UNIVERSIDADE DE LISBOA

FACULDADE DE MOTRICIDADE HUMANA

A IDENTIDADE DOS FÃS DE ESPORTS COM O EVENTO E A MARCA PATROCINADORA: CASO DE ESTUDO DA LG NO FPF OPEN CHALLENGE.

Dissertação elaborada com vista à obtenção do Grau de Mestre em Gestão do Desporto

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"De corpo e alma,

Ator da calma,

Vem cá fora ver o verde

Ver a cor da fauna"

Slow J

Abstract

This study aims to explore the eSports fans' identity on sponsor-sponsee relationship, as well as understand the effects on their behavioural intentions. Data were collected among Portuguese eSports fans (n = 356) who attended at the 2021 FPF Open Challenge, using an online questionnaire. A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) analysed the psychometric properties of the constructs, and a subsequent structural equation model (SEM) examined the effects of fan identity on two behavioural intention and on sponsor-sponsee relationship. Results evidence that highly identified fans with eSports are more committed towards the event and tend to have a positive word-of-mouth intention, while those who have higher brand identification reported the highest connection to the event sponsor-brand and then tend to purchase its products. Moreover, our findings also provide evidence of the bidirectional interaction between fan' identity with eSports event and its sponsor-brand, leading to greater reciprocity on their social identity formation. Managerial implications focus on strengthening the social identity of fans as a way to understand their future behaviours.

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List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

AVE   Average Variance Extracted

CFA   Confirmatory Factor Analysis

CMB   Common Method-Bias

CPL   Cyberathlete Professional League

FPDE   Federação Portuguesa de Desportos Eletrónicos

FPF   Federação Portuguesa de Futebol

FPS   First-Person Shooter

GFI   Goodness of Fit Index

IESF   International Esports Federation

LED   Light-Emitting Diode

LoL   League of Legends

MMORPG   Massive Multi-User Online Role-Playing Games

RMSEA   Root Mean Square Error of Approximation

RTP   Rádio e Televisão Portuguesa

RTS   Real-Time Strategy

SEM   Structural Equation Model

SIT   Social Identity Theory

TLI   Tucker-Lewis Index

1. Introduction

Esports or electronic sports is the concept used to define the structured and competitive video game playing (Wong & Meng-Lewis, 2022). Its growth is remarkable over the last decade, engaging young consumers and global investors (e.g., Huettermann et al., 2020). It is characterised by experts as one modern digital phenomenon (Scholz 2020), which embraces a large ecosystem of stakeholders, such as sponsors, teams, and their fans, which travel all around the world to play in international competitions (Macey et al., 2022; Sjöblom et al., 2019). The relevance of eSports within the sports field comes through its market potential, which is completely unprecedented (Maciej & Weronika, 2020; Seo, 2013). The global revenue in 2019 was 957,5 million dollars and estimates see this number grow into 1600 million dollars by 2024, marking an increase of approximately 69% (Statista, 2021a). The numbers may vary according to the source, yet every figure related to electronic sports (e.g., fan viewership, sponsorship investment, competition prize money) is projected to grow at rates which exceed traditional sports' growth (Rogers et al., 2020), which explains its growing global dominance.

The intention of some sport organisations to incorporate gaming into its own sports agenda is symbolic of how much eSports has merged into the existing societal and cultural context (Wong & Meng-Lewis, 2022). For the eSports fans, this represents an official recognition for the sport and for the events they like and support. Fans as a social group, usually demonstrate the same identifying characteristics – intergroup differentiations, perceived categorizations, and measures of self-esteem (Wann & Branscombe, 1993). Previous studies indicated that a well-established social group identity is a provider of self-esteem strengthening, accentuating the positive features of identification, and minimizing the negative points of group membership (Biscaia et al., 2018; Gwinner & Bennett, 2008). In the eSports context, fans generally feel more connected to their social groups than to their local community, leading to an enhanced sense of belonging (Edwards & Reysen, 2018). They build shared connections through video game streams, attending live events, interaction in group chat platforms, and through gaming together (Hedlund, 2021). At this point, Brown et al. (2018) highlighted that eSports fans are more engaged than traditional sports fans.

However, despite recent advances, relatively little remains known about these social group behaviours (Cushen et al., 2019) and how they react on the eSports events' context and their stakeholders (Mühlbacher et al., 2021).

The eSports ecosystem includes a number of stakeholders, including sponsor brands (Hedlund et al., 2020). In fact, the electronic sports environment offers a great set of opportunities for sponsoring brands to rejuvenate and create value-in-context (Nielsen, 2019). Its fans are not simply interested in playing the games but also enjoy watching competitions (both live and via media), learning about the teams and events (Cushen et al., 2019), and contributing to the development of ecosystem-related brand' identities (Mühlbacher et al., 2021). When they perceive identity similarities between themselves and sponsor-brands, new identification processes unfold (Pan & Phua, 2021). For this respect, the fans' identity with the club or their sponsors might increase through the launch of eSports extensions, especially when the fans consider the addition to be enriching and containing resemblances (Abosag, et al., 2012). The opposite is also true, i.e., if fans feel "disconcerted or deceived" with the investors' actions, they tend to diminish or even lose their social identification (Mühlbacher et al., 2021). The sponsor-brands linked to the offer of eSports contents represent a new research interest that potentially can justify the meanings of fans perceived brand identity (Besombes, 2016). Moreover, for eSports organisations, the knowledge of how these fans are connecting and engaging is one the possible keys for a better understanding of their motivations and future behavioural intentions.

Most of the academic literature has pointed out eSports with possible similarities alongside traditional sports, relating their cooperative nature through social group memberships (Kaye et al., 2020), and noting the behavioural intentions of fans as potential consumers (Abbasi et al., 2020). The social identity framework formalizes the value and emotional attachment placed on a particular group membership (Tajfel & Turner 1979). Individuals like fans can use social groups and eSports group membership to maintain and support their personal and collective identities (Chuang, 2020). As fan-consumers, they are engaged in producing their social realities and personal or social identities by sharing experiences, creating emotional and social support for offline events, and translating passion into tangible consumption practices (Abbasi et al., 2020;

Andrews & Ritzer, 2018). As a result, it is possible that fans who engage in the eSports social context (e.g., events, teams or clubs) are more likely to contribute with positive word-of-mouth (WOM) and purchase intentions (PI). In this paper, we assume that social identification can be comprehended as a motivational driver, providing social incentives to engage fans in subsequent behavioural intentions. Yet, empirical research has yet to prove or refute these assumptions based on the context of eSports events. Research targeting eSports fans to date has been limited to the effects of their motivations on frequency of watching (Hamari & Sjoblom, 2017), on the value co-creation into the fan communities (Seo & Jung, 2016; Woratschek et al., 2014), or on the eSports brand identity dynamics (Mühlbacher et al., 2021; Huettermann et al., 2020). Problematically, little empirical insight exists regarding the social identity effects on the eSports contexts (Kaye et al., 2017), and how it can represent an important contribution to sports organisations and their future sponsors. In addition, it is clear that eSports sponsorship activations have benefits waiting to be reaped by sponsor-brands, given the large fan base present at events and in online streaming (Clavio, 2017). As eSports increasingly becomes interwoven with international organizations, a multitude of literary gaps emerge (Cunningham et al., 2018), in regard to eSports fandom, events and sponsoring brands' context and must be explored.

Thus, the current research aims to explore the eSports fan' identity on sponsor-sponsee relationship, as well as understand their effects on fan's behavioural intentions. This study will allow to understand to what extent the fan identity with eSports contributes to a dynamic process of identity formation with the event and their sponsor brand and to what extent this process tends to encourage or discourage their behavioural intentions for purchase intention and word-of-mouth. This dissertation will consist in eight sections. The next section coincides with the literature review, in which the theoretical base of this research is discussed, clarifying the social identity of fans in the eSports context and their relationship with events, sponsor-brands and behavioural intentions, followed by the development of hypotheses. Next, the conceptual model is presented alongside the research questions of the dissertation. The method, which contains the contextual settings, measurement dimensions, data collection, sample and data analysis is presented in the following section. Results are presented in the

fifth section. We conclude with the theoretical discussion of our results, offering the managerial implications for the eSports organisations and industry. Finally, the study's limitations and suggestions for future research are shown, ending with the dissertation's references and appendix.

2. Literature review

The literature review will contain the theoretical base in which this research deposits of its backbone of knowledge, advancing to the operationalization of theory-related concepts to develop hypotheses research questions and the conceptual model. It will also cover the current context of eSports, analysing this phenomenon through a socio-historic perspective, identifying its main characteristics and how it is similar and relevant to sports management. In addition, the main theoretical constructs of this study and their linkage will be explored in a logical manner, aiding the construction of this research.

2.1 Theoretical base

The theoretical foundation for the eSports fan identity analysis is based on the social identity theory (SIT; Turner & Tajfel, 1979). SIT has been thoroughly used in sports field, with several studies highlighting its relevance in managerial implications in order to analyse the social context in various sub-fields of sports itself, like sports marketing, sponsorship, or events (Biscaia et al., 2018; Thomas et al., 2017; Trail et al., 2012; Tsordia et al., 2021). Taking into consideration eSports' large estimated growth for the upcoming years (Rogers et al., 2020) and SIT's importance in the sports management field related to understanding fandom's social behaviour (Biscaia et al., 2018; Gwinner & Bennett, 2008; Trail et al., 2012), it is important to extend this theoretical framework onto the electronic sports' ecosystem.

This theory explains the social behaviour of individual, suggesting that the s(he) transcends his or her own personality in order to develop a social identity that is associated with a social group. This means that an individual's perception of itself is essentially based on a collective identity which comprehends social traits that the individual shares with other people or social groups (Tajfel et al., 1979). Applied to fan identity, the SIT describes it as an orientation of the self in regard to other objects, individuals or social groups, which results in feelings or sentiments of close attachment (Trail et al., 2000). When fans identify with a group, they assimilate the said group's identity into their own self-concept (Mael & Ashforth, 1992), and experience a sport or team's failings and achievements as their own (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003). Their level of identification can range from quite weak to extremely strong, according to evaluations toward members

of the groups they have chosen to belong to (Mullen et al., 1992). Fan identification reaches its highest levels when they feel the balance between assimilation of group identity and in-group distinctiveness (Brewer, 1991; Brewer & Gardner, 1996).

Moreover, mutual identification processes may develop in a communal fashion – partnering organizations, each one with their own social group identity, developing mutually through associations, building its core values, in-group categorizations or in-group comparisons and influencing collaborating groups (Cova & Pace, 2006). This intertwining processes could lead to new identity developments. Individuals derive their sense of identity from their affiliation with a sport, a team, or an athlete, reinforcing bonds with positive partners for their own social group (Heere et al., 2011). In this sense, overlapping identities can be a way to develop similar identities with brands or sports, creating new points of attachment for individuals (Mahar & Clinton, 2013).

Considering the interactive nature of eSports means fans are no just viewers, instead they are also players, content creators and community activists (Hedlund, 2021). Based on SIT, their social identity might represent a common feeling, thought, and sense generated by people in the in-gaming network, live events or in the virtual communities (Chuang, 2020). While eSports has become a global phenomenon, it has also kept its tangible roots and national identities through local events and community activities (McCauley et al. 2020). Addressing this identity can aid to fans in developing bonds with local ecosystem related stakeholders, such as teams, athletes or sponsors (Anderson-Coto et al., 2020). Previous research has revealed a clear congruence between traditional sports and eSports that allow scholars from different disciplines to take advantage of this association to probe the emerging phenomenon (Cunningham, et al., 2018; Funk et al., 2018; Hallmann & Giel, 2018; Heere, 2018). Specifically on fan identity, there is the need to theorise and understand the conditions under which it has been occurring in electronic sports (Macey et al., 2022), and in particular exploring how this social identity might attach to their behavioural intentions. This fact reinforces the necessity of research using SIT as a useful lens to help explain the eSports fan behaviours.

2.2 The social identity theory

Turner and Tajfel's (1979) social identity theory (SIT) defends that existing social groups are found within the individuals that make the groups themselves. According to Turner and Tajfel (1979), the main questions in their empirical work regard the social behaviours of individuals in line with the group they are aligned with. In a sports context, many previous studies have highlighted the relevance of SIT in managerial discussions, looking through this theory's lens in order to observe and analyse the social context, in various sub-fields of sports itself, like sports psychology, sports marketing, sports sponsorship or sports events (Bee & Dalakas, 2015; Biscaia et al., 2018; Jang et al., 2020; Rees et al., 2015; Thomas et al., 2017; Trail et al., 2012; Wann & Branscombe, 1993).

For example, when the former Indianapolis Colts quarterback Andrew Luck decided to announce his retirement in NFL, a series of angry tweets, comments, and posts on social media from fans emerged, associating Luck with the club's success, and urging him to stay (Young, 2019). This strong emotion shows not only the level of identification between fans and their team, but also that they will defend the group like it is themselves, finding the social group in the individuals that identify with it, making its success a part of their pride and self-esteem (Turner & Tajfel, 1979).

First, the authors identified two extremes of social behaviour, which they call interpersonal and intergroup. In the interpersonal extreme, they say that interactions between two or more individuals are fully determined by their characteristics and not at all affected by the social groups they are inserted in or categories they belong to (Tajfel, 1982; Turner & Tajfel, 1979). For instance, when UFC fighter Conor McGregor wanted to stand up for himself and act aggressively against a fan that decided, against Conor's will, that he would take a photograph of him, this violent act can be considered an interpersonal behaviour, since it is not an act that followed any group conduct (Sheets, 2019). As for the intergroup extreme, this one consists of the interactions between two or more individuals which are fully determined by their membership in certain social groups they are slotted in (Tajfel, 1982; Turner & Tajfel, 1979). In another example, Jamie Carragher and Gary Neville, Liverpool and United football legends respectively, had a heated discussion about their teams before they

clashed in a Premier League game in early 2021, showing the pride and passion regarding the institutions they used to represent and, with that, demonstrating identification through the argument and towards the social group they are inserted in (Mullock, 2021). Although the authors identify these extremes, caution is advised, given that the full extremes of each behaviour can non-exist in real-life situations. Even though they may not exist at their fullest potential, as stated by Turner and Tajfel, it is possible that individuals gravitate to act towards their function within the social groups or categories they are inserted in (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

While the actions of individuals towards their functions within their social groups is essential to the development of this research, we must understand first what makes up the characteristics of the individual itself and how they act in various contexts and phases of life. Turner and Tajfel state that individual identity contemplates specific characteristics which are inherent to individuals, like personal abilities or personality traits. These characteristics are what makes an individual special, singular from any other being (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Mead and Schubert (1934), for instance, will introduce his concept of self. It is the self that differentiates us from lower intelligence life forms. He also states that the body may work intelligently without the self being involved, as animals do (Mead & Schubert, 1934). This author mentions that individuals develop, through time and life experiences, their self. The self is, therefore, in constant development, because of social experiences, activities and interactions with other human beings (Mead & Schubert, 1934).

For example, this development is seen through Berger and Luckmann's (1966) construction of reality, where the authors say that the individual is not a member of society through birth but instead, they are born with a predisposition towards sociality within society and the groups within this structure. This process of learning, in which the individual is introduced to participation in society, gets to be known by the name of primary socialization (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). To further explain this process, the authors state that it is during primary socialization that individuals learn and build their self. Also, it must be said, this process occurs during the childhood of the individual. It is during this time that individuals will learn what is acceptable in a society and what is not, what are the rules and norms institutionalized and how to interact with other human beings. This is

something that every individual must go through to achieve functionality as a member of society (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

Although primary socialization would be enough for an individual to be a functional member of society, its institutions and social groups require another process to achieve membership. This process is called secondary socialization and is defined as the internalization of institutional based sub-worlds (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). It is through secondary socialization that individuals acquire role-specific knowledge, which is essential for their functions as members of social groups and institutions in society. This means individuals acquire the rules, routines, and conducts connected with group behaviours. It is this group reality that provides tacit understanding to individuals of what it is like to be a part of any social group (Berger & Luckamnn, 1966).

Thus, it is possible to deconstruct three processes that make up the in-group and out-group classifications, in which individuals insert themselves, get inserted into or even get out of any social group. These three mental processes constitute what individuals go through to mould in-group or out-group classifications: social categorization, social identification, and social comparison (Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

The first process, social categorization, is where individuals are placed and organized into social groups, in order to understand the world, society and its sub-worlds, in which the group has a major influence on the way group members view everything. This process is also enabling individuals of classifying other people, based on the groups they belong to (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Social categorization of individuals leads to favouritism in-group and discrimination out-group. Even ad hoc group categorization, with minimum conditions, leads to in-group favouritism and discrimination towards out-group individuals (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Tajfel, 1982). This has also been proven in previous studies (Doise et al., 1972; Hugenberg & Sacco, 2008; Turner, 1975), with social categorization being sufficient for the creation of identification with a group, showing that the sense of belonging of an individual in a specific group creates favouritism in-group. This means that, while identification with the group helps the individual belong within a social group and society itself, extracting their sense of self-worth to themselves, it is not its only function – social categorization, as a process, also aids the individual in understanding the social context. With

both functions highlighted, it is important to note why in-group favouritism and out-group discrimination is created within the individual. While identifying with a specific social group and social category, the individual creates a sense of "common destiny", linking its path and eventual success or failure with the group, thus being biased to the in-group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Although social categorization is enough to create identification in individuals towards a social group, its layers should not be overlooked. There are many levels of social identification and they become more intense and obvious when the social category is contrasted with another category or categories. The more contrasting it is, the more an individual will be identified and biased towards his social group (Turner, 2010).

The second process is social identification. In SIT, the concept of social identity is defined as "that part of the individual's self-concept which derives from their knowledge of their membership" (Tajfel, 1982, p. 24). The authors go even further and establish three theoretical principles: "1. Individuals strive to achieve or to maintain positive social identity; 2. Positive social identity is based to a large extent on favourable comparisons that can be made between the in-group and some relevant out-groups; the in-group must be perceived as positively differentiated or distinct from the relevant out-groups; 3. When social identity is unsatisfactory, individuals will strive either to leave their existing group and join some more positively distinct group and/or to make their existing group more positively distinct" (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 40).

This means that when individuals identify with a group, it can lead them to have behaviours that they believe a member of the said social group should have. As a result of identification, beings become devotedly invested in their group memberships. Therefore, their self-esteem will be impacted by the status of their group, because, as mentioned before, individuals who are aligned with the group, make its successes or failures their own (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

Based on what the first theoretical principle says, individuals will strive to maintain or improve their self-esteem, which means they seek to have a positive self-perception of themselves (e.g., club-fans identity; Biscaia et al., 2018) through fan comparisons. In the second principle, the authors enounce that any social group will be associated with positive or negative social identity (e.g., through sponsorship association; Bee & Dalakas, 2015). Consequently,

individuals will also be associated with positive or negative social identity, depending on the group itself. Lastly, on the third principle, individuals will assess their own group comparing it with other groups, through a dimension or an attribute (e.g., comparing social groups in favourable dimensions or attributes with rivals; Bee & Dalakas, 2015). Positive evaluations regarding their group when comparing it with another one will result in high status and prestige while negative evaluations will result in lower status and prestige (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Finally, the third mental process: social comparison. Based on SIT, this is the process where individuals compare their groups with other social groups, in certain dimensions, attributes, through prestige or status (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In the majority of cases, social groups achieve positive social identity through social comparisons. Once again, mental processes are intertwined. While social categorizations support people in understanding the social context, social comparison assists the individual in finding positive social distinctiveness in-group. Group members utilize this process to create favourable social comparisons in which they boost their self-esteem. (Tajfel, 1982).

Social comparison's utility as a process of social identification for the individual does not see its functions end here. Intergroup comparisons also lead to a more salient group membership (Tajfel, 1982). When Jose Mourinho, in 2002, while coaching Porto, said that in "normal conditions, we will be champions and in abnormal conditions, we will be champions, we are strong, we are the best team in the country", comparing himself and his team (in this instance, his social group) against every other team in the country, extolling his pride and belief, it not only lead to favouritism and bias in-group but it also established his membership and leadership within the group (Expresso, 2017). When comparing themselves with other groups in favourable dimensions or attributes, through prestige and status, individuals shall have a more positive identity and determination towards acting like members of the social group they take part in. Not only do individuals use social comparison as a process to boost their self-esteem but they also even utilize it to get more determined in playing their roles as group members (Tajfel, 1982).

Social identity has, on the other hand, threats to its existence. Branscombe et al. (1999) identified two types of threats – value and distinctiveness. Value

threats are either messages or actions that weaken the value of group membership and attack the principles, norms and practices those members of any given social group share. The second threat, distinctiveness, is a perceptual change or changes that undermines a group (its positions, values, norms, or practices) against other social groups. On the other hand, previous studies (Pichastor et al., 2009; Stephan & Stephan, 2000; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) draw their attention next to several types of strategies to manage threats against social identity or even reactions to negative identification. The first strategy identified is individual mobility, where individuals usually try to dissociate themselves from their low prestige social group towards associating with another group, this one being of higher prestige and status than the first one. Their objective is to gain upward social mobility. In tandem, it is identified as a strategy social creativity (Pichastor et al., 2009; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This strategy is explained through three possible situations happening to the individual – the comparison of the in-group and the out-group through new dimensions, the change of values in attributes that were once favourable but not anymore and, finally, changing the out-group, which means changing comparisons and other groups becoming more appealing to individuals. The last strategy is social competition, in which rivalries between groups intensify so much their disputes, that other social groups may evolve, social objectives may change, and the individual may lose its bias in-group and want to change to a higher status or prestige group (Pichastor et al., 2009; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

In summary, social identity theory is considered by many in sports psychology, particularly in the sports management field as the major theoretical framework in understanding group behaviour (Thomas, et al., 2017). Not only it provided an important base of scientific knowledge, but it also opened a wide variety of new areas of research, like social identity bases of discriminations, prejudice, concern, categorization of individuals and their motives (Islam, 2014). As the theoretical framework became more consensual in the academic community, it even branched itself into new theories, like the self-categorization, self-enhancement, or self-verification theories (Islam, 2014).

SIT can be considered the basis of the relation between fans as individuals and sports, with its many social groups within its sub-world(s). It helps individuals understand the world and grow their passion and pride for their group, creating a

sense of self-belonging necessary to overview the world (Rees, et al., 2015). This highlights, once again, the importance of secondary socialization to individuals, especially in understanding sports as a sub-world. It must be said that this process may run its course, but, for individuals, the process of identifying with any social group never ends because of new dynamics or new social actors in the in-group. A past study, by Smeekes and Verkuyten (2014), shown that positive social identity continuity leads to a more salient group-membership. In sports context, this has also been proven, with continuity being a strong predictor for a salient group-membership (Thomas, et al., 2017). It is expected that the more satisfied an individual is with the group it identifies with, the more self-esteem it shall have, and a more salient group-membership shall be demonstrated by individuals, applying this continuity to keep going the processes of social categorization, social identification, and social comparison with other sports social groups (Thomas, et al., 2017).

In sport management past literature, fan identity has been a critical element in understanding sports as whole and promoting successful relationships between teams and individuals, leading to more purchase intent amidst consumer behaviours (Biscaia et al., 2018; Heere et al., 2011; Lock & Heere, 2017; Trail et al., 2012). In particular, the eSports field, its specific culture has been created by the social groups that formed within this sub-world. Previous studies (Seo, 2016; Jang et al., 2020) have been focusing on the observation of tournaments and interviews with eSports players, evidencing those players who view eSports as a form of self-improvement, shaping attitudes like honesty and mutual respect and, more importantly, shaping their own identity. (Seo, 2016). In addition, its relevance cannot be overlooked in a world where technology has become a prominent part of society and interest has been growing increasingly in the past years (Huk, 2019). For this respect, it is important to understand its place in the social context of current society, and how it relates with individual's behaviours.

2.3 The eSports as a social phenomenon

The eSports refer to the depiction of video games as a spectator-driven sport, carried through promotional activities, utilizing broadcasting infrastructures, with

a socioeconomic organization of teams, tournaments, and leagues, embodied by the performances of players themselves (Taylor, 2015). The phenomenon of eSports is growing rapidly and has now developed into a large ecosystem with several stakeholders, such as sponsors, teams, coaches, and fans, which travel all around the world to play in legitimized international tournaments (Macey et al., 2022; Sjöblom et al., 2019). While eSports is still in its first steps, there is a need to understand its evolution, in order to comprehend it.

The academic literature, for example, has been a stage of many discussions between several scholars, who have highlighted the difficulty in acknowledging eSports as a sport and how to conceptualize it (Huk, 2019; Jenny et al., 2016; Sjöblom & Hamari, 2017;). The main debate between experts and sports stakeholders concerns physical activity, which through sport should be an improved element of the individual (Council of Europe, 2001). Traditional sport has been defined by four pillars: it should involve physical activity (1), it must be done for recreational purposes (2), it must involve an element of competition (3) and has an institutional structure in the background (4) (Hallman & Giel, 2018). While many arguments have been raised because of the lack of physical activity in eSports (Funk et al., 2018), it is not possible to rule out this phenomenon into traditional sports. In addition, eSports contains low motor functions, hand-eye coordination, speed of action and strategy, which were all proponents enough to recognise a few sports as such, like chess or shooting, for example (Huk, 2019).

In contrast with the difficulties in contemplating eSports as field of traditional sports, there have been arguments considering the eSports features and their tools as a sports discipline (Hutchins, 2008). Among these factors, the following stand out: (a) similarity in organizing games and tournaments, where eSports directly refers to Olympic traditions, which are associated with rivalries among nations (e.g., players reigniting rivalries between countries at the FIFA eNations Cup; McCaskill, 2019); (b) broadcast through television or online means (e.g., television networks like ESPN, CW or CBS have all broadcast eSports in the past five years; Adgate, 2020); (c) a system of training which requires precision, cooperation amongst teammates and organizational stakeholders, and a strict diet (e.g., League of Legends player Eugene "Pobelter" Park discussing his stern diet imposed by his contracted organization Immortals in GQ magazine; Darby, 2016); (d) the use (and disapproval) of illegal doping, in the form of

amphetamines or steroids, in order to improve results (e.g., Korey "Semphis" Friesen mentioning in a post-game interview that he and his teammates had consumed "aderall" amphetamine; Kendell, 2020); (e) institutionalization of legitimized forms of organization, allowing the formation and association of teams in international, national and academic leagues (e.g., IESF; International eSports Federation, n.d.); and (f) sponsorship and advertising of non-eSports brands, like large corporations, in electronic sports (e.g., Gilette sponsoring Russian Dota2 players; Deloitte, 2019) (Huk, 2019; Hutchins, 2008).

The spectrum of definitions has varied greatly, with scholars often defining eSports utilizing different elements in their quest to define the phenomenon. Table 1 shows the evolution of eSports definitions and its constituting elements.

Table 1. Sources, definition and elements of the eSports concept

Author & Definition

Wagner (2006):
"eSports is an area of sport activities in which people develop and train mental or physical abilities in the use of information and communication technologies."

Witkowski (2012):
"For the past decade, this style of gaming has been played across networked computers where structured online computer gaming leagues and locally networked events have offered players a place to engage in serious or career competition"

Taylor (2015):
"eSports involves the enactment of video games as spectator-driven sport, carried out through promotional activities; broadcasting infrastructures; the socioeconomic organization of teams, tournaments, and leagues; and the embodied performances of players themselves"

Jenny et al. (2017):
"eSports are organized video game competitions, that include play and competition, are organized by rules, require skill, and have a broad following".

Hamari & Sjöblom (2017):
"eSports as a form of sports where the primary aspects of the sport are facilitated by electronic systems; the input of players and teams as well as the output of the eSports system are mediated by human-computer interfaces."

Gawrysiak et al. (2020)
"eSports refers to organised video game competitions that serve as a non-traditional model of sport, which has established itself and commercialised entertainment enterprises".

The phenomenon of eSports has many similar names, like pro-gaming, electronic sports, or competitive gaming (Martončik, 2015) and one of the earliest reliable sources to use this term was the Online Gamers Association (OGA) in 1999, in which eSports were compared with traditional sports (Wagner, 2006). This was when sports broke the boundaries of reality and became a part of videogame consumption, pushing the frontiers of imagination through the development of technology (Borowy & Jin, 2013).

The emergence of electronic sports can be separated by two distinct value systems, both pivotal in contextualizing the eSports field: western versus eastern gaming cultures (Wagner, 2006). Europe and the United States, being central poles of the western value system, had, by 1997, formed several professional and semi-professional online gaming leagues, with the most prominent being the Cyberathlete Professional League (CPL), which is still highly influential today because of its business concept, being the one that modelled the major professional eSports leagues in the United States (Wagner, 2006). In the western value system of gaming, the discipline of eSports that first acquired a high level of popularity were "First-Person Shooters" (FPS), like Quake or Counter-Strike, and this discipline of electronic sports is still one of the central elements of western eSports events (Kushner, 2003; Larch, 2019).

By 2021, many countries have accepted eSports as a sport, such as South Korea, China, Russia, Denmark, or Hungary (Jonasson & Thiborg, 2010). This process of legitimizing eSports all around the world has been assisted by the creation of the International eSports Federation (IESF), back in 2008, which seeks to increase global standardization in all eSports disciplines (Thiborg, 2008). Its purposes are to regulate alongside all of the stakeholders involved in pro-gaming, while training and educating individuals to be qualified professionals of eSports (International eSports Federation, n.d.).

In Portugal, in the early 2000s, the first major annual event dedicated to gaming emerged, getting known as XL Party (Silva, 2020). Today, the eSports field is on its way to legitimizing itself, having his own public streaming channel, with RTP's partnership (i.e., Portuguese public streaming), being boosted by investment of major stakeholders like professional clubs extending to the field or nationally recognized brands, like Worten, Moche, Sporting or Braga (Silva, 2020). Professionalization of eSports teams have also been carried out by

internationally recognized organizations like Offset eSports, who surfaced in the Portuguese eSports scene, being the first to have an official headquarters, localized in the city of Braga (Ferro, 2019). Furthermore, this process is being assisted by the arise of official entities that regulate eSports in Portugal, like the Portuguese Federation of Electronic Sports (FPDE) or the section of eSports within the Portuguese Federation of Football (FPF), which have been major proponents for the professionalization and sponsorship acquirement, as well as the development of physical and technological infrastructures in the Portuguese electronic sports' environment (Miranda, 2020; Silva, 2020).

As shown in Table 2 eSports contains a various number of disciplines or genres, which represent different games. In general, any game can be included in a discipline of eSports. Notwithstanding, there is a certain core of games, which are more popular worldwide and are highly regarded in the eSports field (Adamus, 2012). Table 2 summarizes some of the most popular eSports disciplines.

Table 2. Esports Disciplines

Disciplines	Games
Battle Royale	PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds; Fortnite;
Card Games	Hearthstone; Magic: The Gathering Arena;
Massive Multi-User Online Role-Playing Games (*MMORPG*)	Runescape; World of Warcraft;
First-Person Shooter (*FPS*)	Quake; Counter-Strike;
Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (*MOBA*)	League of Legends (*LoL*); Defense of the Ancients 2 (*DotA 2*);
Real-Time Strategy (*RTS*)	Warcraft; StarCraft;
Sports Simulators	FIFA; Madden NFL;

Source: Adamus, 2012

The relevance of eSports' legitimization within the sports field is its market potential, which is completely unprecedented (Seo, 2013). In 2019, the global market revenue of eSports was 957,5 million dollars and it is estimated to grow into 1617,7 million dollars in 2024, which marks an increase of approximately 69% if it comes to fruition (Statista, 2021a). According to the revenue, it is possible to consider that the biggest slice comes from sponsorships and

advertising, with 641 million dollars in 2021 coming from this area, in a total of 1084 million, highlighting its relevance to eSports (Statista, 2021b; Singer & Chi, 2019). Following the data gathered and estimated by Statista (2021c), it is not just the global market revenue and sponsorship that will grow, but also the audience size shall inflate, which is accounted in 2021 with 474 million dollars (Deloitte, 2020) and, by 2024, it is estimated to have grown into 577,2 million, making an increase in nearly 22%. Finally, prizes in eSports have also been getting bigger. In 2017, the annual combined eSports prize pools in the world were 115 million dollars, increasing into 246 million by 2019 and it was estimated to expand into 543 million dollars by 2023 (Statista, 2019). The higher the stakes, the higher the rewards, and prizes enhance investment in eSports, working as a guarantee of financial stability in an unstable, mutable, and very dynamic world (Deloitte, 2019).

All of the core areas in the eSports ecosystem, which includes players, teams, events, game publishers, eSports fans in the form of spectators, strategic partners like sponsors or investors and media platforms that broadcast pro-gaming content, have sent positive signals in 2020, concerning the development of the field (Lachmann et al., 2020). There is an increase in global activity that even the Covid-19 pandemic could not hold on. In fact, the pandemic may have lowered the barrier for the entrance of new consumers in eSports, with the rise of digital events that provided content while everything was closed down, during 2020's general curfew all around the world. While uncertainty may be in the air for traditional sports and entertainment, eSports crucial stakeholders like sponsors and strategic partners (e.g., private investors and brands associated with the field) remain optimistic in the growth of electronic sports' market. (Murillo, 2020). In addition, it is expected that the eSports audience continues to grow alongside consumption behaviours of individuals. Anecdotal evidence suggested that one half of the regular viewers of eSports have already spent money on pro-gaming related content in Europe, making this region a present and future hotspot for electronic sports (Bosman, 2020).

2.3.1 Fan identity in eSports

Ashforth and Mael (1989) enounce that the individual has the tendency to identify with organizations whose endeavours are usually in areas of interest to human beings, due to its popularity and importance in society, like wars, religions, or sports. Previous studies have identified a need in individuals, as sports fans, to identify with sports team, building the emotional dimension that has been thoroughly associated with sports (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Bee & Dalakas, 2015; Biscaia et al., 2018; Lock & Heere, 2017; Wann & Branscombe, 1993).

Fan identification is thus defined as an orientation of the self in regard to other objects, including an individual or a group, which results in feelings or sentiments of close attachment (Trail et al., 2000). A sports fan that identifies as such, has a favourable attitude towards any type of legitimized individual, team, or discipline (Wann & Branscombe, 1991). Despite this, a separation of concepts must be done against sports spectators, once association of individuals and their attitude towards any given team or sport does not mean game consumption or viewership itself (Wann, 1995). Consequently, a sports spectator can be defined as an individual that follows the in-game experience but is not necessarily a participant of said game or even a fan (Cheung & Huang, 2011). Thus, it can be considered that sports spectators are mainly associated with sports events and viewership, whilst sports fans are usually linked to teams, players, or sports. In eSports, parts have been mixed, with fans of electronic sports engaging in several roles that include playing, spectating, and governing legitimized institutions. In this respect, eSports players have become spectators and vice-versa, blurring the lines between spectatorship and gaming which traditional sports had previously set (Seo & Jung, 2016).

Therefore, the most striking aspect in eSports fans is the nature of the value that the fandom seeks from their experience. Adding to the eSports' experience is the unique social atmosphere in its events, which builds on the value fans look for when engaging with this type of field (Macey et al., 2022). Moreover, the eSports' unique social atmosphere carries a set of idiosyncratic features, such as cosplay or new cheering patterns, alongside behaviours previously identified in traditional sports contexts, like similarity between fans, suitable behaviours and affective responses related to eSports team support, the

social density of individuals, or even behavioural intents of returning to eSports events (Jang et al., 2020). This means that this sport' sub-field shares individuals' behaviours with other sporting contexts, having minor differences. However, these differences are important, since they contribute to an individual's sense of distinctiveness when eSports' in-group identification kicks in, allowing the individual to have their self-esteem boosted, aiding the self-perception imaging. These in-event behaviours lead to shared behavioural intents between eSports and traditional sports fields, such as watching television, spectating internet streaming devices, or game participations (Lee & Schoenstedt, 2011). Thus, the relationship between the eSports event, its fans, and consumption behaviours could be thoroughly mediated by group identity and a strong identification, since this has been previously demonstrated in other sporting contexts (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003; Kwon et al., 2007).

Fans, as a group, usually demonstrate the same identifying characteristics, intergroup differentiations, perceived categorizations, and measures of self-esteem (Wann & Branscombe, 1993; Biscaia et al., 2018). Fan identity within a group is a provider of self-esteem strengthening, accentuating the positive features of identification, and minimizing the negative points of membership within said group, therefore chasing and acquiring positive distinction. Negative information is depreciated, and positive information is extoled. (Gwinner & Bennett, 2008) Once identified with a sport or a team, individuals tend to categorize themselves according to their in-group and out-group classifications. This is one of three mental processes that individuals must go through in order to achieve full identification with a social group, as it moulds the perception of the entity in cause (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The other two processes are social identification (and the consequent levels of identification that exist) and social comparison (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Tajfel 1982). Bertschy, Mühlbacher and Desbordes (2020) conducted a study to understand the influence of launching an eSports section on the parent sport brand, using A.S. Monaco as their case study. Their findings shown that football fans of A.S. Monaco were not interested or only peripherally touched by the club's new activities. Despite these findings, fans understood the importance of eSports to Monaco's organization. In order to succeed in extending the main sports brand, Monaco's management team should had put in motion more associations

between the main sports brand and the eSports extension. Although extension' associations may be different from traditional sports in eSports, the main sports brand can coexist and cooperate with the eSports extension, in order to create a sense of identification amongst fans, without altering the core brand meaning. (Bertschy et al., 2020; Kapferer, 2012).

Individuals have the need to create group identification in order to reduce uncertainty in their lives, manufacturing a sense of belonging, inclusion, and involvement along the way (Hogg, 2000; Hogg 2007). Group identification is a bearer of inclusion and distinctiveness which individuals crave to feel satisfied (Brewer, 1991). The extent of social identity motives also has a substantial and unique impact on group identification. Not only individuals desire belonging, but there is a hunger for temporally persistent social relationships, based on continuity, and meaningful identities, acquired through longer memberships (Thomas et al., 2017). For instance, F.C. United of Manchester fans, whose allegiance was formerly with Manchester United, created the new club because of the values intrinsic to their group identity, against commercial exploitation of the sport brand (Abosag et al., 2012). As a result, a stronger identification of individuals between group members will result in a stronger group identity, with fellow members perceiving the group as an extent of their individuality and utilizing this to boost their distinctiveness towards out-group categorizations and comparisons (Hofmann & Gavin, 1998; Thomas et al., 2017).

All the mental processes' individuals go through are entangled and work in tandem towards a stronger social identification (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The last of these processes is social comparison, which can take place in various ways, like being based on facts or as a simulation within the mind (e.g., imaginary comparisons or temporary comparisons about the future) (Demirel, 2015). Social comparison is traditionally made in an upward fashion. Individuals tend to compare themselves with other groups in favourable dimensions, in order to boost their self-esteem, although situations of comparisons with groups with lower status may occur, having the same objective (Petersen & Ritz, 2010; Demirel, 2015). These comparisons are usually a process that boosts the self-esteem of the individual and can be a strategy to overpower threats to social identity (e.g., Arsène Wenger comparing Arsenal's fanbase superiority against their biggest rival, the Tottenham Hotspur; Govind, 2016).

Academic literature has pointed out sport identification and team identification as well-established forms of identification, proving its influence on behaviours and attitudes of individuals as potential consumers (Bee & Dalakas, 2015; Biscaia et al., 2018; Kwon et al., 2005; Trail et al., 2003; Wann & Branscombe, 1993). Other forms of psychological attachment have been identified, such as coaches, communities, universities, and sport level itself (e.g., professional, amateur and college) (Spinda et al., 2016; Kwon et al., 2005). As noted by Squire (2002), fan groups produce complex social structures, mediated by the game playing experience, where social factors and social contexts help to shape both the identity and the meaning to individuals. In eSports, the identity of individuals is largely influenced by the language, values, interactions, and practices adopted and developed by social groups inserted in this sub-field. (Mäyrä, 2006; Steinkuehler, 2006). Moreover, fans in eSports build their identities borrowing from the digital and sports cultures (Taylor, 2012), which means that traditional sports and eSports fans may have overlapping characteristics in their group identities. This goes in line with the idea that eSports fans and traditional sports fans have overlapping motivations, behaviours, identities, and behavioural intents (Jang et al., 2020; Lee & Schoenstedt, 2011; Taylor, 2012). Fandom in eSports and traditional sports express their identity in similar ways, being primarily differentiated by the fact that individuals consume much more voraciously in the eSports field (Brown et al., 2018). Similarities in behaviours extend onto other factors and related stakeholders, such as viewership, event spectatorship, casting, management, or sponsorship (Anderson-Coto et al., 2020; Sell, 2015; Scholz, 2019). Lastly, fan identity and its particularities in pro-gaming have been shown to help develop individuals' bonds with eSports teams and athletes, translating from traditional sports contexts (Absten, 2011).

Related to this, McGeehe and Cianfrone (2009) highlighted the need to pursue new studies about fan identity amongst different sports. Similarly, Cunningham (2018) shown that these gaps have extended onto eSports, since there have been little studies about this phenomenon (Bertschy et al., 2020), while Anderson-Coto, Squire and Tomlinson (2020) explained eSports' extension of identification forms, borrowing from traditional sports' context, like fan identity with teams, leagues, disciplines, or players. Problematically, there is a need to theorize and understand the conditions under which eSports has been occurring,

comprehending the motives that lead to behavioural intents (Lee & Schoenstedt, 2011; Macey et al., 2022) and how identity has been forming in the sub-field (Cunningham, 2018). The eSports research nascency means there are still fundamental questions about how the field is unfolding, being necessary to integrate fields that differ in their methodological and theoretical backgrounds (Reitman et al., 2020).

2.3.2 Fan identity with eSports events

The eSports is synonymous with big public gaming events, having thousands of visitors who spectate and are part of pro-gaming fandom, and others that watch events unroll through various online streaming platforms (Borowy, 2012). Newzoo (2020) divides eSports fans into two categories: enthusiasts and occasional, defining the first as the group of individuals who watch pro-gaming content more than once a month, and the second as the group of individuals who watch eSports less than once a month. Regardless of the frequency, these two categories make up the eSports audience in its events, may it in person or through online means (Newzoo, 2020).

The eSports events involve organized video game competitions that meet requirements for structure, organization, and institutionalization (Funk et al., 2018). These institutionalized eSports events allow formal competitions to take place between players or teams under official rules acknowledged by formal leagues (Funk et al., 2018). About what motivates consumers to attend events as fans, Pizzo et al., (2018) claimed that those who watch eSports events and those who watch traditional sports are similarly motivated. However, the eSports consumers have a different identity, especially when compared with traditional sports fans, due to certain particularities, because individuals who view eSports as serious leisure while participating, can transform themselves into professionals of the field (Seo, 2016). This means that eSports fans can engage in competitive gameplay through casual or serious leisure, but they also can assume the roles of professional gamers (Seo, 2016). Specifically, consumers can become professionals with careers in eSports when they engage in the field, viewing it as serious leisure (Seo, 2016) and this concept could be intertwined

with fan identity within the field (e.g., the more identified an individual is, the more seriously he shall take his activities in eSports).

The idea that eSports fans borrow actions, motivations, and identity characteristics from traditional sports (Lee & Schoenstedt, 2011) can be pointed out to explain their identity with eSports events. Social identity forms in eSports have been alluded to as extensions of traditional sports context, such as team, league, discipline, or player identification (Anderson-Coto et al., 2020). At that point, similarities in behaviours extend onto related stakeholders, such as event spectatorship, management, or sponsorship (Sell, 2015; Scholz, 2019). However, eSports fan identity contains certain particularities. Unique features from the eSports social event atmosphere like cosplaying or cheering behaviours (Jang et al., 2020) contribute to this social field's distinctiveness, encouraging individuals' affective responses event-oriented (Jang et al., 2020). Moreover, these fans type has particular characteristics which directly impact their identities, for example multiple roles such as fans, players or team managers (Seo, 2016), or a huge passion related to the developed activities in gaming (Mandryk et al., 2020). These characteristics can be intertwined with social identity within the field, which social factors of identification (e.g., gender, age, game identity) can help fans foster and maintain a positive identity related to eSports context (Jang et al., 2020). This social identity approach (Tajfel & Turner, 2004), consider the social characteristics as predictors of a specific behaviour of interest. Based on SIT, a greater psychological connection to a group identity predicts a greater link to the group's content (Hogg & Smith, 2007). This can mean that the more identified a fan is, the more likely they will identify with eSports-related activities.

Previous studies have examined identification in depth, with a special emphasis being given on the way it affects consumption behaviours of individuals, perceived brand image or brand loyalty transferability in sports (Bertschy et al., 2020; Biscaia et al., 2018; Devlin et al., 2014; Gwinner et al., 2009; Kwon et al., 2005; Lee et al., 2010; Wann & Branscombe, 1993). The role of fan identification on sports events has been looked at as a facilitator of behavioural intents on sponsoring brands, participant teams or involved sports, driving consumption for consumers (Wann, 2006). This, allied with the perspective of events as measures of fan identification (e.g., highly identified fans will attend and spectate sports events; Kwon et al., 2007) justify event

identification as an independent element contributing to behavioural intentions (Devlin et al., 2014). Prior studies also considered as antecedents of event attachment, the sport identification (Prayag & Grivel, 2018), recreational motivation (Filo et al., 2010), and involvement with sport (Brown et al., 2018), in relation to in-person event spectators. However, these studies take place outside the eSports context and not consider the particularities related to the identity of fans in this sub-field, opening a gap in literature.

Events in the eSports field have been persecutors of creating familiarity, social and physical proximity, and support between individuals (Trepte et al., 2012), all major contributors of positive identities, increasing self-esteem of individuals and approximating them with their in-group identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Tajfel, 1982). A positive fan identity tends to be a positive influence on all the major stakeholders associated with the team, player, or sport (Biscaia et al., 2018), especially because of the importance of the fans as stakeholders themselves. As a feature of sports fans, those with a strongly defined fan identity are more likely to attend game event (Watanabe et al., 2017), and report future behavioural intentions (Smith & Stewart, 2007). Since most eSports fans are engaged on video gaming environment (Jang & Byon, 2020) and because eSports events attendance might signify those attendees are engaged fans, it may be reasonable to suggest that fan identity with eSports may influence their identity with the event. Yet, empirical research has yet to prove or refute this assumption, thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Fan identity with eSports positively influences its identity with an eSports event.

2.3.3 Fan identity with brands

Branding is a topic that has received a big interest in the past decades (Keller, 2013). Previous academic literature has highlighted branding essentially based on finance-based frameworks (e.g., Biel, 1992; Keller & Lehmann, 2006) or on customer-based conceptualizations (e.g., Aaker, 2009; Keller, 2013), underlining this concept as a flux of the resulting management practices (Delia, 2015). Closely related to the branding concept and the managerial practices put in action

is brand identity, which the traditional brand management literature has defined as an inside-out perspective, led by brand managers, where identities are strategically defined by leaders and communicated to all major stakeholders, whose mission is to propagate the defined identity in the brand's ecosystem and beyond, through society as a whole. (Chernatony, 2006; Carlson et al., 2009; Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000).

However, when considering brand identity as a simple extension of a product or a service, intended only to differentiate a group or an organization from their direct competitors as a result of direct managerial practices (Aaker, 1996; Iglesias et al., 2013), one does not contemplate the intricacies behind the social processes inherently linked to social identity building. Considering this, Csaba and Bengtsson (2006) have defined brand identity through a process-oriented perspective, emphasizing the dynamics and the complexity of this social phenomenon (Hemetsberger & Mühlbacher, 2009; Merz et al., 2009). Brand identity is co-created by all stakeholders (Black & Veloutsou, 2017), being submitted to multiple social negotiations amongst actors who define the meanings of any brand manifestation (e.g., showing joy or disappointment of working for a brand, consuming the brand, being proudful of wearing the brand; Brodie et al., 2013; Cova et al., 2007; Dion & Arnould, 2016; Lüdicke et al., 2010), delineating the identity's fluidity and dynamics, predisposing it to change and evolution (Lüdicke et al., 2010). In eSports, sponsor-brands engage with the social field's activities to represent new interest manifestations that may potentially mean changes to brand identity constitution (Besombes, 2016).

Forming brand identity is linked with the actions from stakeholders, whose contributions contemplate supporting, reflecting, questioning, ignoring, or opposing a brand's self-view of identity (Mühlbacher et al., 2021). Brands and managers can deliberately determine offers of tangible and intangible manifestations, but the final word will be on the stakeholders' side, since the meanings will be ascribed by them, defining the identity (Hemetsberger & Mühlbacher, 2009). As this process unrolls, new opportunities for fans to identify with a brand open considerably wider, while conserving the identification of already loyal individuals, since an identity is mutable and depends on the context (Mühlbacher et al., 2021). An individual tends to consider itself a member of any given social group by means of identification (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tajfel, 1982;

Turner & Tajfel, 1979). The identity of an individual is reflexive, becoming more salient depending on the context (Hogg et al., 1995). As an individual develops the process of socially identifying with a brand, they acquire a perception of oneness with the in-group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Kuenzel & Halliday, 2010). Identity is intrinsically linked to identification, since the first situates the individual, capturing its essence, and the second is the process in which individuals come to define themselves, acknowledging and communicating it to others, using the acquired membership to direct their actions (Ashforth et al., 2008; Tajfel & Turner, 1979;).

There is a clear interplay between brand identity and individual identity, surfacing articulated through values and symbolic expressions (Kornum et al., 2017). Values and symbolic expressions conceptually represent major elements of intertwining brand and individual identities, as central and distinctive enduring attributes, constituting both identities in their core (Ashforth et al., 2008). In eSports, individuals have to develop new identities based on the space and context they are in (Hendricks & Wrinkler, 2006). As such, eSports fans create and relate to different communities, through new types of values and symbolic expressions or artifacts associated with the sub-field (Hand & Moore, 2006). This is clear in the language, interactions, and practices, adopted by groups in the sub-field and their composing individuals (Mäyrä, 2006; Steinkuehler, 2006). Accordingly, when brands engage with the eSports sub-field, they are altering the individual's perception of an identity, benefiting from new and enhanced associations (Janakiraman et al., 2006). Consequently, since individuals categorize themselves through the process of socially identifying with an in-group (Tajfel, 1982; Turner & Tajfel, 1979) and considering that identities are reflexive (Hogg et al., 1995), the process of associating a brand with a new social field such as eSports, with new values and symbolic expressions, will lead to new categorizations of individuals, with the objective of learning and remembering new relationships (Huetterman et al., 2020). This critically emphasizes the importance of categorizing information to the processes of social identification and social identity (Magnusson et al., 2014).

Previous studies in sport management have noted the individuality related to the field of eSports, showing the differences in how stakeholders perceive, organize, and interpret external stimuli and how this stimulus impacts and

influences fan perception (and, consequently, identification) (Hallman & Giel, 2018). Furthermore, there have been studies focusing on the eSports fan identity, specifically the individual identity and in-group identities such as club fandom (Bertschy et al., 2020; Mühlbacher et al., 2021; Seo, 2016). However, to gathered knowledge, no studies have focused on the fan's identity with the sponsor-brand and its relationship with an eSports event.

Squire (2002) says that in-group fandom in eSports is a producer of complex social structures, being mediators of the eSports' experience, where social factors and context aid in shaping the meaning given to identity manifestations. Likewise, the eSports field offers an opportunity for brands to rejuvenate their core demographics, since the individuals associated with this field are young adults, who usually are very passionate about electronic sports (Nielsen, 2019). Previously, mature and established brands have been shown to use cultural interests of younger target-audiences to revitalize their brands (Aaker, 2003). On the other hand, fans of eSports demand authenticity (Pizzo et al., 2019), as a result of the complex social structures inherent to the field (Squire, 2002). Fans of eSports are some of the hardest reaching individuals for brands (Singer & Chi, 2019) even if sponsorship or value alignment seem like obvious paths to get the desired audience to consume. Brands need to understand the unique characteristics associated with eSports fandom and its consequent ecosystem, while being aware of possible brand dilutions, since this type of fans are highly critical of possible exploitations related to the industry (Deloitte, 2019). Moreover, not only the fan identity is unique, but the eSports' events enjoy a distinctive environment (Jang et al., 2020). In fact, there are few studies that address these issues in depth, specifically when related to brand identity and eSport fan identity (Mühlbacher, 2021).

Current literature on brand identity related processes has produced substantial evidence of the interactions between stakeholders on the ongoing co-creation of multiple identities (Essamri et al., 2019). In the sports management literature, particular on the eSports subject, there is still a need to deepen research about these relationships, specifically considering the field's infancy (Sjöblom et al., 2019).

2.3.4 Fan identity with eSports sponsor-brand

In eSports, sponsor brands always had a strong connection related to the development of the field, especially in the last 20 years (Singer & Chi, 2019). More recently, an influx of major brands (e.g., Coca-Cola or Mercedes; Singer & Chi, 2019) has moved eSports from experimental marketing budgets onto the core sponsorship line-ups, helping fuel the growth of the industry for all major stakeholders involved. (Singer & Chi, 2019). Brands in eSports events can be divided into two major sponsoring categories: endemic sponsors and non-endemic sponsors. The first category, endemic sponsors, are highly associated with eSports, due to the use and integration of their own products and services into eSports activities (IEG, 2019). As for the second category, non-endemic sponsors are the ones which offer products and services not directly related to the production or the execution of eSports activities (IEG, 2019). Endemic sponsors in eSports include brands like Logitech, Microsoft, Nvidia, Razer or Samsung, usually technology-related companies, which provide an important support to teams, players, event-organizers, or federations (Nielsen, 2019). As for the non-endemic sponsors, there is a growing list of brands investing in eSports, beyond the technology centred core of companies, like Adidas, BMW, Coca-Cola, Nike, or Michelin (Hayward, 2019).

Academic literature has shown the beneficial impact of positive social identities in various sports management contexts, including the beneficial relationship of fan identification related to sponsor brands of teams (Cornwell & Coote, 2003; Madrigal, 2001), athletes (Carlson & Donavan, 2013), sports (Brown et al., 2013) and events (Watanabe et al., 2017). Sporting contexts have core characteristics, extensions, and presentations that result in unique aspects (Watanabe et al., 2017). As such, branding aims to represent a unique idea and concept, that enables a specific brand to enter the consciousness of sports interested individuals (Jankovic & Jaksic-Stojanovic, 2019). Fundamentally, brands use sports events to take advantage of the emotional connection between individuals and sports to raise their own commercial or intangible value (Santomier, 2008). In the eSports environment, brands tend to look for hard-to-reach audiences, in a territory completely akin to young individuals (Elasri et al.,

2020), acknowledging their hardcore fandom and taking advantage of the possible benefits allied with such association.

At this point, the reflexiveness of an identity can be visualized through the social context, becoming more salient according to the experienced environment (Hogg et al., 1995). As an individual develops this process of identifying with a brand, they acquire a perception of oneness with the in-group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Kuenzel & Halliday, 2010). As describes to Madrigal (2000, p. 14), "sport fans will voluntarily choose to act in ways that exemplify the perceived will of the group". At this point, when identity similarities exist in relationships between brands and social groups, certainly the process of fan identity unrolls (Pan & Phua, 2021), leading to a favourable attitude towards a brand (Pradhan et al., 2020).

Consumers are most likely to have relationships with brands and resonate with their actions when they re-view themselves in what a specific brand is doing (Fournier, 1998). Fans are most likely to have a favourable attitude towards 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 reflexiveness between the fan-brand identity, can leads to stronger brand identification when linked to its social group. Based on this assumption, the following hypothesis is advanced:

H2: Fan' identity with brand positively influences its identity with eSports sponsor-brand.

2.3.5 Fan' bidirectional identity with eSports event and its sponsor-brand

Sports events are in line with the idea that highly identified individuals join groups viewed as being equal to or slightly better than their own self-concept (Cialdini et al., 1976; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), seeking to support the brand or event succeed in their ventures (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). When addressing a brand, a sport, or an event associate with each-other, identified individuals will most likely have supportive actions towards these partnership (Cornwell & Coote, 2003; Wann & Branscombe, 1991).

At this point, social group identities take place in a communal way towards building the individual' identity of fans, sharing points of attachment and values

(Cova & Pace, 2006). This means that multiple processes of fan identification result in identity building for individuals and for the social groups (e.g., sport fan and sponsor-brand) (Heere et al., 2011). The fan identity is a role which individuals interpret, acquiring characteristics through their in-group membership, adding to their personal identity (Biscaia et al., 2018). Overlapping identities can be a way to develop similar identities with brands or sports, creating new points of attachment for individuals (Mahar & Clinton, 2013).

These findings support past research (Westberg & Pope, 2014), particularly if eSports is viewed as a cultural cause (Pappu & Cornwell, 2014). A halo effect takes place, suggesting that the positive feelings toward any sponsor supporting an eSports event would shape fans' views of that sponsor, such as attitudes toward the company and its products and services (Meenaghan, 2013). The effect might also be applied toward the eSports event, wherein the positive attitudes toward the event provide a halo for everything attached, including sponsors (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977).

This interplaying relationship can be explained by the fan's perception towards 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). Furthermore, events are opportunities for sponsor brands to be associated with core values and concrete causes, alongside other sport brands and organizations, becoming as 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 individuals' attitude and identity (Biscaia & Rocha, 2018). It is likely that highly identified fans with an event are influenced by the sponsoring attitude and behaviour of a brand, developing a new relationship with this social group identity as a result of such interactions (Deitz et al., 2012; Madrigal, 2001). Even in the absence of greater sponsorship activation, social identity may lead to an affectively based positive response to the sponsor (Bagozzi & Lee, 2002). That is, via a strong identity and commitment to the social group, an emotional transfer of affect from the group to the sponsor can occurs (Deitz et al., 2012). Moreover, events associated with social and cultural causes, like promoting public health (Close et al., 2006) or supporting non-for-profit activities (Roy, 2010) may

facilitate the development of feelings of attachment and closeness in individuals towards sponsor-brands. In this sense, it is most likely that fans identified with an eSports event will have positive influences on eSports event brands and vice-versa since identities work in a communal way, sharing points of attachment and values (Cova & Pace, 2006). Thus, based on these assumptions and considering the need to deepen studies about identity influences on other contexts (Mahar & Clinton, 2013), the following hypotheses are proposed:

H3: Fan' identity with eSports event positively influences its identity with eSports sponsor-brand.

H4: Fan identity' with eSports sponsor-brand positively influences its identity with eSports event.

2.4 Behavioural intentions of eSports fans

The new millennium saw a shift on the lens used to observe consumer behaviour, considering judgements from wider culture (Macey et al., 2022). The new perspective adopts a practice-oriented path, understanding the act of consuming not as a certain point in time but as almost a moment in every action or practice done by consumers (Warde, 2005).

Drawing from previous authors, behavioural intentions in sports involve the spectator's purchase intent of products or services and word-of-mouth recommendation to other individuals (Biscaia et al., 2012; Cronin et al., 2000; Yoshida & James, 2010). In the context of this research, these two types of behavioural intents shall be defined, in order to operationalize them in this conceptual framework. First, purchase intent denotes the individual's readiness to buy eSports or field-related products or services (Abbasi et al., 2020). Second, word-of-mouth is the fans' intent to share positive information regarding eSports or their tournaments to others (Abbasi et al., 2020).

In the previous literature of sports management and marketing, a positive fan identity has been linked to persecuting behavioural intentions (Kwon et al., 2007; Lee & Kang, 2015; Trail et al., 2003). Behavioural intentions connected to fan identification include favourable attitudes towards sponsoring brand (Gwinner

& Swanson, 2003), event purchase intent (Gwinner & Bennett, 2008) or the frequency of spectatorship (Bodet & Bernache-Assolant, 2011). Fans identified with a specific in-group categorize themselves as members and compare their in-group with out-groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Tajfel, 1982), recognizing the sponsor brand and the eSports event as important partners, trustworthy and honest, building and enhancing credibility for each-other and vice-versa (Brewer, 1979; Gwinner & Swanson, 2003; Wang et al., 2012). Moreover, the in-group bias can intertwine the fate of partnering entities, leading to an increase of sponsor and event support, regarding them as crucial to the success of each in-group and vice-versa (Lings & Owen, 2007).

Recent studies have shown that eSports consumer social engagement can positively influence their consumption behaviour, including heightened word-of-mouth (Abbasi et al., 2020), while others have revealed that fans with positive experiences share their content for a longer time period (Wakefield & Bennett, 2018). In the eSports context, an individual's interaction with others involves discussing ideas, experiences, and feelings related to a game, match, player or team with others (Wann, 2006). Positive experiences can lead to the increase of content consuming and support to the game through positive word-of-mouth recommendations to others (Kim & Kim, 2020). By participating on the event, the consumers feel like they are socially connected as fans of an eSports team (Kim & Kim, 2020), and they tend to support them in real life as way to evidence their social identity. Strong fan identification with an eSports event implies them incorporate the event into their self-identity and share their experience with others, resulting in strong event-oriented identity.

Considering this, eSports events are plausible to have a positive influence on individuals and their will to express themselves as members of a social group, being provided with another behavioural dimension (e.g., word-of-mouth) to their social identity. As such, another hypothesis is formulated:

H5: Fan' identity with eSports event positively influences its word-of-mouth recommendation.

Previous studies have associated fan identification with purchase intent positively (Meenaghan, 2001; Tsiotsou & Alexandris, 2009). Moreover, individuals can

develop similar behaviours for overlapping identities and points of attachment (Mahar & Clinton, 2013). If a new process of social identification arises, individual's behaviours may be mirrored from overlapping and already established identities, borrowing from other sports related contexts or stakeholders (Cova & Pace, 2006; Heere et al., 2011) Considering that brand identification has been previously linked with purchase intent (Cornwell & Coote, 2003), the branding of an eSports event may be a persecutor of positive this type of behavioural intent.

Research related to sponsorship outcomes has linked fan identity with positive perceived fit (Gwinner & Bennett, 2008), increase in brand awareness (Lings & Owen, 2007), positive attitude toward sponsors, sponsor patronage and sponsor satisfaction (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003). These studies shown that identification is enough of a factor to impact congruence-related imagery between entities and their sponsoring brands, altering perceptions and motivations of individuals towards the development of planned actions (Tsordia et al., 2021). Fans with a positive perception towards a sponsor brand are likely to purchase branded products associated with their favourite club or event (Pradhan et al., 2020). This means that individuals with high levels of identification have favourable attitudes towards sponsors and consequently, a greater intention to purchase (Madrigal, 2000).

In fact, individuals express their fan identification through an emotional investment in the electronic sports ecosystem and their related stakeholders (Hollebeek, 2019), which may transpire in new brand-related enjoyment, resulting in behavioural intentions. Since eSports appropriates traditional sports' behaviours and considering eSports consumer' particularities, being a social field so akin to young individuals whose consumption of electronic sports entities and related stakeholders' products or services is intensified (Elasri et al., 2020), analysing this relationship may be helpful to sports managers and marketeers comprehend the impact that eSports event-sponsors may have in future behavioural intents. Thus, the sixth hypothesis is proposed:

H6: Fan' identity with eSports event-sponsor positively influences its brand's purchase intent.

3. Research Problem

As the eSports social phenomenon continues its unprecedented growth (Seo, 2013), a clear need to further understand its social and marketing value arises. As such, this study aims to contribute to the gathering of eSports knowledge, specifically linked to fan identity in the ecosystem's events and related to individual's brand interactions, linking two major entities to electronic sports' fandom through this research.

Social identity theory has been widely used in the sports management and sports marketing area, addressing identification processes with teams (Bee & Dalakas, 2015; Wann & Branscombe, 1993), sports (Prayag & Grivel, 2018; Kwon et al., 2005) and brands (Csaba & Bengtsson, 2006; Mühlbacher, 2021). However, fan identity in eSports contexts has not been addressed in depth. Considering the infancy of the electronic sports field (Cunningham et al., 2018) and SIT's relevance within sports management studies, it is adequate that this theoretical framework extends its analysing lens onto eSports, arranging new ways of interpretation and debate about the fan's social behaviours.

Given that strong the strong levels of fan identification present in the eSports ecosystem can lead to strong emotional attachments with their related stakeholders (Hollebeek, 2019), the current study will look to understand these relationships focusing on eSports fandom and fan behavioural intentions. In addition, the study will address the fans' social identity in eSports and how social groups related, since no studies have been found researching this topic.

4. Conceptual model and research questions

Figure 1 presents the conceptual model of this study, which demonstrates the relationship between constructs.
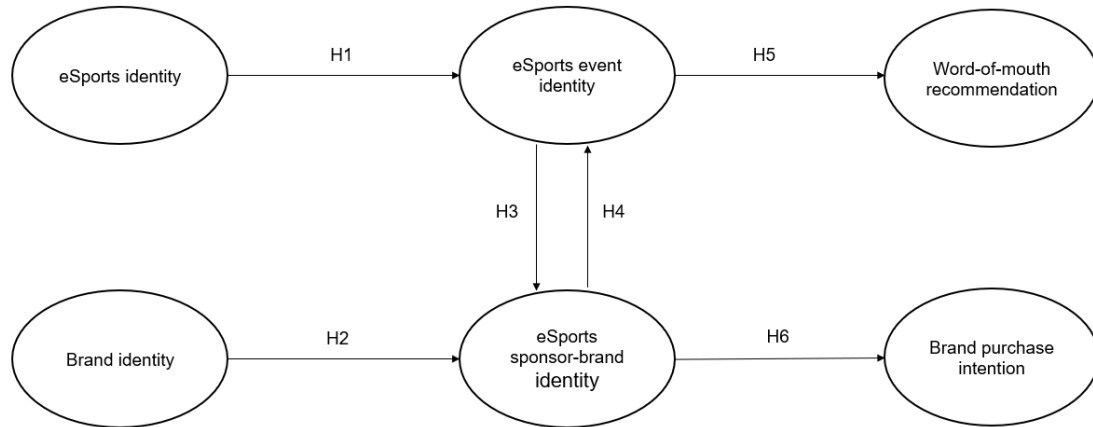
Figure 1. Hypothesised model

Taking into consideration the theoretical background of this research, the literature review, our conceptual model and the purpose of this dissertation, this study aims to answer the following general research question:

RQ1: Does the eSports fan identity influence their identity with the sponsor-brand and the event?

Furthermore, this research will focus on the impact of individuals' social identification processes on behavioural intentions and, as such, the second research question is formulated:

RQ2: Does the eSports fan identity with event and its sponsor influence their behavioural intentions?

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5. Method

This chapter provides an outline of the research methods used to conduct this study. The first section presents the research setting, defining the specific context in which the research takes place, considering the characteristics of the case study. Subsequently, the data collection procedures and sample selection are presented. Lastly, the measurement dimensions and data analysis are explained.

5.1 Contextual settings

The 2021 FPF Open Challenge was selected as a case study. This eSport event is the first in the competition circuit's calendar, in the Portuguese FIFA scene. It took place between November 13th and 14th 2021, at the Pombal Expocentro, during the Moche XL Games World. This was the fourth edition of the competition. (Pereira, 2021). The Moche XL Games World promotes gaming culture, having a special location dedicated to eSports, where fans gather to witness competitions of different genres, such as FIFA, Counterstrike or League of Legends (Moche XL Games World, n.d.). The FPF Open Challenge contains a multiplicity of local stakeholders represented by male players, teams, sponsors, and event organizers, amongst others, being funded by the Portuguese Football Federation (FPF). In this event, the sponsoring brands include RTP, MEO, Alpha Gamer, PlayStation, and LG. The 2021 tournament version features an unprecedented 5,000€ in prize pool for the winner, a five time increase from the first edition of the competition, back in 2017 (FPF eFootball, 2021).

In addition to the event, the LG brand was selected in the current study. Being established since 1958, the LG brand engages in the development of display devices, home appliances, electronic parts, multimedia goods and software (Forbes, 2021). Their headquarters is located in South Korea and the brand is present in multiple countries and stores, all around the world. From an international point of view, LG has multiple investments in different eSports ecosystems, being sponsors for many notable organisations, such as Eintracht Frankfurt Esports (an eSports extension from the professional team in the German Bundesliga), LEC (premier competition of League of Legends in eSports) or the London Royal Ravens (Call of Duty franchise team) (Hollingsworth, 2019). Recognizing the relevance of eSports and gaming in

general, as well as the unprecedented exponential growth in investment, LG supports the development of activation activities, products and services dedicated to serve players and electronic sports' spectators (Pinto, 2020).

Specifically, in the case of FPF Open Challenge, LG supported the use of its best gaming-related products for players. The sponsorship activation was done through the usage of light-emitting diodes (LED) monitors, alongside innovative HDMI cables, assuring the fastest answering technology for users, and LED screens for fans to truly had an immersive experience, either in-person or via streaming (FPF eFootball, 2021). Currently, the LG has established their own eSports teams that compete in various leagues against one another, encouraging a unique and particular environment for their users and fans across the world (Cranmer et al., 2021).

5.2 Measures

In the current research, a pool of 22 items was assessed. 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 fans' identity toward the analysed psychometric measures (i.e., eSports identity, event identity, brand identity and eSports event sponsor-brand identity) and their behavioural intentions (word-of-mouth and purchase intent). In this study, an overall scale measuring the identity dimensions was chosen and adapted. This type of scale has been previously used and validated by previous authors, such as Cornwell and Coote (2003), Tsiotsou and Alexandris (2007), Trail et al. (2003) or Kuenzel and Halliday (2010). A guide question invited the respondents to assess the items according to their level of agreement and two initial filter questions were included related to the participant being (or not) an eSports fan and if s(he) attended (or not) the two days of FPF Open Challenge. Respondents who answered "no" to any of these filter questions were forwarded to the end of the survey. Then, all the participants were invited to assess the following dimensions:

Esports Identity. This construct refers to the fan identity with eSports, resulting in a feeling of belonging and distinction for the individual (Hogg, 2007).

A 4-item scale from Tsiotsou and Alexandris (2009), and Trail et al. (2003) was adapted in the traditional sports fandom.

Brand Identity. This construct used a 4-item scale adapted from Cornwell and Coote (2003), and Kuenzel and Halliday (2010) to assess fan identity with a brand, ascribed by its social identity and self-definition.

Esports Event Identity. This construct assesses the fan identity with an eSports event through familiarity, belonging and social proximity feelings amongst individuals (Trepte et al., 2012). A 4-item scale was adapted from and Prayag and Grivel (2018) related to place dependence in a sport event setting.

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

Word-of-Mouth Recommendation. This construct included a 4-item scale adopted from Prayag and Grivel (2018) to assess fan's intention to share positive information towards the eSports event.

Brand Purchase Intention. A 4-item scale was adapted from Alexandris et al. (2012) and assesses the fan's intention to buy products related to the eSports sponsor brand.

All measurement items were translated in Portuguese and back-translated into English, to ensure precision between the original scales, the necessarily translated version and the cultural context redaction accuracy (Banville et al., 2000). The content validity process (Pollit & Beck, 2006) was ensured by three scholars with experience in sport marketing and management. All researchers were instructed 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, followed by the quantitatively estimates the content validity index (CVI = .96) (Pollit & Beck, 2006). 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 1.

Table 3. Correspondence between measuring dimensions, original items and the backtranslation process in the adopted scale

Dimension	Original Items	Portuguese Translation	Backtranslation	Final Item Formulation
eSports Identity	*I consider myself to be a real fan of the F1.*	Eu considero ser um verdadeiro fã de eSports.	*I consider to be a real fan of eSports.*	Eu considero ser um verdadeiro fã de eSports.
	Being a fan of the F1 is very important to me.	Ser um fã de eSports é muito importante para mim.	*Being a fan of eSports is very important to me.*	Ser um fã de eSports é muito importante para mim.
	I would experience a feeling of "loss" if I had to stop	Eu experienciaria um sentimento de "perda" caso tivesse de deixar de ser fã de eSports.	*I would experience a feeling of "loss" if I had to stop being a fan of eSports.*	Para mim seria um sentimento de "perda" caso tivesse de deixar de ser fã de eSports.
	I want others to know I'm a fan of the team.	Eu quero que os outros saibam que eu sou um fã de eSports.	*I want others to know I am a fan of eSports.*	Eu quero que os outros saibam que eu sou um fã de eSports.
Brand Identity	*I am very interested in what others think about my car brand.*	Eu estou muito interessado no que os outros dizem acerca da LG.	*I am very interested in what others think about LG.*	Eu estou muito interessado no que os outros dizem acerca da LG.
	When someone praises my car brand it feels like a personal compliment.	Quando alguém elogia a LG, parece um elogio pessoal.	*When someone praises LG, it feels like a personal compliment.*	Quando alguém elogia a LG, parece um elogio pessoal.
	This car brand's successes are my successes.	Os sucessos da LG são os meus sucessos.	*LG's successes are my successes.*	O sucesso da LG é o meu sucesso.
	When someone criticizes the race, It feels like a personal insult.	Quando alguém crítica a LG, parece um insulto pessoal.	*When someone criticizes LG, it feels like a personal insult.*	Quando alguém critica a LG, parece um insulto pessoal.
eSports Event Identity	*I feel a strong sense of belonging to the Interamnia World Cup as event.*	Eu tenho um sentimento forte de pertença ao FPF Open Challenge.	*I feel a very strong sense of belonging to the FPF Christmas Challenge as an event.*	Eu tenho um sentimento forte de pertença ao FPF Open Challenge enquanto evento.

	I am very attached to the Interamnia World Cup.	Eu estou muito envolvido com o FPF Open Challenge.	*I am very attached to the FPF Christmas Challenge.*	Eu estou muito envolvido com o evento FPF Open Challenge.
	I enjoy the Interamnia World Cup more than similar sporting event.	Eu gosto mais do FPF Open Challenge do que qualquer outro evento desportivo similar.	*I enjoy the FPF Christmas Challenge more than any similar sporting event.*	Gosto mais do FPF Open Challenge do que qualquer outro evento desportivo similar.
	I identify strongly with this destination.	Eu identifico-me fortemente com o FPF Open Challenge.	*I identify strongly with the FPF Christmas Challenge.*	Eu identifico-me fortemente com o FPF Open Challenge.
eSports Sponsor-Brand Identity	*I like NASCAR sponsors because they sponsor NASCAR*	Eu gosto da LG porque eles patrocinam eventos de eSports.	*I like LG because they sponsor eSports events.*	Eu gosto da LG porque ela patrocina o FPF Open Challenge.
	I feel more favourable towards NASCAR sponsors because they sponsor NASCAR.	A minha atitude é mais favorável em relação à LG porque eles patrocinam eventos de eSports.	*I feel more favourable towards LG because they sponsor eSports events.*	A minha atitude em relação à LG é mais favorável porque ela patrocina o FPF Open Challenge.
	I feel better about NASCAR sponsors' product and/or services because they sponsor NASCAR	Sinto-me melhor em relação aos produtos e/ou serviços da LG porque eles patrocinam eventos de eSports.	*I feel better about LG products and/or services because they sponsor eSports events.*	Sinto-me melhor em relação aos produtos da LG porque ela patrocina o FPF Open Challenge
	When choosing brand and retailers, I choose those that are NASCAR sponsors.	Quando eu tenho de escolher uma marca, eu escolho a que patrocina eventos de eSports.	*When I choose a brand, I choose those that sponsor eSports events.*	Quando eu tenho de escolher uma marca, eu escolho a LG porque patrocina o FPF Open Challenge.
Word-of-Mouth (WOM)	*I say positive things about [Firm's name] to other people.*	Eu falo bem do FPF Open Challenge a outras pessoas.	*I say positive things about the FPF Open Challenge to other people.*	É provável que eu fale bem do FPF Open Challenge a outras pessoas.
	I will tell my friends and/or family how much I enjoyed the 2012 Interamnia World Cup.	Eu vou a dizer a outras pessoas o quanto gostei do FPF Open Challenge.	*I will tell my friends and/or family how much I enjoyed the FPF Open Challenge.*	É provável que eu diga a outras pessoas o quanto gostei do FPF Open Challenge.
	I will recommend the Interamnia World Cup to my friends and family.	Eu recomendo o FPF Open Challenge a outras pessoas.	*I will recommend the FPF Open Challenge to my friends and family.*	É provável que eu recomende o FPF Open Challenge a outras pessoas.

	I recommend [Firm's name] to someone seeking my advice.	Eu recomendo o FPF Open Challenge a alguém que procura os meus conselhos.	*I recommend the FPF Open Challenge to someone seeking my advice.*	É provável que eu recomende o FPF Open Challenge a alguém que procure os meus conselhos.
Purchase Intent (PI)	*Consider buying sponsor's products in the future.*	Eu considero comprar produtos da LG no futuro.	*I consider buying LG's products in the future.*	Eu considero comprar produtos da LG no futuro.
	Will try to buy sponsor's products in the future.	Eu vou tentar comprar produtos da LG no futuro.	*I will try to buy LG's products in the future.*	É provável que eu compre produtos da LG no futuro.
	Will buy sponsor's products in the future.	Eu tenho intenção de comprar novos produtos da LG.	*I will buy LG's products in the future.*	Eu tenho intenção de comprar novos produtos da LG.
	Due the particular sponsorship, I like more the products of the sponsor.	Devido a este patrocínio em particular, eu gosto mais dos produtos da LG.	*Due the particular sponsorship, I like more the products of LG.*	Devido a este patrocínio em particular, eu gosto mais dos produtos da LG.

5.3 Data collection and sample

This study was conducted with a convenience sample of eSports fans (n = 356) who attended the 2021 FPF Open Challenge. An online questionnaire was used to collect data during one month and a half (from the 25th of November to the 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: (i) individuals who attended the event in person or through online streaming, (ii) individuals who consider themselves eSports fans, and (iii) individuals who are fluent in Portuguese. Individuals under the age of 18, or who were not attendees of the event, were excluded from the study.

A banner with the questionnaire link and an explanation of the study's purpose was sent via e-mail, inviting subjects to participate in the study. A total of 15 minutes was allowed to answer the questions, while questionnaire download, print or advertisement activation was not allowed. To ensure that each subject 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.

A total of 445 surveys was returned. Data was examined and the surveys not completely filled out or from respondents that did not match the criteria defined were excluded from further analysis (n=89). After data screening, 356 complete responses were deemed usable for data analysis. The majority of the participants were male (96.1%), with ages ranging from 18 to 55 years old, being predominant in the 18-25 age bracket (70.8%). Around 70% of the respondents had high school degrees. The sample contained essentially Portuguese eSports fans (97.8%). Regarding the event, a large number of fans were not first-time spectators of an eSports event (71.1%), while event attendance was mainly via streaming (81.5%). Related to eSports game participation, a great preponderance of individuals played FIFA in their free time (93.7%) and almost a half of the sample were avid players, ticking in at playing more than 6 times a

week (41.6%). All of these details are shown below in Table 3, which contains the sample profile.

Table 4. Respondents' demographic profile

Variable	Item	Total Sample %
Genre	Male	96.1
	Female	3.9
Age	18-25	70.8
	26-35	24.2
	36-45	4.4
	46-55	0.3
	55 or more	0
	M(SD)	23.6
Education	Elementary School	0.3
	High School	68.6
	College Degree	31.4
	(Bachelor's)	(24.8)
	(Master's)	(6.6)
Nationality	Portuguese	97.8
	Other	2.2
Event first-time	Yes	28.9
	No	71.1
Event attendance	In person	18.5
	Streaming (Twitch)	81.5
FIFA free time	Yes	93.7
	No	6.3
FIFA play-times	Occasionally	7.4
	1 to 2 times a week	8.8
	3 to 4 times a week	22.6
	5 to 6 times a week	19.6
	More than 6 times a week	41.6

5.4 Data analysis

Descriptive statistics were calculated using SPSS 26.0, and then the data was analysed using AMOS 26.0. A Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted on the model proposed to ensure the measurement model's psychometric properties. Then, the substantive hypotheses were tested using the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), which simultaneously uses a series of

separate and independent multiple regression equations (Marôco, 2018). The ratio of chi-square (χ2) to its degrees of freedom, Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), comparative-of-fit index (CFI), goodness-of-fit index (GFI), and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) were the fit indices used in this study (Hair et al., 2009). 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 & Larcker, 1981). Regarding to the internal consistency, Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability were measured to evaluate the reliability of the survey measures. Finally, a Structural Equation Model (SEM) was performed to assess the predictive validity of the model.

6. Results

In this chapter, the study results are presented, separated by three sub-chapters: descriptive statistics of factors, measure assessment and hypotheses testing. As such, the results of the Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) and the Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) are shown, being analysed all throughout the chapter.

6.1 Descriptive statistics of factors

Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 5. All skewness (values smaller than -1.425) and kurtosis (values smaller than 2.191) indicated that data distribution, and consequently multi-collinearity, was not an issue (Hair et al., 2011). 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 identification and behaviour. 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 identification and event sponsor-brand (M_{brand} = 3.29, $M_{sponsor-brand}$= 4.30), revealing their strong identity with eSports and associated products. 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 identification with brand was the variable with the lowest mean perceived (M = 3.29, SD = 1.71), evidencing their weak brand-identity. Furthermore, all variables were positively and significantly inter-correlated.

6.2 Assessment of the measures

The global fit indices indicate that the measurement model proposed provides a good fit to the data [$\chi2$(192) = 478.06 (p <.01), $\chi2$/gl = 2.49, CFI = .86, GFI = .90, NFI = .94, TLI = .95, RMSEA = .06]. The CFI, NFI, and TLI values exceeded the recommended cut off of 0.90, whereas the RMSEA value was more favourable than the 0.08 threshold (Hair et al. 2009). In addition, Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability values (α and CR) of all constructs exceeded the recommended threshold of .70 (values higher than .86), providing support for the internal consistency of these constructs (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

The construct measures yielded sound reliability and validity properties (Table 5). The AVE scores varied from .61 (eSports identity) to .90 (brand purchase intention), exceeding the recommended threshold of .50, and providing evidence of convergent validity (Fornell & 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 & Larcker, 1981). The correlation matrix for the constructs and average variance extracted (AVE) tests of discriminant validity are presented in Table 5. Subsequently, the structural model was examined.

Table 5. Correlation matric, AVE values and squared correlations among constructs

Construct	M(SD)	Correlation matrix (n=360)						Factor loadings	Z-Value	α	CR	AVE
		1	2	3	4	5	6					
1. eSports identity	5.37(1.29)	*.61*						.713-.867	14.91-19.76	.85	.86	.61
2. Brand identity	3.29(1.71)	.14	*.76*					.762-.923	16.76-22.67	.92	.93	.76
3. eSports event identity	4.80(1.65)	.54	.24	*.73*				.775-.922	17.11-22.57	.92	.92	.73
4. eSports sponsor-brand identity	4.30(2.01)	.24	.31	.53	*.84*			.897-.927	21.66-22.94	.95	.96	.84
5. Word-of-mouth recommendation	5.60(1.38)	.41	.14	.52	.27	*.80*		.858-.910	20.00-21.99	.92	.92	.80
6. Brand purchase intention	4.77(1.81)	.20	.19	.29	.48	.32	*.90*	.936-.956	23.50-24.38	.96	.96	.90

Notes. 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).

6.3 Hypotheses testing

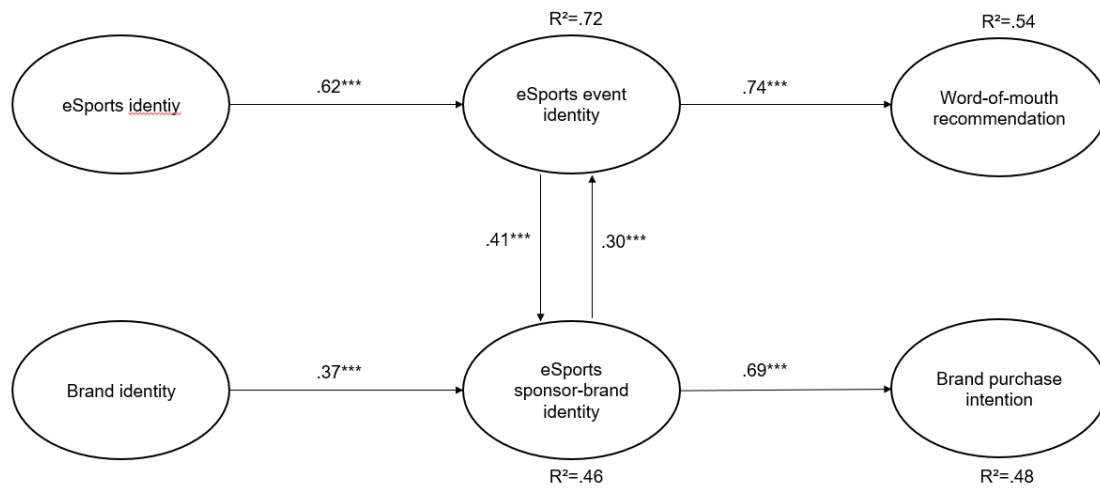The results of the structural model are pictorially presented in Figure 2.

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

The model explained a significant portion of the variance of fan identification with eSports event ($R^2 = 72\%$), of event sponsor-brand identification ($R^2 = 56\%$), of word-of-mouth recommendation of event ($R^2 = 54\%$) and of brand purchase intention ($R^2 = 48\%$). The effects of eSports fan identification on eSports event ($\beta = .62$, $p < .001$), and on word-of-mouth recommendation of event ($\beta = .74$, $p < .001$) were positive and significant (see Figure 2), thus supporting H1 and H5. Similarly, the fan identification with brand showed a significant positive effect on its identification with event sponsor-brand ($\beta = .37$, $p < .001$) and with its brand purchase intention ($\beta = .69$, $p < .001$), thus H2 and H6 were supported. Moreover, fan identification with eSports event was also significantly related to its identification with event sponsor-brand ($\beta = .41$, $p < .001$) and vice versa ($\beta = .30$, $p < .001$), evidencing a reciprocity effect that explains the positive relationship between fan identity with eSports event and its sponsor-brand perceived. Therefore, H3 and H4 were also confirmed. The path coefficients for each model are illustrated in Table 6, indicating that all hypotheses were supported. Furthermore, the overall assessment of the structural model demonstrated an adequate fit to the data [$\chi2(200) = 545.02$ ($p < .01$), $\chi2/gl = 2.72$, CFI = .95, GFI = .88, NFI = .93, TLI = .95, RMSEA = .06].

Table 6. Path Coefficients, Indicator Weights, and Explained Variance of Structural Model

H	Path	Supported?	β	Z-Value	p-value
H1	eSports identity → eSports event identity	Yes	.615	11.63	***
H2	Brand identity → eSports sponsor-brand identity	Yes	.372	7.90	***
H3	eSports event identity → eSports sponsor-brand identity	Yes	.413	6.95	***
H4	eSports sponsor-brand identity → eSports event identity	Yes	.300	5.50	***
H5	eSports event identity → Word-of-mouth recommendation	Yes	.738	15.01	***
H6	eSports sponsor-brand identity → Brand purchase intention	Yes	.694	15.60	***
	Explained Variance				
	eSports event identity		$R^2 = .72$		
	eSports sponsor-brand identity		$R^2 = .56$		
	Word-of-mouth recommendation		$R^2 = .54$		
	Brand purchase intention		$R^2 = .48$		

Notes. H = hypothesis; β = beta weight; *** = significant at .001 level.

7. Discussion

This chapter explains the results gathered, divided into two sections – theoretical and managerial implications. The first sections aims to discuss the hypothesis and the initial research questions, focusing on the theoretical implications related to the research results. The second section will focus on the practical implications for managers, event organizers or brand marketeers, offering feasible actions for all major stakeholders involved, linking the previously discussed theory alongside practice.

7.1 Theoretical implications

The purpose of this study was to explore the eSports fan's identity towards event and sponsor-brand and understand how its identity can influence their behavioural intentions. In doing so, this study sought to understand the fan's identity process towards sponsor and sponsored activity, arguing that highly identified fans are more likely to yield positive perceptions towards the event and their sponsor brands. This study extends the body of knowledge in the sports marketing and sponsorships literature by (1) exploring the role of social overlapping identities in the eSports sponsor-sponsee relationship, and by (2) examining the effects of social identity construct as a predictor of the behavioural intentions of fans. Our key findings and contributions are discussed below, and several implications for the eSports industry can be derived from these findings.

Our empirical findings revealed that the eSports fan's self-identity was a positive and significant predictor of its identity with the event and subsequently on its positive word-of-mouth recommendation (see Fig. 2 and Table 6). This finding supports previous evidence in the traditional sports context (Brown et al., 2018; Watanabe et al., 2017) and leads us to support the notion that strong identity relations are an important contribute to create social links among eSports fans, influencing their future behavioural intentions. Results suggest that strong eSports identification allows fans to incorporate social group identity' values, characteristics or behaviours into their self-identity (Prayag et al., 2020), creating common social identity (Kaye, 2014). The sense of fan identity is built-on by the community developed interaction (e.g., sharing communal values and points of

attachment), supporting newly identified fans, preserving already loyal individuals, and reinforcing identity processes within grassroots community (Barney, 2021). As such, the multidimensional construct of fan identity (Biscaia et al., 2018) has its complexity reinforced by the new forms of identification introduced by this study, thus linking event and sponsor-brand identification into alignment with social identity theory, as well as their interplaying relationship. The sense of fan identity is built-on by the community developed interaction (e.g., sharing communal values and points of attachment), supporting newly identified fans, preserving already loyal individuals, and reinforcing identity processes within grassroots community (Barney, 2021).

This study allowed to explore and extend eSports literature, by showing the sequential process on which the fan identity attaches to an eSports event and develops onto behaviours, such as word-of-mouth recommendation (see Fig. 1). Individuals' social interaction with in-group-based behaviours reflect through word-of-mouth recommendation, as our study confirms. This explains that the more fans identify with esports, the more they value its social extensions (e.g., events) and the more they tend to share their experiences with others (WOM). As for the second structural analysis, fan identity related with a brand can positively influence its identification towards the sponsor-brand of an eSports event, subsequently increasing their future purchase intention. This means that the more identified an individual is with a brand, the more s(he) will yield positive perception of the organisation, due to the sponsoring action of a cultural cause, such as an eSports event (Jang et al., 2021), thus tending to purchase their products or services (Deitz et al., 2012). By sponsoring events, brands are closely associated with fan identity and the sponsorship action itself contributes to the strengthen of social group identities in the eSports environment (Mühlbacher, 2021). As noted by Devlin et al. (2013), sponsorship helps brand identity building, leading the fan to value its linkage to the event and further increase brand trust (Pan et al., 2019). Sponsorship increasingly becomes interwoven with an individual when they resonate with the actions behind the brand's actions, creating an idealized vision of the sponsoring brand and enhancing social identification with the social group (Gawrysiak et al., 2020). Likewise, our findings noted that highly identified fans with the event sponsor-brand increase their purchase intent. This is consistent with previous studies, which consider high fan

identity congruency to increase patronage attitude (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003) and provide purchasing attitudes towards the sponsors (Lee et al., 2020). Recent studies (e.g., Elasri et al., 2020) have linked eSports with an avid consumer audience, resulting in intensified search for involved brand-related products or services. Malthouse et al. (2016) pointed out that affective engagement towards eSports creates beneficial behaviours (e.g., purchase intention). In this sense, marketeers and directors should be advised to focus on event sponsorship as way to attract or retain new fans, enhancing the brand's social identity.

7.2   Managerial implications

The respondents reported a low mean score on the perceived brand identity (M = 3.29, SD = 1.71), evidencing their weak brand association. This can mean that the brand does not have a strong link with the eSports social context. As such, the bridging between social identification and the fan's response could be weakened as a consequence. The presented findings suggest an effect of social fan identity on brand perceptions through the association of sponsoring the event, working as a pathway to develop behavioural intentions for individuals. This means that fans are more likely to have a favourable attitude towards the brand when it sponsors an eSports event, resulting in stronger identity perceptions. When seeking to develop strong social identifications, managers and marketeers should use eSports to enhance brand perceptions through the lively experiences and social connections of the ecosystem, inviting and encouraging fans to actively create content based on these experiences. Specially eSports national leagues or tournaments could be used as examples of how to enhance the organisational branding and explore different ways to maximize opportunities for brands. This becomes even more relevant for non-endemic sponsors, given that fans tend to support eSports-related sponsors, such as technology companies or internet providers (Gawrysiak et al., 2020). Thus, it is important that sponsoring brands are embedded in the main values, characteristics and principles of eSports, in order to attract their fans to a collective feeling and a common social group identity.

Results from this study also provide evidence of the bidirectional interaction between the fan identity with the eSports event and its sponsor-brand (see Fig.2). These structural relationships are significant and positive between

the constructs and its explained variance indicates a strong association between fan's identity factors (IDbrand: $R^2 = 0.56$; IDevent: $R^2 = 0.72$). This suggest that the more fans are identified with an eSports event, the more they identify in its sponsor brand and vice versa. Highly identified fans with an event are more positive towards the sponsorship (Tsordia et al., 2021), enhancing their favourability when the connection between sponsor and sponsee is perceived as fit (Woisetschläger et al., 2010). As resemblances extend from the eSports environment to its stakeholders, fans feel these similarities bridged in the ecosystem, encouraging the new social identification processes (Brocato et al., 2012). This relationship is guided by the creation social linkages on the sponsor-sponsee relationship (Deitz et al., 2012), providing the psychological connection with an event and the emotional value a fan attaches on brand support to the event. For eSports managers, understanding the meaning fans attach to their intergroup identity is essential for the successful sponsorship management, since similarities lead fans to have positive behavioural responses and intentions.

In this sense, given the experiential nature of eSports events (Jang et al., 2020), the two-way finding makes sense: if fans are primarily seeking to reinforce their identities by attending eSports events, new social identification processes can be stimulated based on the sponsorship-related activities (Gawrysiak et al., 2020). By sponsoring teams and events closely related to the eSports fan' identity, the sponsorship may serve to establish and strengthen brands' social group identities through the shared common values and points of attachment. Thus, it would seem likely that when sponsorship is embedded in eSports events, a halo effect occurs, leading to greater reciprocity from fans.

Likewise, the sponsor-brand connection with individuals can be provided when the fans' social needs are satisfied in the event. At this point, the sponsor anticipates the positive event attributes shared by fans to be transferred to itself (McDaniel, 1999), allowing for the identity strengthening (Mühlbacher et al., 2020). Drawing from social identity theory, it is possible to argue that as fan identification of fans with the event increases, the social connection with their sponsors also increases, creating a favourable attitude on the sponsor-sponsee relationship. Given this social identity strengthening, eSports managers should encourage the maintenance of strong fan identities related with their sponsors, providing for joint engagement actions (Abbasi et al., 2020), as a way for creating

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positive atmospherics, in order to improve their marketing and management activities (Jang et al., 2020). This assumes particular importance given that fan identity is a key aspect to understand future behaviours for individuals (Biscaia et al., 2018). In this sense, the results of the current study represent a valuable contribution towards promoting a stronger social link between eSports events and their sponsors, according to fan' perception.

8. Limitations and suggestions for future studies

This study has some limitations, which opens new opportunities for future research. First, this study has measured eSports fan identity and their behavioural intentions during the Covid-19 pandemic context, which could have influenced fan perception. This is an aspect that should be considered and could condition fan perception regarding their social perspective of various subjects (Vegara-Ferri et al., 2021). In addition, individuals' fear of participating in live events could have limited the obtained results, related to on-site attendance. Future studies should collect larger samples and test the moderation effects between attending eSports events in-person and streaming online.

Second, the use of a cross-sectional study design prevents the observation of cause-effect relationships. Despite the hypothesised paths supporting 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 amongst scale items (Malhotra et al., 2016). This was a constant concern for the researchers involved and it was controlled through the SEM, however, futures studies should adopt longitudinal study designs, which allows for the inference of causality, as well as a decrease in the possibility of CMB existence through a latent method factor or harman's one factor test (Jordan & 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 towards male, young people (18–25), high-school-level people, and those who play more than 6 times a week. This is likely a result from the demographic profile associated to the respondent's type (millennial and Gen Z), and in addition the 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 behavioural responses. Considering this, conducting future studies in different cultural contexts or eSports fan communities, with new sample profiles, would aid in the garnishing of further validation for the survey instrument and conceptual model.

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Fourth, our conceptual model is non-recursive since there are reciprocal paths between two endogenous variables. As such, potential issues in the fan identification may arise, since it is harder to judge identity based only on simple statistic rules and visual inspection (Blunch, 2012). It is suggested that future studies adopt tests to the order condition, which is applied to each variable and evaluates the number of variables in the structural model that directly influence each endogenous variable against the number of variables which don't exert any influence, being commonly denominated as the excluded variables. The test of order condition requires that the number of excluded variables is equal or surpasses the number of endogenous variables minus one (Kline, 2015). Moreover, a condition classification test is suggested in order to guarantee the validity of the model. Related to our research, there is a correlation of .24 between our crossed variables and, in non-recursive models, this should not occur between the endogenous variables whose paths are crossed. Thus, it is a limitation that must be acknowledge and controlled in future studies by the two proposed tests. In addition, future research should also include independent variables, for instance using endemic and non-endemic brands as moderated variables of the conceptual model, with the objective of gathering specific knowledge regarding these two types of entities.

In summary, this study sought to provide empirical evidence related to the two-way relationship of eSports fan's identity (i.e., sponsor-sponsee), while linking these constructs with their behavioural intentions. Our findings help in understanding how the fan's identity process can enhance its fate and develop mutually (Heere et al., 2011), building social overlapping identity in the eSports sponsor-sponsee relationship. Furthermore, these findings aid the eSports managers and marketeers to understand the fan's behaviour from a social standpoint, connecting events and brands with fandom and their intentions. It is conceivable that a better understanding of the eSports fans' social identity will lead to a better perception of how they related with other stakeholders, contributing to broader academic discussions on the social value of eSports, and adding new options of the sponsorship for sponsor-brands, marketeers, and future event organisers.

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10. Appendix

Appendix 1. Factor Loadings, Z-Values, CFA item statistics and correlation matrix.

Variables	Factor loading	Z-value	CR	AVE
Social Identity				
Esports Identity			.86	.61
I consider myself to be a real eSports fan.	.713	14.91		
Being an eSports fan is very important to me.	.867	19.76		
I would experience a feeling of "loss" if I had to stop being a fan.	.812	17.90		
I want others to know that I'm an eSports fan.	.719	15.06		
Brand Identity			.93	.76
I'm very interested in what others say about LG.	.762	16.76		
When someone praises LG, it feels like a personal compliment.	.906	21.95		
LG's success is my success.	.923	22.67		
When someone criticizes LG, it feels like a personal insult.	.883	21.03		
Esports Event Identity			.92	.73
I feel a strong sense of belonging to the FPF Open Challenge as event.	.847	20.64		
I am very attached with the FPF Open Challenge.	.922	22.57		
I enjoy the FPF Open Challenge more than any other similar event.	.775	17.11		
I strongly identify with the FPF Open Challenge.	.847	19.60		
Esports Sponsor-Brand Identity			.96	.84
I like LG because it sponsors the FPF Open Challenge.	.924	22.80		
My attitude towards LG is more favourable because it sponsors the FPF Open Challenge.	.897	21.66		
I feel better about LG products because it sponsors the FPF Open Challenge.	.927	22.94		
When choosing a brand, I choose LG because it sponsors the FPF Open Challenge.	.923	22.82		
Behavioural Intentions				
Word-of-Mouth Recommendation			.92	.80
I'm likely to tell for other people how much I enjoyed the FPF Open Challenge.	.910	21.99		
I will recommend the FPF Open Challenge to others.	.909	21.95		
I recommend the FPF Open Challenge to someone seeking my advice.	.858	20.00		
Brand Purchase Intention			.96	.90
I consider to buy LG products in the future.	.956	24.39		
It is likely that I will try to buy LG products after this event.	.950	24.12		
I intend to buy new LG products.	.936	23.50		
Correlation matrix				

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Esports Identity	*1.00*					
2. Brand Identity	.14	*1.00*				
3. Esports Event Identity	.54	.24	*1.00*			
4. Esports Sponsor-Brand Identity	.24	.31	.53	*1.00*		
5. Word-of-Mouth Recommendation	.41	.14	.52	.27	*1.00*	
6. Brand Purchase Intention	.20	.19	.29	.48	.32	*1.00*

Note. No correlations failed the AVE test of discriminant validity.

p<.01; χ²(192)=478.06 (p<.001), χ²/df = 2.49, TLI = .95, CFI = .96, NFI = .94, GFI = .90, RMSEA = .06.