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Esports fan identity toward sponsor–sponsee relationship: an understanding of the role-based identity

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Abstract

Purpose – Despite to useful relevance to better understand how group-level identity develops, few studies have explored the identity theory in the esports field and, in particular, considering the impact of a fan's role identity. The current study aims to explore esports fan role-identity vis-à-vis the relationship with the sponsor and the sponsee so as to understand the effects on their behavioral intentions.

Design/methodology/approach – Using a sample of 356 esports fans who attended the 2021 FPF eFootball Open Challenge, a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) analyzed the psychometric properties of the constructs and a subsequent Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) examined the effects of fan identity on two types of behavioral intentions and sponsor–sponsee relationship.

Findings – Results indicate that fans who highly identify with esports have the highest attachment to the event and tend toward having a positive word-of-mouth intention. Esports fans who have a higher brand identification reported a positive attitude toward the event's sponsor brand and tend to purchase its products. Moreover, the study findings also provide evidence of the bidirectional interaction between the way in which fans attach with the esports event and its sponsor brand, leading to greater reciprocity in their identity formation.

Originality/value – This study helps to understand how the fan identity process can enhance its fate and develop mutually, building role overlapping identity in the esports sponsor–sponsee relationship. Complementarily, it supports of how the marketeers and managers must analyze the importance of being a fan to the individual in order to understand how its self-identity can shape the future behavior.

Keywords Fan identity, Identity theory, Brand identity, Behavioral intentions, Esports

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Esports, or electronic sports, is the concept used to define structured and competitive video game playing (Hedlund *et al.*, 2020). It is characterized by experts as a modern digital

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phenomenon that embraces a large ecosystem of stakeholders such as sponsors, teams and their fans (Macey *et al.*, 2022). The relevance of esports within the sports field comes through its identity potential and cultural formation (Hutchins, 2008). The idea of "real, authentic" fans is the genetic source for the prevailing identity, which leads to the disruption with traditional mechanisms for developing a sport-based community and identity (Xue *et al.*, 2019). Identity in itself is a product of the reflective process of individuals (Crawford and Rutter, 2017) and provides a new interest field for scholars who might (re)think about the complexities of the identity formation of fans in an online environment.

Fan identity is essentially a type of role-based identity, which differs from category-based, that focuses on its own perception as being a fan of sports (Stryker and Burke, 2000). This identity accommodates the social nature of past experiences and is socially recognized through lived actions (Trail *et al.*, 2005). Fans express how relevant esports is for them via watching esports content live-streaming (Macey *et al.*, 2022), by following esports professional teams/players (Qian *et al.*, 2020), or by attending events (Jang *et al.*, 2020). Given the interactive nature of gaming, these fans are no longer just viewers, but are also players, content creators and community activists (Witkowski and Manning, 2019). The social structures which a fan is associated with (e.g. esports) make some role-identities more probable to develop than others. Points of attachment (e.g. the event, community or brands) might be intrinsically linked with associated role schemas that provide an understanding for role-behavior appropriateness (Stryker and Burke, 2000). To understand the relevance of fan identity to esports organizations, marketeers and managers must analyze the importance of being a fan to the individual (i.e. an esports fan as an identity role) in order to understand how the individual's self-concept can shape its future behavior.

An esports ecosystem includes a number of stakeholders, including sponsor brands (Hedlund *et al.*, 2020). Its fans are not simply interested in playing the games, but they also enjoy watching competitions both live and via media, learning about the teams and events, and contributing to the development of the brand's identity (Mühlbacher *et al.*, 2022). When investigating the esports fan motivation, previous researches have highlighted the spectating frequency, attitude, game commitment and points of attachment as outcomes of motivation factors (Yu *et al.*, 2022; Qian *et al.*, 2020). However, no studies have focused on fan role-identity based on events and their associated sponsor brands. When fans perceive identity similarities between themselves and sponsor brands, new identification processes unfold (Pan and Phua, 2020). In the extent to which fans identify with the club or their sponsors might increase through the launch of esports if the fans consider the addition to be enriching. The opposite is also true, so if fans feel "disconcerted or deceived" by the sponsor's actions, they tend to diminish or even lose their identification (Mühlbacher *et al.*, 2022). The sponsor brands linked to the offer of esports content represent a new avenue of research that could potentially justify the meaning of fans' perceived brand identity (Besombes, 2016). Moreover, for esports actors, knowledge of the individual brand identity is crucial to better understand the real value the fans attribute to the brand and their role.

Most of the academic literature has pointed out esports as having possible similarities with traditional sports, comparing their cooperative nature through the membership of social groups, and noting the behavioral intentions of fans as potential consumers (Abbasi *et al.*, 2020). However, scholars have used identity theory and social identity in a confusing way for years (Lock and Heere, 2017), showing a variety of scattered findings in the literature. The identity framework formalizes the choices individuals make about who they are as an individual or within a group setting (Stryker, 1968). The role of a fan's identity can stimulate behavioral intentions (Biscaia *et al.*, 2018) when emotional significance to supporting an event and its value is celebrated and accepted within a social group (Stryker and Burke, 2000). So, it is possible that fans who identify with an esports context within

this group are more likely to contribute with positive word-of-mouth (WOM) and purchase intentions (PI). In this paper, we assume that role-identity can be understood as a motivational driver, providing incentives to shape the subsequent behavioral intentions of fans. However, empirical research has yet to prove or refute these assumptions based on the context of esports events. To date, research targeting esports fans has been limited to the effects of their motivation on the frequency of watching (Pizzo *et al.*, 2019), on game commitment and attitude (Qian *et al.*, 2020) or on the points of attachment (Yu *et al.*, 2022). Problematically, little empirical insight exists regarding the role-identity effect of esports fans on other consumer behaviors and how this can represent an important contribution to the esports organizations and their future sponsors. Understanding these role-related behaviors can help marketers tailor their strategies and offerings to cater to the diverse needs of esports fans. Complementarily, managers and marketeers must be cognizant of the impact of role identity within esports industry as it may influence their brand associations and perceptions (Wang *et al.*, 2020), and affecting their behaviors and preferences within the esports ecosystem.

Thus, the current study aims to explore esports fan identity vis-à-vis the sponsor–sponsee relationship so as to understand the effects on fan behavioral intentions. Theoretically, this study advances the sport marketing literature by empirically investigating to what extent fans identifying with esports initiates a dynamic process of identity formation with the event and their sponsor brand. And secondly, how this process tends to encourage or discourage behavioral intentions for purchase and word-of-mouth. Practically, this research will contribute to exploring the self-reflected view of identity providing useful insights for managers and marketeers build and manage associations linked to the event and sponsor brand. Understanding the match-up between these points of attachment could further connect fans to their sponsorship interests, events and/or experiences.

Literature review

Theoretical base

The theoretical foundation in the current study is based on the identity theory (IT; Stryker, 1968). IT has been thoroughly used in the sports marketing literature with several studies emphasizing its meaning attached to social roles (e.g. fan) (Biscaia *et al.*, 2018; Lock and Heere, 2017). In context, fan identity is essentially a type of role-based identity focusing on an individual's perceived importance of being a fan of a sports team (Wang *et al.*, 2020). Identity scholars explore how the roles and counter-roles individuals play in social situations influence behavior (Stryker and Burke, 2000), while social identity theorists explore how belonging to a social group or category (e.g. a team) provides a base for the group's cohesive behavior (Tajfel *et al.*, 1979). Despite a lack of clarity and identity crisis in the recent literature (Lock and Heere, 2017), fan identity and team identity are distinct constructs and therefore should be analyzed separately. The former should focus on cognitions about how important the role of being a fan of the team is to the individual (i.e. role-based identity), while the second should focus on the social interaction with others in the same category (i.e. group-level). Despite its useful relevance to better understand how group-level identity develops, few studies have explored the IT in the esports field and, in particular, considering the impact of a fan's role identity for this industry.

Fan role-based identity represents a set of beliefs about the importance of that role to the individual, e.g. "*I consider myself to be a real esports fan*", or "*Being an esports fan is very important to me*", is pivotal to legitimizing one's role identity as a fan (Trail *et al.*, 2017). This means that individuals have role identities representing the characteristics attributed to oneself within a social role (e.g. how an individual perceives him/herself as an esports fan),

which gives meaning to their past behavior and directs future behavior (Trail *et al.*, 2005). As noted by Ervin and Stryker (2001), a role identity accommodates the social nature of past experiences and predicts future behavioral intentions. For instance, esports fans can express how important the game is for them by watching broadcasts of events (Jang *et al.*, 2020) and by buying products of their sponsors (Huettermann *et al.*, 2020). A fan's action expresses their identity (Biscaia *et al.*, 2018) suggesting that their interactions with a team/game can represent an expression of their role identity. Role identity is powerful in predicting actual consumptions such as game attendance (Wang *et al.*, 2020), media consumption (Park and Dittmore, 2014) or brand trust (Pan and Phua, 2020). However, despite to previous studies have focused on the research of identity in different contexts (Biscaia *et al.*, 2018; Trail *et al.*, 2005), the importance of being a fan in an online environment and the impacts of role identity on future behaviors of WOM and brand purchase were rarely examined in the sport marketing field. To this end, we argue that fan identity should also incorporate how the individual sees him or herself as a devoted fan of esports and their associated sponsors. This fact reinforces the need to carry out further research using IT as a useful lens to help explain the fan identity role-based.

Fan identity on traditional sports and esports context

Academic literature has highlighted the similarities between esports and traditional sports, with research noting their cooperative nature through social group memberships (Kaye *et al.*, 2019) and exploring the behavioral intentions of fans as potential consumers (Abbasi *et al.*, 2020). These similarities have allowed scholars from various disciplines to utilize renowned sports management frameworks to study this emerging phenomenon (Cunningham *et al.*, 2018). The congruence between esports and traditional sports extends beyond the social realm and into practicality. For example, (1) the similarities on organization of games and tournaments, with esports directly referencing Olympic traditions that are associated with rivalries among nations (e.g. player rivalries igniting; McCaskill, 2019), (2) the broadcast of esports through television or online means (e.g. television networks like ESPN or CW; Adgate, 2020) or (3) the system of training that requires precision, cooperation amongst teammates and the strict diets (Darby, 2016), as in traditional sport. In both contexts, fans perceive their sports or esports games as an extension of their own identity. They incorporate their favorite games characters, colors or players into their personal style, social media profiles or online usernames (Jang *et al.*, 2020). This sense of identity extension reinforces their fan role-identity and can help to justify the use of the similar measurement scales and attributes in future studies.

Notwithstanding, there are also noteworthy identity differences between esports and traditional sports fans. While a sports spectator can be defined as an individual who follows the in-game experience but is not necessarily a participant in the game or even a fan (Cheung and Huang, 2011), esports fandom involves a mixture of activities, with electronic sports fans typically engaging in multiple roles, including playing, spectating or governing legitimized institutions within the field. This blurs the lines between fandom and other roles that traditional sports had previously set (Thompson *et al.*, 2022). Esports offers a unique social atmosphere, different from traditional sports events, and include new features such as cosplay and cheering patterns (Jang *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, esports fans have been highlighted as being more engaged with the field than traditional sports fans, leading to more salient identities (Brown *et al.*, 2018). These identity differences reveal the need for a deeper understanding of the fan experience and suggest that the management practices developed for traditional sports may not always apply to esports. To this end, new studies using identity theory are suggested (e.g. Trail *et al.*, 2017) to advance knowledge in the esports literature and understanding the fan intentions in the event. These researches can help identify the different

roles that fans play within the esports community and how those roles contribute to their identity formation. Such discussion will contribute to explore the ways in which esports fans engage with the sport, the meaning that they attach to their participation, and how it contributes to attach their role-identity.

Fan identity and behavioral intentions

The dynamic nature of esports means that fans are not merely viewers, but also players, content creators and community activists (Hedlund *et al.*, 2020). They carry out different roles beyond the spectator activity since some are players themselves and others are team managers within the community (Seo, 2016). Based on IT, individuals make choices about who they are as an individual or within a group setting (Stryker, 1968). They can assume many role identities, and each specific identity represents a set of beliefs about the importance of that role to the person (Trail *et al.*, 2017). Esports fans express their identity when watching events, following and supporting different competitors, as well as socializing about the games, events and communities with which they associate (Xue *et al.*, 2019). This can mean that the more an individual identifies with being an esports fan, the more likely they will have favorable behaviors with esports-related activities.

Following this stream of research, the literature on sports marketing studies has clearly highlighted the effect of fan identity on sponsorship effectiveness, team performance or game outcomes (Lock and Heere, 2017). Previous studies noted that fans strongly attached with a sport or team are more motivated to attend a match (Wann, 2006). Although the construct of event attachment remains relatively unexplored, previous research in sport management has demonstrated that fans can form a strong emotional connection to a specific event, supporting the theoretical concept (Prayag *et al.*, 2020; Zhang *et al.*, 2019). Esports fans who share a common interest gather together, forming connections, friendship and a perceptual sense of belonging at events (Thompson *et al.*, 2022). This sense of community can deepen emotional ties to the event and make it more meaningful. The idea that fans borrow actions, motivations and identity characteristics from traditional sports (Brown *et al.*, 2018) can be pointed out to explain why they have a role identity toward the esports events. Their particular characteristics directly impact their identities. For example, fans may travel long distances, spend money on tickets, merchandise and dedicate their time and energy to following the event (Obiegbu *et al.*, 2019). The event itself may be a source of identity and pride, making the emotional connection even stronger. Sport fan actions express their identity (Biscaia *et al.*, 2018), suggesting that fan interactions with an event can represent an expression of their role identity. Based on IT, previous research (Trail *et al.*, 2005) has noted there are several points of attachment (e.g. events) linked to the deep connection felt by fans in regard to other entities (e.g. esports) (Ballouli *et al.*, 2016). Thus, it may be reasonable to suggest that the extent to which fans identify with esports may influence the way they attach with the esports event:

H1. Fan identity with esports positively influences its attachment with esports events.

Fans have a crucial role in sport consumption (Trail *et al.*, 2005, 2017) due to their ticket and product purchases, attending future games, sponsorship interest and positive word-of-mouth to others (WOM). In an esports context, one type of consumption behavior is word-of-mouth intention among grassroot communities. As noted by Abbasi *et al.* (2020), the concept of word-of-mouth refers to a consumer's intent to share positive information regarding esports or related tournaments to others. Recent studies have shown that esports consumer social engagement can positively influence their consumption behavior, including heightened word-of-mouth (Abbasi *et al.*, 2020). By participating in the event individuals sees themselves in a certain role (e.g. esports/event fan) and tends to guide behavior as a way of demonstrating

their identity (Stryker and Burke, 2000). Consequently, the effect of this role is conducive to WOM as individuals can view the event as a way of legitimizing their consumption behaviors (Biscaia *et al.*, 2018).

Recognized as an important consumer behavior, WOM is considered a key relational outcome and a powerful input in consumer decision making (Abbasi *et al.*, 2020). In esports consumption, Macey *et al.* (2022) highlighted the consumer role of watching and purchasing, while Qian *et al.* (2020) noted that push or pull factors' effect on WOM is explained by gaming commitment. It is expected that highly identified fans will attend and spectate events (Kwon *et al.*, 2007), and by participating they tend to feel more open to spread positive information regarding the event in their day-by-day interactions (Wann, 2006). Considering that the fan identity process shapes consumption action (Biscaia *et al.*, 2018), self-recognition will likely influence behavioral intentions toward the event. Furthermore, the way one sees oneself in a certain role (e.g. esports fan) in a particular moment and context in time tends to guide their future behavior (Stryker and Burke, 2000), especially when the event is perceived as an attachment point for the esports fan role-identity (Ballouli *et al.*, 2016). As such, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2. Fan attachment with esports events positively influences their word-of-mouth recommendations.

Brand identity and behavioral intentions

Sponsor brands added esports activities to their organizational portfolio, representing a new interest that potentially changes the meaning of brand identity (Besombes, 2016). As this identity process unfolds, new opportunities for fans to identify with a brand emerge since identity is mutable and depends on the context (Mühlbacher *et al.*, 2022). A primary IT pillar is that individuals have role identities guided by past and future behaviors (Ervin and Stryker, 2001). When there are similarities in identities between brands and individuals, these similarities can lead to role-based identity intensification (Pan and Phua, 2020), guiding fans to favorable attitudes toward a brand (Pradhan *et al.*, 2020).

In the case of esports, individuals have different roles based on the space and context in which they are involved (Hedlund *et al.*, 2020). Esports fans create and relate to different gaming communities through common values and symbolic expressions or artifacts associated with the sub-field (Seo, 2016). When sponsor brands engage with the esports sub-field, they are altering the individual's perception of their brand identity, benefitting from new and enhanced associations (Janakiraman *et al.*, 2006). As fans extend their self-concept through connections and social interactions (Lock and Heere, 2017) within the esports-linked roles (e.g. players, viewers or fans), this identity could reflect their positive attitudes within the ecosystem (Wang *et al.*, 2020). Following this concept, brand identity is perceived to impact fan response to sponsor-brands of their favorite esports, events or teams (Tsordia *et al.*, 2021). According to Meenaghan (2013), when events and brands show congruence between their self-identities, consumer attitudes may change positively for sponsoring organizations. Thus, fans are most likely to have a favorable attitude toward the sponsor brand if it is a part of the club's group brand community (Pradhan *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, it is plausible to argue that the perceived self-reflexive of the fan role-based and brand identity can lead to stronger attitudes when the sponsorship action is activated. Based on this assumption, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3. Fan identity with the brand positively influences their attitudes toward the sponsor brand.

Fan identity has been a persecutor of positive behavioral intentions (Trail *et al.*, 2005) such as favorable attitudes toward the sponsor brand and event purchase intent (Gwinner and

Bennett, 2008), or increased attendance (Bodet and Bernache-Assolant, 2011). Moreover, the positive impact of fan identity on behavioral intentions (Lee and Kang, 2015) has been linked with the possibility of overlapping role-based identities (Heere *et al.*, 2011), which exert influence on individuals and their actions on group identity (Cova and Pace, 2006). This means that fans with high levels of overlap converge identities into more stereotypical behavior (e.g. purchase intention), representing their role-based identity. Previous studies have shown that identification is enough of a factor to impact the similarity between entities and their sponsoring brands, altering perceptions and motivations of individuals toward the development of planned actions (Tsordia *et al.*, 2021). When the event and the sponsor are regarded as being in a fit relationship, the fan purchase intention of sponsor-brand products or services are positively influenced (Gwinner and Bennett, 2008). Thus, fans with a positive perception toward a sponsor brand are likely to purchase branded products associated with their favorite club or event (Pradhan *et al.*, 2020). This means that individuals with high levels of identification have favorable attitudes toward sponsors and consequently a greater intention to purchase (Madrigal, 2000). Considering these arguments, the following hypothesis is advocated:

H4. Positive attitudes toward the sponsor brand positively influence the fan's brand-purchase intention.

Bidirectional interaction related to esports events and their sponsorship

The relationship between fan identity with their attitudinal and behavioral outcomes has become particularly important in the esports environment (Macey *et al.*, 2022). Fans express their identity through showing their willingness to attend related events continuously or when they support a brand to differentiate themselves from fans of other brands (Mühlbacher *et al.*, 2022). As they express their own identity with a sport, through event attachment or a brand association, those individuals will most likely demonstrate supportive actions toward these partnerships (Cornwell and Coote, 2005). At this point, sport fan actions express their identity (Biscaia *et al.*, 2018), suggesting that such interactions can represent an expression of their role identity. This means that multiple processes of fan role-based identity can be transferred to associated products or stakeholders (e.g. sponsors and brands). To this end, the individual identity the fans attribute to the event or brand gains a new facet without changing their role-identity, which is highly important to them.

Fan identity is a role that individuals interpret, acquiring characteristics through their in-group membership, adding to their personal identity (Biscaia *et al.*, 2018). For instance, sponsored events draw the audience based on the event's core values in order to connect individuals with their brands, products or services, and in particular, what they are personally identified with (Madrigal, 2000). Events associated with social and cultural causes such as promoting public health or supporting not-for-profit activities (Roy, 2010) may also provide a closeness effect in one's own identity toward sponsor brands. In consequence, a halo effect can occur, suggesting that positive feelings toward any sponsored event can shape fans' views of their sponsors such as positive attitudes toward the company and its products or services (Meenaghan, 2013). In this sense, it is likely that esports fans attached with an event are influenced by their sponsor brand's attitude. That is, due to a strong own attachment with an event or a game, an emotional transfer of affect from the fan to the sponsor can occur (Deitz *et al.*, 2012). Based on these assumptions, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H5. Fan attachment with esports events positively influences their attitude toward the sponsor brand.

Conversely, the halo effect can also be applied to fan identification with an event whose attitudes toward the sponsor provide a positive effect on everything attached to the brand,

including the event (Nisbett and Wilson, 1977). Regarding brand identity, individuals can have meaningful and personal connections with brands (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003) and it may even become an extension of themselves (Biscaia *et al.*, 2018). This bidirectional relationship can be explained by fan perception toward the partnership since in sports contexts, events and sponsors are perceived as trustworthy partners, enhancing each other's credibility and support (Wang *et al.*, 2012). Likewise, events are opportunities for sponsor brands to be associated with core values and concrete causes alongside other sport brands and organizations, becoming a distinctive resource and competitive advantage against competitors (Papadimitriou *et al.*, 2008). Whether fans have a perception of sponsorship congruence and awareness (i.e. knowledge and deal fitness), the act of sponsoring will most likely be effective in shaping the individual's attitude and identity (Biscaia *et al.*, 2018). Fan identity reaches its highest levels when individuals feel a good fit between the sponsor and the sponsored activity (Deitz *et al.*, 2012). Consistent with the theoretical evidence, it is expected that a favorable attitude toward a sponsor brand will activate subsequent responses on sponsor–event relationship as an extension of their own identity. In this sense, the last path of research to be tested in our model is as follows:

H6. Fan attitude toward sponsor brand positively influences their attachment with the esports event.

Drawing on these views, we propose a hypothetical model that explores esports fan identity toward the event and sponsor brand and how this identification can influence their future behavioral intentions. Our study aims to understand to what extent the fan role-based identity influences the sponsor and the sponsored activity, supporting the hypothesis that fans who highly identify with esports are the most positive toward the brands and consequently exhibit a favorable behavioral response for purchase and word-of-mouth (Deitz *et al.*, 2012). Since role identity is based on previous experiences and is socially recognized through actions (Trail *et al.*, 2005), multiple overlapping identities can occur and influence fan perception toward sponsor and sponsee and vice versa. The model hypothesized and the specific study hypotheses are illustrated in Figure 1.

Method

This study was conducted in the 2021 FPF Open Challenge (event) and based on the LG (brand), as contextual design. The research setting is explained below with the subsequent sections addressing participants, data collection and analysis.

Research context

The 2021 FPF eFootball Open Challenge was the first event in the esports circuit calendar in the Portuguese FIFA scene. It took place between the 13th and 14th of November, 2021 in Pombal, Portugal within the main event of Moche XL Games World. This was the fourth edition of the competition (Pereira, 2021), which promotes the video gaming culture, in particular focused on esports where fans gather to witness competitions of different game genres such as League of Legends, Counter-Strike or FIFA (Moche XL Games World, 2021). This event was composed of several local stakeholders such as players, teams, sponsors, volunteers, event organizers, among others and was supported by the Portuguese Football Federation (FPF).

The brand LG Electronics Inc. was one of the main sponsors of the event. Established in 1958, the LG brand engages in the development of display devices, home appliances, electronic parts, multimedia goods and software (Forbes, 2021). From an international standpoint, LG has various investments in different esports ecosystems and is one of the

main sponsors of notable organizations such as Eintracht Frankfurt Esports (German Bundesliga), LEC Replays (Europe's premier League of Legends) and London Royal Ravens (Call of Duty League team) (Hollingsworth, 2019). Specifically in the case of FPF eFootball Open Challenge, LG supported the use of its best gaming-related products for players. Sponsorship activation was carried out through the usage of LED monitors alongside innovative HDMI cables, assuring the fastest technology for users with no delay and LED screens for fans to have a truly immersive experience either in-person or via streaming (eFootball, 2021).

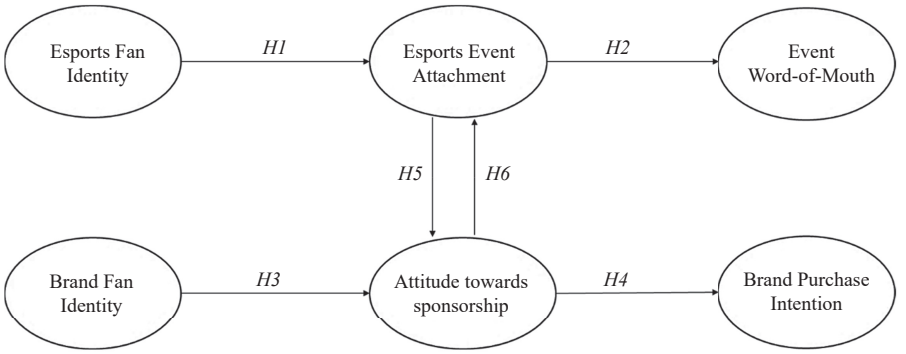
Data collection and sample

This study was conducted with a convenience sample of esports fans ($n = 356$) who attended the 2021 FPF eFootball Open Challenge. An online questionnaire was used to collect data for one month and a half (25th of November to 4th of January) in the post-event period.

The sampling strategy employed was based on an internal database from the Portuguese Football Federation (event owner), which managed and recruited the participants through e-mail adverts. In addition, the following criteria were considered for participant selection: (1) individuals who attended the event in person or through online streaming, (2) individuals who watched/played the FIFA game for at least 1 year and (3) individuals fluent in Portuguese. Individuals under the age of 18, those who did not attend the two event days or those who had not watched/played a FIFA game for at least 1 year were excluded from the study.

A URL link with the questionnaire and an explanation of the study's purpose was sent via email inviting subjects to participate in the study. A total of 15 min was given to answer the questions, while the download, print or advertisement activation of the questionnaire was not allowed. To ensure that each question was answered only once, the IP address was recorded in the server, preventing further access to the survey. All participants voluntarily accepted to participate and signed an informed consent form.

From a total sample of 1032 individuals ($n = 1032$) who had registered for the event and subscribed to the FPF eFootball Twitch, 445 answered the survey (43.1% response rate), but 89 cases were removed due to incomplete responses or non-compliance with the criteria defined. As a result, the final sample consisted of 356 individuals (34.5% response rate), with 96.1% of participants being male ($n = 342$) while 3.9% were female ($n = 14$). As for participant demographics, participants aged between 18 and 25 years comprised 70.8% ($n = 252$) of the sample, which is consistent with previous studies both in Portugal and in



Source(s): Authors own creation

Figure 1. Hypothesized model showing fan identity relationships with event and sponsorship and their behavioral intention

Europe (ISFE, 2020). In terms of education level, 68.6% of the respondents had a high school degree (n = 244), and this sample contained essentially Portuguese esports fans (n = 348). Regarding the event, 71.1% (n = 253) of the fans were not first-time spectators of an esports event, while event attendance was entirely via streaming (n = 290). As for the FIFA gameplay behavior, we asked their game-play time (i.e. times per week). For our sample, 61.2% answered that they played more than five times per week and 38.8% played less than three to four times per week. Despite the convenient sample used, these proportions closely mirrored those reported in the Interactive Software Federation of Europe (2020) as described in Table 1.

Measurement and scale items

A pool of 22 items was assessed in the current questionnaire. The first section of the survey collected sociodemographic information (e.g. age, gender, nationality, education level, play time per week and free time), while the second part examined fan identity toward the psychometric measures analyzed (i.e. esports fan identity, event attachment, brand identity and sponsor

	Total sample (%)	Portugal * (%)	Europe ** (%)
Gender			
Male	96.1	84	87
Female	3.9	7	13
Age			
18–25	70.8	47	22
26–35	24.2	27	20
36–45	4.4	3	16
46–55	0.3	0	23
55 or more	0	0	0
M (SD)	23.6(6.08)	24.2	31.3
Education			
Elementary school	0.3	4	–
High school	68.6	66	–
College Degree	31.4	32	–
(Bachelor's)	(24.8)	(24)	–
(Master's)	(6.6)	(6)	–
Nationality			
Portuguese	97.8	–	–
Other	2.2	–	–
Event first-time			
Yes	28.9	–	–
No	71.1	–	–
FIFA free-time			
Yes	93.7	–	–
No	6.3	–	–
FIFA play-times			
Occasionally	7.4	–	9.5 average hours per week
1 to 2 times a week	8.8	15	
3 to 4 times a week	22.6	10	
5 to 6 times a week	19.6	18	
More than 6 times a week	41.6	57	

Note(s): * Silva (2020). ** ISFE (2020)
Source(s): Authors own creation

Table 1. Respondent demographic profiles

brand attitude) and their behavioral intentions (word-of-mouth and purchase intent). A guided questionnaire encouraged the respondents to assess the items according to their level of agreement and two initial filter questions were included related to their attendance or not of the two days of event or if s(he) watched/played (or not) the FIFA game for at least 1 year. Respondents who answered "no" to any of these filter questions were redirected to the end of the survey, but all other participants were invited to assess the following aspects:

Esports fan identity
This construct refers to fan identity with esports, resulting in a feeling of belonging and distinction for the individual (Lock and Heere, 2017). A 4-item scale from Tsiotsou and Alexandris (2009) and Trail *et al.* (2005) was adapted in the traditional sports.

Brand fan identity
This construct used a 4-item scale adapted from Cornwell and Coote (2005) and Kuenzel and Halliday (2010) to assess fan identity with a brand as ascribed by its identity and self-definition.

Esports event attachment
This construct assesses fan identity with an esports event, which ensues when sentiments of attachment, familiarity, and belonging reflect the importance of being a fan of the event to an individual. A 4-item scale was adapted from Prayag and Grivel (2018) related to place dependence in a sport event setting.

Sponsor brand attitude
This construct includes a 4-item scale adapted from Degaris *et al.* (2017) to assess fan attitudes with a sponsor brand of an event, activating feelings of distinction, belonging and reassurance through the sports connection.

Event word-of-mouth
This construct included a 3-item scale adopted from Prayag and Grivel (2018) to assess fan intention to share positive information toward esports event.

Brand purchase intention
A 3-item scale was adapted from Alexandris *et al.* (2012) to assess fan intention to buy products related to the esports sponsor brand.

All measurement items were translated into Portuguese and back translated into English to ensure precision between the original scales, the translated version and redaction accuracy of the cultural context (Banville *et al.*, 2000). First, three scholars with experience in sport marketing and management started the back-translation process. Then, the three translations were compared and accepted followed by a back-translation by a native English speaker. Subsequently, the original and back-translated versions of the instruction, item stem, scale and items were compared between both versions resulting in additional adjustments to the initial translation. In the content validity process, researchers were asked to raise any concerns while completing the scale and carrying out the content analysis of the items. After this step, suggestions for changing the wording of 14 items were made, aiming at greater clarity and comprehensiveness of each item. The content validity was first assessed through Lawshe's (1975) method. The scholars rate each item on a scale from 1 to 3 (i.e. essential, useful but not essential, or not necessary), indicating the degree to which item was relevant and appropriate to

measure the constructs. Then, the experts' assessment of the items deemed essential was used to calculate the content validity ratio (CVR) and content validity index (CVI) as outlined by Lawshe (1975). The CVR value was computed for each item to determine whether it should be retained or discarded, while the CVI represents the average CVR value, indicating the degree of overlap between the items and their theoretical domain. The CVR's results were above the 0.90 value, while the CVI for the total of the items was 0.95. The final version included a pool of 22 items measuring psychosocial dimensions and 6 measuring demographic items. All items were formulated based on positive statements and they were jumbled within each section. The survey included seven-point Likert scales (From 1 = "Strongly Disagree" to 7 = "Strongly Agree) and the survey items can be found in Appendix, alongside its factor loadings and CVI.

Data analysis

Descriptive statistics were calculated using SPSS 26.0 and then the data were analyzed using AMOS 26.0. A Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted on the model proposed to ensure the measurement model's psychometric properties. The substantive hypotheses were then tested using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), which simultaneously uses a series of separate and independent multiple regression equations (Marôco, 2018). The fit indices used in this study were ratio of chi-square (χ^2) to its degrees of freedom, Tucker–Lewis Index (*TLI*), comparative-of-fit index (*CFI*), goodness-of-fit index (*GFI*), standardized root mean square residual (*SRMR*) and root mean square error of approximation (*RMSEA*) (Hair *et al.*, 2010). Convergent validity was assessed in terms of factor loadings through the average variance extracted (*AVE*), while discriminant validity was assessed by comparing squared correlations among the constructs (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Regarding the internal consistency, Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability were measured to evaluate the reliability of the survey measures. Finally, an SEM was performed to assess the predictive validity of the model.

Results

Descriptive statistics of factors

The descriptive statistics are presented in Table 2. All skewness (values smaller than −1.425) and kurtosis (values smaller than 2.191) indicated that data distribution, and consequently the multicollinearity, was not an issue (Marôco, 2018). Data were positively skewed with mean scores significantly above three (3.5), which represents the mid-point of the 7-point Likert scale items, for fan identity and behavior. The mean scores for fan identification with esports and the event ($M_{esports}$ = 5.37 and M_{event} = 4.80) were higher than for its brand identity and event sponsor brand (M_{brand} = 3.29, $M_{event\text{-}brand}$ = 4.30), revealing their strong identity and commitment to the field of esports. The results also indicated that word-of-mouth recommendation of the event had the highest mean score (M = 5.60, SD = 1.38), while fan identity with the brand was the variable with the lowest mean perceived (M = 3.29, SD = 1.71), evidencing their identification level with the brand.

Assessment of the measures

The global fit indices indicate that the measurement model proposed provides an acceptable fit to the data [$\chi^2(192) = 478.06$ ($p < 0.01$), $\chi^2/gl = 2.49$, $CFI = 0.96$, $GFI = 0.90$, $NFI = 0.94$, $TLI = 0.95$, $SRMR = 0.05$, $RMSEA = 0.06$]. The *CFI*, *NFI* and *TLI* values exceeded the recommended cut off of 0.90, whereas the *SRMR* and *RMSEA* value was more favorable than the 0.08 threshold (Hair *et al.*, 2010). In addition, Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability values (α and *CR*) of all constructs exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70 (values higher than 0.86), providing support for the internal consistency of these constructs (Marôco, 2018).

Construct	*M* (SD)	Correlation matrix (n = 360)						Factor loadings	Z-Value	α	CR	AVE
		1	2	3	4	5	6					
1. Esports fan identity	5.37(1.29)	*0.61*						0.713–0.867	14.91–19.76	0.85	0.86	0.61
2. Brand fan identity	3.29(1.71)	0.14	*0.76*					0.762–0.923	16.76–22.67	0.92	0.93	0.76
3. Esports event attachment	4.80(1.65)	0.54	0.24	*0.73*				0.775–0.922	17.11–22.57	0.92	0.92	0.73
4. Sponsor-brand attitude	4.30(2.01)	0.24	0.31	0.53	*0.84*			0.897–0.927	21.66–22.94	0.95	0.96	0.84
5. Event word-of-mouth	5.60(1.38)	0.41	0.14	0.52	0.27	*0.80*		0.858–0.910	20.00–21.99	0.92	0.92	0.80
6. Brand purchase intention	4.77(1.81)	0.20	0.19	0.29	0.48	0.32	*0.90*	0.936–0.956	23.50–24.39	0.96	0.96	0.90

Note(s): No correlations failed the AVE test of discriminant validity. M = mean; SD = standard deviation; α = Cronbach's Alpha
Values on the diagonal refer to average variance extracted (AVE)
Source(s): Authors own creation

Table 2.
Correlation matrix, AVE values and squared correlations among constructs

The construct measures yielded sound reliability and validity properties (Table 2). The *AVE* scores varied from 0.61 (esports identification) to 0.90 (brand purchase intention), exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.50 and providing evidence of convergent validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). In addition, evidence of discriminant validity was accepted given that the correlation coefficients were lower than the suggested criterion of 0.85 (Kline, 2005), and none of the squared correlations exceeded the *AVE* values for each associated construct (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). The correlation matrix for the constructs and average variance extracted tests of discriminant validity are presented in Table 2. Subsequently, the structural model was examined.

Testing of the hypotheses

The results of the structural model are pictorially presented in Figure 2. The overall assessment of the structural model demonstrated an acceptable fit to the data [$\chi^2(200) = 545.02$ ($p < 0.01$), $\chi^2/gl = 2.72$, $CFI = 0.95$, $GFI = 0.88$, $NFI = 0.93$, $TLI = 0.95$, $SRMR = 0.07$, $RMSEA = 0.06$]. Our model explained a significant portion of the variance of fan identification with the esports event ($R^2 = 72\%$), of the attitude toward sponsorship ($R^2 = 56\%$), of the word-of-mouth recommendation of the event ($R^2 = 54\%$), and of brand purchase intention ($R^2 = 48\%$). The effects of fan identification on the esports event ($\beta = 0.62$, $p < 0.001$) and on the event word-of-mouth intention ($\beta = 0.74$, $p < 0.001$) were positive and significant (see Figure 2), thus supporting H1 and H2. Similarly, fan identification with the brand showed a significant positive effect on their identification with the event's sponsor brand ($\beta = 0.37$, $p < 0.001$) as well as on the brand purchase intention ($\beta = 0.69$, $p < 0.001$), therefore H3 and H4 were also supported. Moreover, fan identification with the esports event was also significantly related to their identification with the event's sponsor brand ($\beta = 0.41$, $p < 0.001$) and vice versa ($\beta = 0.30$, $p < 0.001$), evidencing a reciprocity effect that explains the positive relationship between the sponsor and the sponsored activity. As a result, H5 and H6 were confirmed. The path coefficients for each model are illustrated in Table 3 and Figure 2, indicating that all hypotheses were supported.

Discussion and managerial implications

The purpose of this study was to explore esports fan identity toward the event and the sponsor brand and understand how their identity can influence their behavioral intentions.

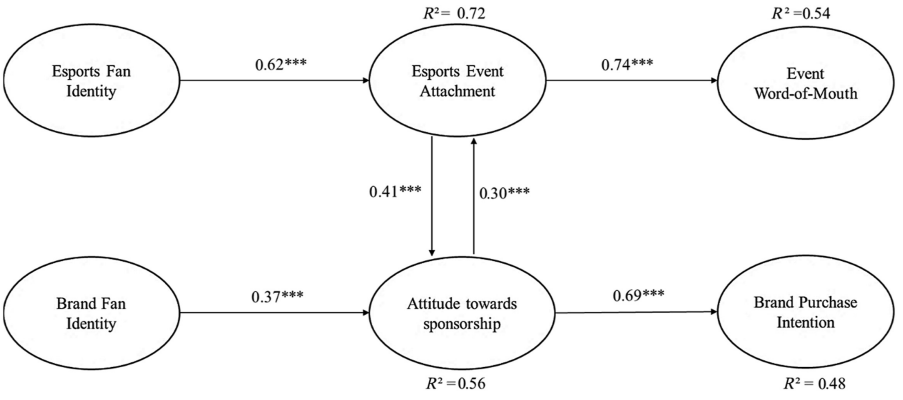


Figure 2.
Standardized estimates of the structural relationships between the constructs

Source(s): Authors own creation

H	Path	Supported?	β	Z-Value	*p-value*
H1	Esports fan identity → Esports event attachment	Yes	0.615	11.63	***
H2	Esports event attachment → Event word-of-mouth	Yes	0.738	15.01	***
H3	Brand fan identity → Sponsor-brand attitude	Yes	0.372	7.90	***
H4	Sponsor-brand attitude → Brand purchase intention	Yes	0.694	15.60	***
H5	Esports event attachment → Sponsor-brand attitude	Yes	0.413	6.95	***
H6	Sponsor-brand attitude → Esports event attachment	Yes	0.300	5.50	***
	Explained Variance				
	Esports event attachment		$R^2 = 0.72$		
	Event word-of-mouth		$R^2 = 0.54$		
	Sponsor-brand attitude		$R^2 = 0.56$		
	Brand purchase intention		$R^2 = 0.48$		

Note(s): H = hypothesis; β = beta weight; *** = significant at 0.001 level
Source(s): Authors own creation

Table 3.
Path coefficients, indicator weights, and explained variance of structural model

In doing so, this study sought to understand the fan identity in an esports context, arguing that fans who highly identify with esports are more likely to yield positive attitudes toward the event and its sponsor brands. The current study contributes to the sports marketing and sponsorships literature by (1) demonstrating that fan interactions with an event or sponsor brand can represent an expression of their role identity, (2) evidencing the importance of being fan in the esports sponsor–sponsee relationship, and by (3) showing that identity construct contributes to understanding fan intentions to WOM and brand purchase.

Firstly, our empirical findings revealed that esports fan self-identity was a positive and significant predictor of their identification with the event and subsequently their positive word-of-mouth recommendation (see Figure 2 and Table 3). This finding supports previous evidence in the context of traditional sports (Brown *et al.*, 2018) and leads us to support the notion that the way an individual sees oneself in a certain role (e.g. sport fan) tends to guide their attitudes and future behaviors (Stryker and Burke, 2000). Results suggest that a strong identity with esports allows fans to incorporate it into their self-concept (Prayag *et al.*, 2020) and create an identity standard (Ervin and Stryker, 2001). The sense of fan identity is built on past experiences (e.g. feelings held toward the atmosphere, services and the team's performance), which creates role-based beliefs about the event (Trail *et al.*, 2017). This explains that the more fans identify with esports, the more they value the extensions of their role identity (e.g. event attachment), and the more they tend to share their experiences with others (WOM).

The second structural analysis also revealed that fan identity with the brand can positively influence their attitude toward the event's sponsor brand and subsequently increase their future purchase intention. That is, the more an individual identifies with a brand, the more s(he) will yield positive perceptions toward the sponsor, and consequently will then tend to purchase their products (Deitz *et al.*, 2012). By sponsoring events to which fan identification is closely associated, sponsorship may contribute to strengthening this self-reflected view of identity (Mühlbacher *et al.*, 2022). As noted by Devlin *et al.* (2013), the sponsorship helps build brand identity, leading fans to value its link to the sponsor brand and further increase its higher brand trust and sense (Pan and Phua, 2020). This allows fans to create an idealized vision of the sponsor brand and enhance its role-identity (Pan and Phua, 2020). Likewise, our findings noted that a fan's attitude is important to increase behavioral intentions toward the sponsor brand. This is consistent with previous studies that consider that fans who identify with brands may increase their brand commitment (Rather *et al.*, 2018) and provide purchasing behavior toward sponsors (Gwinner and Bennett, 2008). Recent

studies (e.g. Elasri *et al.*, 2020) have linked esports with an avid consumer audience, resulting in an intensified search for brand-related products or services. In this sense, this study underlines the importance of role-identity in the field of esports, allowing us to understand how brand identity provides specific attitudes toward sponsorship and desirable consumption behaviors.

Thirdly, results from this study also provide evidence of the bidirectional interaction between the way in which fans attach with the esports event and its sponsor brand (see Figure 2). These structural relationships are significant and positive between the constructs and its explained variance indicates a strong association between the factors (AT_{brand}: $R^2 = 0.56$; ID_{event}: $R^2 = 0.72$). This suggests that the more fans identify with an esports event, the more they have favorable attitudes toward its sponsor brand and vice versa. Fans strongly attached to an esports event are more positive toward the sponsorship actions (Tsordia *et al.*, 2021), enhancing their favorability when the connection between the sponsor and the sponsored party is perceived as fit (Mühlbacher *et al.*, 2022). As identity aspects extend from the esports environment to its stakeholders, fans feel these similarities bridged in the ecosystem, satisfying multifaceted needs for identity and belonging (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). Given the experiential nature of esports (i.e. aesthetic, educational and entertainment; Seo, 2016), this two-way finding makes sense. That is, a strong and meaningful connection between fans and brands can be certainly activated when fan role-identity is closely connected with sponsor brands or when brands can fit fan-identified psychological needs (Pan and Phua, 2020). At this point, sponsorship may serve to establish and strengthen this self-identity in relation to esports events (Rogers *et al.*, 2020) by sponsoring teams or athletes closely related to esports fan identity. Likewise, a positive attitude toward sponsors can also be provided when the fans' psychological needs are satisfied in the event. In that case, the sponsor expects a positive event attribute shared by fans to be transferred to itself while in turn allowing the strengthening of their identity (Mühlbacher *et al.*, 2022). Our theoretical contributions will now be discussed, and several implications for the esports industry can be derived from these findings.

Theoretical implications

First, this study has contributed to the alleviation of the identity crisis described by Lock and Heere (2017). Our study focused on measuring identity through a fan-role perspective toward esports and brand identity. These constructs have generated some confusion in the literature, leading to measurement inconsistencies and dubious implications as outcomes from previous studies (Lock and Heere, 2017; Trail and James, 2016). By focusing on how a fan perceives and gives importance to their individual role (Trail *et al.*, 2005), our study contributes to Lock and Heere's (2017) goal of achieving a coherent theoretical separation of identity and social identity theories. Drawing from IT approach, this study represents an initial effort to understand how these self-enhancement relationships may transfer into fan association and sponsor brands from a cognitive and emotional understanding of the fan role (Stryker, 1968). However, our study also opens up new avenues for research to explore group and role-based identity differences and how they can impact teams, stakeholders, brands, actions and practices. To address the concerns raised by Lock and Heere (2017), new scales should be developed and validated for support both social identity theory and identity theory. To this end, researchers can more accurately measure these constructs and further advance the understanding of fan and brand identity in the esports field. Our study serves as a starting point for empirical exploration of identity theory in esports fandom research and starts new discussions about the fan role-identity toward sponsor–sponsee bidirectional relationship.

Furthermore, the study highlights the significance of the sponsor–sponsee bidirectional relationship within the esports domain. By revealing the interaction between fan attachment

to the esports event and sponsor-brand attitudes, this research emphasizes the need to prioritize positive fan experiences and ensure brand identity alignment with the values prevalent in the esports social field. Theoretically, a halo effect can occur leading to positive reciprocity between the sponsor and the sponsored activity (Meenaghan, 2013). Drawing from the identity theory, our study represents an initial effort to understand how these self-enhancement relationships may be transferred into fan association and sponsor brands from a cognitive and emotional understanding of the fan role (Stryker, 1968). This research enabled us to extend the literature and studies available on esports, by showing the sequential process underlying fan identity toward event attachment and their behavioral intention (Figure 2). Fan identity with esports and by implication their word-of-mouth behavior are a reflection of one's sense of self within a social role (Wood and Roberts, 2006).

Finally, this research has shed light on the diverse roles that fans can assume within their individuals' identities, demonstrating the interconnectedness and interplay between brand and esports identities. Particularly in the context of an evolving social field like esports, it becomes crucial to comprehend the formation and growth of brand communities, as well as the translation of entity values and practices into fan identities. It is recommended that further research focuses on the analysis of multiple identities through its multidimensional properties (Biscaia *et al.*, 2018), understanding what factors contribute the most to a heightened sense of identity salience among individuals and subsequent positive outcomes that have not yet been studied in esports contexts, such as consumption behaviors or engagement in social media platforms, which is a great relevance for both esports researchers and managers.

Managerial implications

Since the self-reflexive process leads fans to have positive behavioral responses and intentions, managers and marketeers should encourage the maintenance of strong fan identities by their sponsors by both providing joint engagement actions (Abbasi *et al.*, 2020) and by creating a positive atmosphere to improve their marketing and management activities (Jang *et al.*, 2020). From cheering routines put in place by the event organization to in-event contests related to cosplays, or even amateur LAN parties, it is recommended that marketeers use this type of actions to enhance individuals' self-identity salience, attaching it with the event and the sponsor-brand's own identity. This issue is particularly important given that fan role-identity is a key aspect to understanding their future consumer behavior (Biscaia *et al.*, 2018).

Furthermore, fans' positive perceptions of events ($M = 4.80$, $SD = 1.65$) can lead to strong word-of-mouth behaviors ($M = 5.60$, $SD = 1.38$), which esports event organizers and publishers need to be aware of and take advantage. There are three main recommendations coming from this finding: First, this can be achieved through content creation available for sharing by fans. This content should wrap around the fan role-based identity that underlines the link between the event and esports through visual images or videos that may resonate with the audience. And second, to further enhance fan engagement, event organizers and marketers can also leverage the power of influencers. By partnering with popular influencers in the esports industry, organizers can attract more fans and generate interest in the event (e.g. creating a "buzz" or heightened interest among their followers). Furthermore, it is recommended that organizers can create targeted content featuring these influencers, showcasing their personalities and highlighting their involvement in the event. This aligns well with the fact of new fans identify with esports, and more individuals may be willing to attend the event in-person, specifically if the content highlights the special atmosphere and the fan's role at esports events (Jang *et al.*, 2020). Finally, a last recommendation linked with fan identity and esports events is that organizers should consider providing value-added

services to fans attending the event, such as free Wi-Fi or on-site transportation. By offering such perks, fans are likely to feel valued and appreciated, which can strengthen their identity and attachment to the event.

Our findings also report the respondents' low mean score on the perceived brand identity ($M = 3.29$, $SD = 1.71$), evidencing the weak brand associations between the event and the sponsor. This suggests that the effects of fan identity on brand perceptions are in part channeled by their association to the event through the sponsorship action. When promoting this identity, managers and marketeers are advised to use esports to enhance brand associations through personal experiences and connections, inviting fans to actively create content based on these experiences. Esports national leagues or tournaments could be used as examples to improve brand associations and sponsorship awareness, exploring different ways to maximize branding opportunities. It is also recommended that it is provided through the optimization of digital assets, such as in-game avatars or scenarios featuring the sponsor's brand. Moreover, the act of aiding the esports ecosystem, may it be through teams or leagues in sponsorship actions, donating products or services in the process, is a strong perception changer for fans related with brands, diminishing any kind of possible skepticism regarding the sponsorship (Huettermann *et al.*, 2020). This is even more relevant for non-endemic sponsors given that fans tend to support esports-related sponsors such as technology companies and Internet providers.

Limitations and future research

This study has some limitations, which leads to new opportunities for future research. First, this study has measured esports fan identity and their behavioral intentions during the Covid-19 pandemic context, which could have influenced fan perceptions. This is an aspect that should be considered and could determine fan perceptions regarding their social perspective of various subjects. In addition, individual fear and reluctance to participate in live events could have limited the results obtained related to on-site attendance.

Second, using a cross-sectional study design prevents the observation of cause–effect relationships. Although the hypothesized paths support previous research, we cannot infer a case for causality or time order. In addition, this study design increases the probability of Common Method Bias (CMB), which could have influenced the final results by inflating the relationship between constructs and producing a covariation above the true relationship among scale items. This was a constant concern for the researchers involved and it was controlled through the SEM, but future studies should adopt cross-cultural or longitudinal designs, which allow for the inference of causality as well as a decrease of *CMB* existence through a latent method factor or Harman's single-factor test (Jordan and Troth, 2019).

Third, in regard to the sample size and composition, it does not fully represent esports fans. This study was developed in the Portuguese context and the FPF Open Challenge scene. Our sample is skewed toward male, young people (18–25), those with a high-school degree and who play more than six times a week. This is likely to be a result from the demographic profile associated with the respondent's type (millennial and Gen Z), while also considering that online surveys tend to attract a younger demographic (Prayag *et al.*, 2020). It is certainly possible that subsets of the fan's community (particularly different age groups or genres) could exhibit contrasting identity perceptions and behavioral responses. Furthermore, we acknowledge that our use of a convenience sample may have introduced selection bias. Participants were selected based on their availability and

willingness to participate in the study, and therefore, the results obtained may not be generalizable to the broader population (Schonlau *et al.*, 2009). It is essential to note that convenience sampling is typically utilized in exploratory or descriptive studies aimed at understanding specific groups' characteristics and behaviors. Nonetheless, this method may limit the study's external validity, as it may not represent the larger population. Further research needs to provide further generalizability for the model's results (i.e. not rely on a single source of data), with new sample profiles and pilot studies (e.g. in different contexts, cultures and languages), to garnish further validation for the survey instrument and conceptual model.

Fourth, although we adapted previous scales in this study, there may be a potential limitation in the way to measure role-identities for esports and brands. A role identity and a group identity are theoretically distinct and, therefore, they must be measured using different instruments (Lock and Heere, 2017). Further research should re-examine the scale in future esports events by considering only a theoretical base (role or group).

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(The Appendix follows overleaf)

Appendix

Table A1.
Items, factor loadings, Z-Values, CFA item statistics and correlation matrix

Variables/Items Original items	Final wording items	Factor loading	Z-value	CR	AVE
Fan Identity	*Esports Fan Identity*			0.86	0.61
I consider myself to be a real fan of the F1	I consider myself to be a real eSports fan	0.713	14.91		
Being a fan of the F1 is very important to me	Being an eSports fan is very important to me	0.867	19.76		
I would experience a feeling of "loss" if I had to stop being a fan	I would experience a feeling of "loss" if I had to stop being a fan	0.812	17.90		
I want others to know I'm a fan of the team	I want others to know that I'm an eSports fan	0.719	15.06		
Brand Identity	*Brand Fan Identity*			0.93	0.76
I am very interested in what others think about my car brand	I'm very interested in what others say about LG	0.762	16.76		
When someone praises my car brand, it feels like a personal compliment	When someone praises LG, it feels like a personal compliment	0.906	21.95		
This car brand's success is my success	LG's success is my success	0.923	22.67		
When someone criticizes the race, it feels like a personal insult	When someone criticizes LG, it feels like a personal insult	0.883	21.03		
Event Attachment	*Esports Event Attachment*			0.92	0.73
I feel a strong sense of belonging to the Interamnia World Cup as event	I feel a strong sense of belonging to the FPF Open Challenge as event	0.847	20.64		
I am very attached with the Interamnia World Cup	I am very attached with the FPF Open Challenge	0.922	22.57		
I enjoy the Interamnia World Cup more than any other similar event	I enjoy the FPF Open Challenge more than any other similar event	0.775	17.11		
I strongly identify with this destination	I strongly identify with the FPF Open Challenge	0.847	19.60		
Sponsor-Brand Attitudes	*Sponsor-Brand Attitudes*			0.96	0.84
I like NASCAR sponsors because it sponsors NASCAR	I like LG because it sponsors the FPF Open Challenge	0.924	22.80		
I feel more favorable toward NASCAR sponsors because they sponsor NASCAR	My attitude toward LG is more favorable because it sponsors the FPF Open Challenge	0.897	21.66		
I feel better about NASCAR sponsors' products and/or services because they sponsor NASCAR	I feel better about LG products because it sponsors the FPF Open Challenge	0.927	22.94		
When choosing brand and retailers, I choose those that are NASCAR sponsors	When choosing a brand, I choose LG because it sponsors the FPF Open Challenge	0.923	22.82		
Original Behavioral Intentions Items	Behavioral Intentions			0.92	0.80
Word-of-Mouth Recommendation	*Event Word-of-Mouth*				
I will tell my friends and/or family how much I enjoyed the 2012 Interamnia World Cup	I'm likely to tell for other people how much I enjoyed the FPF Open Challenge	0.910	21.99		
I recommend the Interamnia World Cup to my friends and family	I will recommend the FPF Open Challenge to others	0.909	21.95		

(*continued*)

Variables/Items Original items	Final wording items	Factor loading	Z-value	CR	AVE
I recommend [Firm's name] to someone seeking my advice	I recommend the FPF Open Challenge to someone seeking my advice	0.858	20.00		
Brand Purchase Intention	*Brand Purchase Intention*			0.96	0.90
I consider buying sponsor's products in the future	I consider to buy LG products in the future	0.956	24.39		
I will try to buy sponsor's products in the future	It is likely that I will try to buy LG products after this event	0.950	24.12		
I will buy sponsor's products in the future	I intend to buy new LG products	0.936	23.50		

Correlation matrix

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Esports Fan Identity	*1.00*					
2. Brand Fan Identity	0.14	*1.00*				
3. Esports Event Attachment	0.54	0.24	*1.00*			
4. Sponsor-Brand Attitude	0.24	0.31	0.53	*1.00*		
5. Event Word-of-Mouth	0.41	0.14	0.52	0.27	*1.00*	
6. Brand Purchase Intention	0.20	0.19	0.29	0.48	0.32	*1.00*

Note(s): No correlations failed the AVE test of discriminant validity; $p < 0.01$; $\chi^2(192) = 478.06$ ($p < 0.001$), χ^2/df = 2.49, TLI = 0.95, CFI = 0.96, NFI = 0.94, GFI = 0.90, RMSEA = 0.06
Source(s): Authors own creation

Table A1.

About the authors

André Calapez is a PhD student in sport management at the Faculty of Human Kinetics, University of Lisbon, Portugal. His research focuses on consumer behaviors, esports game's identity and esports events.

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