios *et al*., 2021). In their recent theoretical model of sponsorship effects, Wakefield *et al*. (2020) categorized property image and property attitudes as consumer-property factors and antecedents of a brand purchase intent, a consumer-focused outcome. Sport academics and practitioners explain such consumer-property factors by measuring involvement, social identification, relationship quality, avidity, or passion for the property (Wakefield, 2016).

Visentin *et al. (2016)* proposed that involvement is an antecedent of sponsorship effectiveness (e.g., Gwinner & Swanson, 2003), and it is in line with Singh and Singh's (2018) suggestion that high event involvement levels can positively influence attendees' purchase

intentions. Koronios *et al*. (2021) also reported that attraction and centrality influence sponsor awareness and purchase intentions, while Alexandris et al. (2013) supported the role of self-expression in developing leisure involvement. Based on the above discussion, we hypothesized that the level of involvement with the property will affect consumers' intention to buy sponsors' products. Thus:

H1a. Esports involvement (attraction) has a positive association with viewers' intention to buy the tournament's sponsors' products.

H1b. Esports involvement (centrality) has a positive association with viewers' intention to buy the tournament's sponsors' products.

H1c. Esports involvement (self-expression) has a positive association with viewers' intention to buy the tournament's sponsors' products.

Perceived fit and sponsorship outcomes

Perceived fit, or the perceived congruence between the sponsor and sponsee, has been conceptualized as the similarity between a sponsor and a sport entity (Fortunato, 2013). It is suggested to be a key to a consumer's response to sponsorship (Roy & Cornwell, 2004) and an important factor in achieving sponsorship success (Kim *et al*., 2015). Positive association of a sponsor and the sponsored entity plus consistency in the characteristics of either party form the sponsorship fit - the degree to which consumers perceive a sponsor to be congruent with the sponsorship (Roy & Cornwell, 2004).

Previous studies in the context of sponsorship provided evidence that perceived fit plays an important role in the development of positive sponsorship outcomes (Koronios *et al*., 2021;

Maanda *et al*., 2020), because "associations [are] held in consumers' memory" (Keller, 1993, p. 3) and, therefore, high perceived fit makes the memory more accessible. On the other hand, low fit causes more cognitive elaboration and leads to greater resistance to the positive sponsorship message (Menon & Kahn, 2003; Tsordia *et al*., 2018). The literature presents three key reasons for using sponsorship activation to develop the perceived fit between sponsors and sponsees, resulting in the subsequent increased effectiveness of sponsorship: it allows to break through heavy promotional clutter; presents an effective way to combat ambush marketing; and serves as a point of differentiation from competitors (i.e., an 'intangible asset') (O'Reilly & Horning, 2013). In the context of esports, Huettermann *et al*. (2020) found that the attitude toward a brand of the game or the event significantly predicted the attitude toward the sponsor. Their results were relevant to businesses whose products and/or services are not associated with an esports market (i.e., non-endemic sponsors); they suggested that such businesses sponsoring esports events can achieve increased goodwill and purchase intentions.

In the esports context, viewers seek validation for esports as a socially acceptable activity (Hayday & Collison, 2020). In connection with this, non-endemic sponsorships may be perceived by viewers as a signal of mainstream social acceptance (Santos & Eisenhardt, 2009), growth and endorsement for the industry (Huettermann *et al*., 2020), and such signaling may have implications for perceived fit. Burton (2017), however, notes that sponsorships must logically connect the sponsor's brand's products with the esports culture, and as long as they make the brand an integral component of the scene, they will find acceptance of esports. Although there are few studies in the context of esports, perceived fit has generally been found to play a role in consumers' perceptions of event/game sponsors and consumers' intentions to use

sponsors' products (Gwinner & Bennett, 2008). According to Wakefield *et al*.'s (2020) proposed theoretical model, perceived fit is a brand-property factor and an antecedent to sponsorship effects, including a brand purchase intent. Consequently, the following hypothesis was formed:

> *H2. Sponsorship perceived fit is positively associated with esports viewers' intention to buy the tournament's sponsors' products.*

Sport involvement and perceived fit

Research so far has not provided consistent results on the role of perceived fit in the relationship between sport involvement and purchase intentions towards sponsor's products (Wakefield *et al*., 2020). For example, Close and Lacey (2013) provided evidence that perceived fit has an impact on purchase intentions, while Visentin *et al*. (2016) argued that high-fit perceptions do not directly translate into sales but rather are instrumental to enhancing attitudes. Finally, Felbert and Breuer (2021) found that for the sports-related product endorsement involvement did not mediate endorsers' influence on consumers purchase intentions in significant way. Wakefield *et al*. (2020) proposed that the characteristics of the consumer, the sponsor brand, and the sponsored property will affect the consumer's motivation, ability, and opportunity to process sponsorship information. In the present study we propose that viewers with different levels of involvement will have different purchasing intentions towards sponsor's products and sponsorship perceived fit mediates this relationship. In line with Wakefield *et al*. (2020) model we treat perceived fit as a mediator factor, since it generates thoughts and feelings and facilitates a better processing of sponsorship information by consumers. As previously noted in this model, the mediators include consumers' thoughts, feelings, and actions as they process information from interactions with the brand and/or property during the experience.

It is well-established that perceived fit enhances the effectiveness of sponsorship response (Zhang *et al*., 2021), i.e., a sponsor with the highest fit activates more mental associations and enjoys greater benefits from the sponsorship (Wolfsteiner *et al*., 2015). Since associations are held in consumers' memory and high perceived fit plays a role in making the memory more accessible, we argue that perceived fit amplifies the influence of consumers mental processes related to concepts of importance, generating self-expression, and establishing relevance of the activity to the overall lifestyle. The following hypotheses were developed:

H3a. Sponsorship perceived fit mediates the relationship between esports involvement (attraction) and intention to buy the tournament's sponsors' products.

H3b. Sponsorship perceived fit mediates the relationship between esports involvement (centrality) and intention to buy the tournament's sponsors' products.

H3c. Sponsorship perceived fit mediates the relationship between esports involvement (self-expression) and intention to buy the tournament's sponsors' products.

Method

Research participants

Quantitative data was collected via online survey from adults (over 18 years of age), via SIRC Survey platform - an online survey tool for the Sport Industry Research Centre at Sheffield Hallam University. SIRC Survey platform is dedicated to professional data collection in sport and physical activity for research purposes. Convenience sampling was utilised to recruit participants to the study using research platform Prolific (www.prolific.co) - a crowdsourcing platform that has been increasingly used in sport management (Ko et al., 2023; Wang et al.,

2018). The major advantages of using crowdsourcing platforms mentioned by Mason and Suri (2012) include ease of subject access, subject pool diversity, and low cost. However, the disadvantage could be that such samples may not be representative of targeted geographic areas or market segments. To ensure the quality, reliability, and representativeness of data, we have implemented necessary screening procedures. Two filtering questions qualified individuals who watched at least one esports tournament during the last twelve months and they were able to recall one sponsor of the tournament ("Have you watched at least one esports event in the past 12 months?"; "Do you recall the sponsor(s) of the event?"). All Prolific users are at least 18 years old, and in our survey, we used a screening question on whether they watched esports game(s) within the past 12 months. Those who answered "no" to this question were not included in the survey and only participants who completed all responses as nonspeeders were included in the data analysis. A similar approach was employed by Choi et al. (2024); for more information on use of Prolific in research see Palan & Schitter (2018). The data were collected in the winter of 2021.

Two hundred and eighty-five (N=285) esports viewers were qualified and used as a study sample. The respondents comprised 147 (52%) males and 126 (44%) females. Most of the respondents (85.6%) were aged between 18 and 30 years old, which is reflective of the fact that esports are particularly appealing to younger viewers (Newzoo, 2022b). The youngest group of respondents (i.e., 18-22 years old) holds the largest proportion (47%, n=134) across all age groups. Finally, 53% of the respondents were from North and Central America, while respondents from Europe and Africa had 37.5% and 4.2%, respectively, and the rest indicated other locations. It should be noted that any generalization of the results should be made with

caution, considering the convenience of the sample, limited only to the users of the Prolific platform, and the sampling error due to the sample size.

Measurements

To meet the research objectives, three scales were employed in the study a) the leisure involvement scale (Kyle *et al*., 2003); b) the perceived sponsor and sponsored entity fit (Kim & James, 2016); and c) the intentions to purchase scale (Kim & James, 2016). Involvement with esports was measured with nine items corresponding to three components: attraction, centrality, and self-expression. Several versions of this original scale have been used in the literature, such as a shorter scale with two dimensions (centrality and attraction, e.g., Koronios *et al*., 2021; Tsiotsou & Alexandris, 2009), and a longer one with four dimensions (with the inclusion of the social bonding dimension, Kyle *et al*., 2007). We decided to use the original scale with the three dimensions as the most widely used (i.e., Alexandris, 2013; Alexandris *et al*., 2017). It should also be noted that a short but still valid and reliable scale was highly desirable, considering that an online questionnaire was distributed, which was quite long due to the inclusion of several other theoretical constructs.

Three items from Kim and James' (2016) unidimensional scale were used to measure the perceived fit between sponsor and esports tournament. Finally, purchase intentions were measured using three items, as proposed by Kim and James (2016) (“In relation to the esports tournament, I intend to purchase the product(s) of a sponsor”). All the scales ranged from 1 to 7, where 1 meant “Strongly Disagree” and 7 meant “Strongly Agree”.

Data analysis

In order to assess common method bias (CMB), which refers to an inflation in the true correlation among observed variables (Jordan & Troth, 2020), we followed the recommendations of Podsakoff *et al.* (2024). The unmeasured latent variable process by calculating the Chi Square difference test of both models was applied. The results showed a nonsignificant score (Δ^2=23,12, df=17). Consequently, it was concluded that CMB does not pose a significant threat to the validity of the current study. The main statistical analysis was carried out in three steps. First, descriptive statistics were examined. Second, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using AMOS 24.0 (Byrne, 2010) was performed in order to test the goodness of fit indicators of the measurement model. The assessment of observed and latent factors was made based on the internal reliability by Cronbach's alpha indicator, the construct reliability by the composite reliability (CR) index, the convergent validity by the average variance extracted (AVE) value and the discriminant validity by comparing the square root of AVE which should be greater than the latent construct's highest correlation with any other construct (Brown, 2015; Fornell & Larcker, 1981). In the third and final step, mediation analysis was performed using the PROCESS macro for SPSS Model 4 (Hayes, 2017). According to Hayes (2017), this macro should be used repeatedly as it estimates direct and indirect effects for only one independent variable. Following his suggestion, the PROCESS macro was run three times using each involvement dimension as an independent variable; the other two were included as covariates. We used PROCESS (Hayes, 2017) – a regression-based approach - which establishes 95% confidence intervals using bootstrapping. Hayes (2017) indicates that the PROCESS bootstrapping technique can be useful in smaller samples. Hence, due to our moderate sample size and the likelihood of non-normal data (at least some of them), we decided to employ

PROCESS, which has been recently widely used in the literature (e.g., Kim *et al*., 2020; Sato *et al*., 2019). To account for skew in the population, a 5,000-bootstrap sample with replacement was performed (Hayes, 2012). All significance tests for direct and indirect effects were defined by the 95% confidence interval which should not contain the zero value, as proposed in the relevant literature (Hayes, 2012, 2017).

Results

The evaluation of the measurement model indicated marginal model fit: $\chi 2$ (388.23)/ df (102) = 3.80, $p < .001$, RMSEA = 0.087, SRMR = 0.064. CFI = 0.905. TLI = 0.901. A screening of factor loadings showed that three items ('Esports offer me relaxation when pressure build up' (Attraction, b=.43), 'Most of my friends are in some way connected with esports' (Centrality, b =.36), 'You can tell a lot about a person by seeing him/her watching esports' (Self-expression, b=.42) were below the .50 cut-off point (Byrne, 2010). Thus, these items were excluded, and a second round of CFA was performed. The new CFA provided good fit for the measurement model, since all indicators had acceptable fit indices: $\chi 2$ (245.9)/ df (94) = 2.61, $p < .001$, RMSEA = 0.075, SRMR = 0.045, CFI = 0.944 and TLI = 0.936. The measurement model is presented in Table 1. The descriptive statistics indicated that all factors had moderate mean scores, ranging from 3.83 to 5.06. Also, the item loadings and squared multiple correlations (SMC) were shown to reflect well on the underlying latent constructs. With respect to reliability, Cronbach's alpha indicators were above the recommended threshold of .75 (Cortina, 1993). Also, the CR index ranged between .73 and .90, which is above the acceptable .70 cut-off point (Byrne, 2010). Hence, the internal and the construct reliability were established. Moreover, the AVE values ranged from .57 to .70, which were above the .50 threshold, demonstrating

satisfactory convergent validity for the measurement model (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Regarding the discriminant validity test, all square roots of AVE's constructs on the diagonal axis in bold were higher than the correlations of latent constructs, providing evidence of discriminant validity for the model (see Table 2).

[Insert Table 1 about here]

[Insert Table 2 about here]

The hypothesised model

Concerning the structural model, the results partially supported the hypotheses of the study. Figure 1 displays the results of the model and the mediating effects. Specifically, self-expression (β=.36, p=.01, CI= .21 - .53) is positively associated with esports viewers' intention to buy sponsors' products, supporting hypothesis H1c. On the other hand, attraction (β=.06, p=.72, CI= -.06 - .20) and centrality (β=.07, p=.42, CI= -.11- .21) did not have statistically significant direct associations with viewers' intentions. Therefore, H1a and H1b were not supported. Furthermore, attraction (β=.02, p=.98, CI= -.15 - .14) and centrality (β= -.04, p=.59, CI= -.12 - .21) were not shown to have statistically significant associations with perceived fit. Hence, H3a and H3b have not been confirmed from the results. In contrast, self-expression had a statistically significant association with the perceived fit (β=.24, p=.01, CI= .06 - .37); H3c was supported. All three dimensions of involvement explained 7% of the variance in perceived fit (R^2=.07, p<.001). In the same line, concerning H2, the results showed that perceived fit (β=.39, p=.01, CI= .26 - .52) was positively associated with viewers' intentions; the H2 was confirmed. The independent variables explained 27% of the variance in viewers' intentions (R^2=.27, p<.001). Regarding the mediating effects, it has been proposed that for the indirect effect to

exist, the indirect coefficient should be statistically significant, and the upper and lower confidence interval limit should not contain the zero value (Hayes, 2017; Hayes *et al*., 2012). The results revealed statistically significant indirect associations only for the self-expression dimension (e=.09, p<.01, CI= .03- .16). Consequently, perceived fit partially mediated the relationship between self-expression and viewers' intention. On the other hand, perceived fit did not act as a significant mediator (p>.05) on the relationships between attraction, centrality, and viewers' intentions.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Discussion

This paper aimed to test the relationships among the three esports involvement dimensions, sponsorship perceived fit and viewers' intention to buy the tournament's sponsor's products and examine the degree to which perceived fit mediates the relationship between attraction, centrality, self-expression and intentions. First, our results supported the relationships between an esports involvement dimension (i.e., self-expression) with perceived fit and esports viewers' intentions to buy sponsors' products (Hypothesis 1c). However, neither the attraction nor centrality dimensions were shown to be significantly associated with perceived fit and viewers' purchase intentions. In previous studies in which involvement was tested as an antecedent of sport participation, attraction and centrality were reported as the two most important predictors of consumer loyalty, while self-expression was found to have a weaker relationship with it (Alexandris, 2012; Alexandris *et al*., 2008). Our results indicate that the theoretical mechanisms between esports involvement and purchase intentions may differ from those of other leisure and sport contexts due to a unique aspect of esports. Xue *et al*. (2019)

suggested that esports present a digital cultural formation that "disrupts" traditional mechanisms for developing sport-based community and identity and provides a space for scholars to rethink identity formation in techno-mediated platforms. They might also propose that the involvement measurement is a more complex issue in esports. More emphasis should be given to the self-identification dimension. In this line, the extended Kyle *et al*.'s (2007) involvement model, including the identity expression and identity affirmation dimensions, might be more appropriate in the context of esports to better understand the self-identification process of esports users.

It must be noted that esports viewers can embrace multiple roles, which create a basis for the various consumer journeys (Huston *et al*., 2022) and liquid consumption – consumption that is ephemeral, dematerialized, and access-based (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). This means that consumers may shift their interest and investment in esports depending on broader changes to the game or their life (see, for example, Kolyperas *et al*., 2019). For example, high involvement with the game or the event often coincides with overall high engagement with the esports, whereas poorly balanced or unengaging gameplay discourages consumers from playing or spectating esports (Huston *et al*., 2022).

The study's results also provided evidence for the important role of perceived fit on viewers' intention to buy sponsors' products, supporting previous studies (Gwinner & Bennett, 2008; Lacey & Close, 2013). In the hypothesized model, the perceived fit was shown to have a significant association with viewers' intention to buy the sponsors' products, supporting Hypothesis 2. Perceived fit helps an individual to assess incoming information about the sponsor cognitively (Visentin *et al*., 2016). Therefore, if a consumer perceives the sponsor as congruent with the activity, sponsorship perceived fit serves as a stimulus that activates in a consumer's

mind a piece of information corresponding to self-congruence with the activity. Our results confirmed that perceived fit amplifies the influence of consumers' mental processes related to self-expression and establishes the relevance of the sponsor to the overall lifestyle, which subsequently has an effect on purchase intentions toward sponsor's products. This is in line with previous literature stating that perceived fit is an important factor for image transfer (Zhang *et al*., 2021) and that a high level of sponsorship fit activates more mental associations in consumer's minds (Wolfsteiner *et al*., 2015).

In terms of the mediation effects of perceived fit on the relationship between involvement dimensions and intentions, the results provided partial support for Hypothesis 3. Involvement (self-expression) was found to have both direct and indirect relationships, through perceived fit, with purchase intentions. These results again support self-expression's important role in predicting purchase intentions since it strengthens the association between perceived fit and intentions. They also support Wakefield *et al*.'s (2020) model, in which involvement and perceived fit were proposed as antecedents and mediating factors of positive behavioral outcomes, respectively.

Practical implications

Our results have practical implications. Sponsors should account for the context of esports since our results demonstrated that the self-expression dimension of involvement is an important determinant of positive sponsorship outcomes in the context of esports. These results also highlight the unique culture, norms and the symbolic value assigned to them by esports viewers. Self-expression in the context of esports is, therefore, an important variable that should be discussed, analyzed, and accounted for before making sponsorship decisions. As previously

noted, consumer behavior researchers (Roger & Schneider, 1993) considered self-expression as the impression of self that individuals wish to present to others through their participation (i.e., mainstream sport participation, spectatorship, and esports gaming) or choice of consumer product, (i.e., participation in an individual sport, being a fan of a specific sport team, playing in a specific esports tournament). For an individual's involvement to take place, product choice should be perceived as a sign of oneself, i.e., correspond to one's own identity or ego.

In the same line, the involvement profile of the different esports groups should be considered in relation to specific games and tournaments before taking sponsorship decisions. The consumption dimensions proposed by Huston *et al*. (2022) are useful for defining involvement levels in order to profile esports viewers. These authors proposed that esports consumers can be categorized into serious and casual ones. Serious consumers are high in involvement, and their engagement is driven either by improving their skills and gameplay (serious / skills) or by the social aspects of gaming and the opportunity to become part of the esports community (serious / culture). Similarly, casual consumers who do not consider esports as an important part of their lifes, can be driven by either the social aspects of gaming (casual / culture) or by skill improvement (casual / skills).

In a well-developed sponsorship management strategy sponsorship fit can be 'non-elusive' and a controllable factor (Rajabi *et al*., 2022). In this line, developing fit profiles between the consumers and perspective sponsors is important. Several fit aspects should be considered. Examples are the two brands' image and personality, the target groups' demographics, psychographics, and geographical distribution, product-related attributes, benefits, and organizations' missions, marketing, and promotion strategy (Rajabi *et al*., 2020).

However, since sponsorship fit is also a perception, as discussed in our study, it can also be influenced by individual (i.e., involvement levels) and communication (i.e., formal and informal) related factors. Our study showed that involvement has a direct influence on perceived fit. Subsequently, sponsorship practitioners should aim to develop programs that target highly involved viewers if a favorable environment for esports viewers to assess incoming information about the sponsor cognitively is to be created.

In conclusion, the current study supported the relationships among esports attraction, centrality, and self-expression, sponsorship perceived fit and purchase intentions. The self-expression dimension of involvement and perceived sponsorship fit are key variables in predicting positive sponsorship outcomes in the context of esports. Creating involvement profiles should, therefore, be the first step in designing a sponsorship program. Managing and promoting the specific attributes of perceived fit are the next steps in creating an attractive environment for positive sponsorship outcomes.

Study Limitations and Future Research

As discussed previously, from the three involvement dimensions, only self-expression was found to impact perceived fit and purchase intentions. This was not an expected finding, considering previous studies in non-sponsorship contexts (Alexandris, 2012; Alexandris *et al*., 2008). It is not clear whether this relates to the sponsorship context, the profile of the sample or the behavioral and psychographic characteristics of esports viewers. Future studies should test multi-dimensional models of involvement in different samples and contexts in order to draw conclusions with more confidence.

This study was based on the theoretical model proposed by Wakefield *et al*. (2020) in

order to study how a consumer property factor (i.e., involvement) and a brand-property factor (i.e., fit) influence sponsorship outcomes (i.e., purchase intentions). Future studies should test more outcome variables, such as attitude toward the sponsor, awareness of the sponsor, or the sponsor's image (Koronios *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, some more mediators such as consumers' motivations, ability and opportunity to process, intensity, direction, and valence of process, as well as thoughts, feelings, and actions for processing. Future studies could test whether these factors mediate the relationship between antecedents and consequences in an integrated model.

A final note should be made about the measurement of perceived fit. Our study used a unidimensional scale to measure a global perception of perceived fit. However, Rajabi *et al*. (2020) proposed that perceived fit can be measured with multidimensional models, including visibility, slogan, mission, color target, promotion, geography, involvement, and explicitness. The measurement of perceived fit in such a detailed way would allow an understanding of whether involvement influences all or some of these subdimensions in relation to purchase intentions.

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Table 1. Confirmatory factor analysis of the measurement model

Factors/ facets	loadings	t-value	SMC	alpha	Mean	AVE	CR
Attraction				**.82**	**4,91**	**.64**	**.83**
1. Watching esports is the most enjoyable thing I do	.88	9,21***	.78				
2. Watching esports is the most satisfying thing I do	.91	8,36***	.84				
3. I have little or no interest in watching esports	.66	6,26***	.30				
Centrality				**.79**	**4,02**	**.57**	**.73**
4. I enjoy discussing esports with my friends	.74	12,02***	.74				
5. I find a lot of my life organised around esports	.75	12,47***	.75				
6. Esports are important to me	.60	10,23***	.56				
Self-expression				**.80**	**3,94**	**.66**	**.79**
7. Esports say a lot about who I am	.84	13,66***	.71				
8. When I watch esports, others see me the way I want them to see me	.70	11,71***	.55				
9. When I watch esports, I can really be myself	.69	9,98***	.53				
Fit				**.90**	**5,06**	**.70**	**.90**
10. There is a logical connection between the esport tournament and its sponsor	.87	15,81***	.76				
11. The esport tournament and its sponsor fit well together	.92	16,65***	.85				
12. The esport tournament and its sponsor stand for similar things	.68	9,55***	.47				
13. It makes sense to me that this company/brand sponsor of the esport tournament	.84	15,21***	.71				
Intention				**.87**	**3,83**	**.69**	**.87**
14. I intend to purchase the product(s) of the sponsor of the tournament	.76	10,23***	.58				
15. I would be more likely to buy products of the sponsor of the tournament over its competitors	.81	11,03***	.66				
16. Whenever possible, I try to buy products made by the sponsor of the tournament	.91	16,93***	.83				

*** significant p<.001

Table 2. Latent factor correlation matrix and square roots of AVE

Factors	1	2	3	4	5
1. Attraction	**.837**				
2. Centrality	.800	**.864**			
3. Self-expression	.796	.773	**.851**		
4. Perceived Fit	.185	.237	.295	**.834**	
5. Intention	.375	.446	.502	.417	**.830**

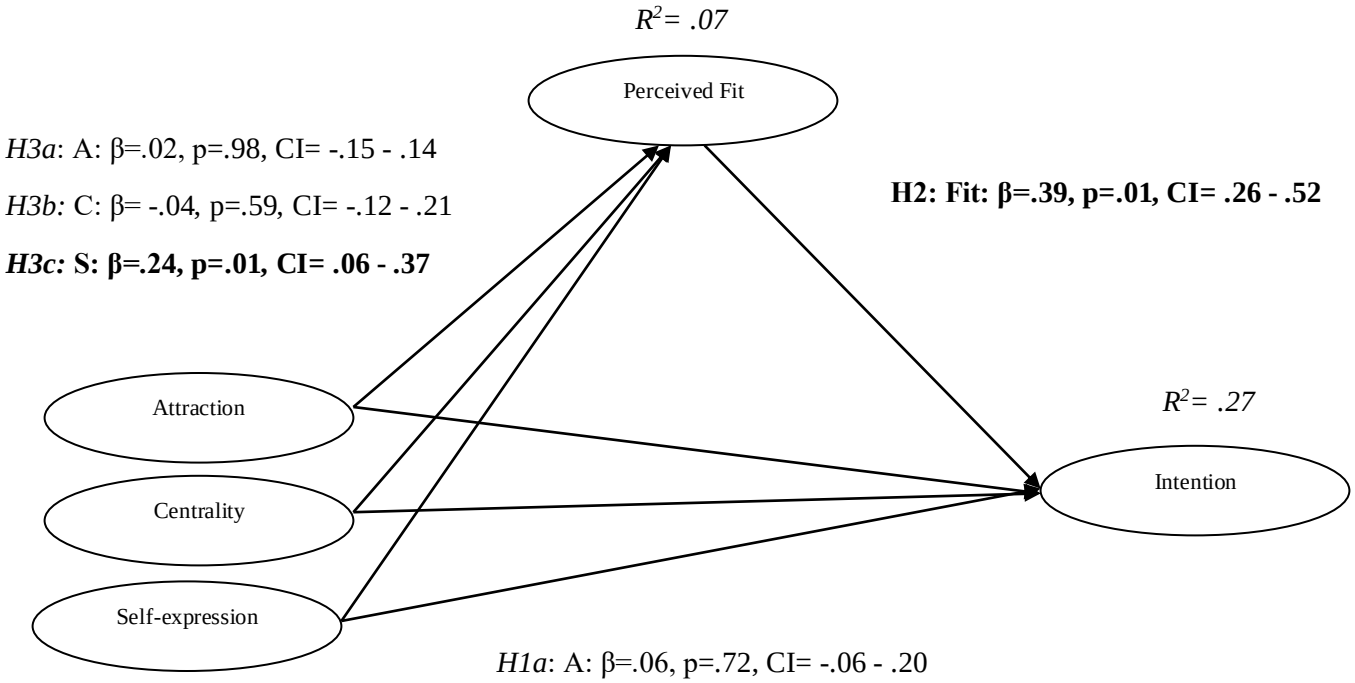

Figure 1. The hypothesized model

Note: A= attraction, C= centrality, S= self-expression, β= loading, p= level of significance, CI= 95% confidence interval Low limit – Upper limit, e=indirect effect