The Benefits and Risks of Sponsoring eSports: A Brief Literature Review

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The Benefits and Risks of Sponsoring eSports: A Brief Literature Review

By Bruno Duarte Abreu Freitas, Ruth S. Contreras-Espinosa and
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As of today, eSports are a worldwide phenomenon (Hiltscher & Scholz, 2017) of high economic significance (Ströh, 2017) and large international reach (BI Intelligence & Elder, 2017). This popularity has attracted the attention of multiple companies interested in capitalizing on its success. Specifically, just in 2016, more than 600 sponsorship deals were made in the eSports market (Shabir, 2017). However, little is known about this industry (Ströh, 2017), especially regarding the area of eSports sponsorships (Hallmann & Giel, 2018). As such, considering that the eSports market presents brands with, not only very attractive sponsoring benefits (Ströh, 2017), but also with brand threatening risks (Shabir, 2017), this literature review addresses, in a descriptive manner, the benefits and risks that come with the sponsoring of competitive gaming tournaments. The used literature included only scientific and academic articles, books, news media, and professional studies related to eSports and eSports sponsorships, and did not make use of data outside the scientific, professional, or journalistic environment.

The Benefits of Sponsoring eSports

Due to all of its sponsoring benefits (Härig, 2015), eSports has become an important marketing channel for consumer brands (CGC Europe, 2015). The first and main reason why this new medium has attracted so many sponsors is due to its massive audience (Ströh, 2017). As of now, the eSports audience is comprised of between 299 million (SuperData, 2017) and 330 million fans, and this number has been experiencing a yearly growth of about 13.5% (Newzoo, 2018). As it stands, the current mass of eSports fans is already bigger than the 151 million that comprise the American Football audience (Winnan, 2016) and is rivalling the volume of the basketball audience. These high numbers are extremely important (Sylvester & Rennie, 2017) because high levels of visibility are the main reason why traditional sports have been the major sponsorship medium (Bennett, 1999), and now eSports are rivalling regular sports' visibility levels (Ströh, 2017). For example, while the opening ceremony of the 2012 iteration of the Summer Olympics was watched by 40.7 million people in the United States (Statista, 2016) and the 2018 edition was watched by 28.3 million (Statista, 2018), the Mid-Season Invitational 2018 eSports tournament had a total of 60 million online viewers (Esports Marketing Blog, 2018; Fusco, 2018). Because of this, enhanced brand awareness has been the main benefit that brands seek from eSports sponsorships (O'Beirne, 2010).

Being an extremely popular market (Ströh, 2017) has allowed the eSports scene to be valued at roughly $1.13 billion in 2017, with an expected increase to $1.24 billion by 2018 (SuperData, 2017). In relation to revenue, in 2017, the eSports market generated about $756 million and is expected to generate around $1 billion by 2018 (SuperData, 2018). These high figures have led brands to sponsor eSports with the goal of driving their sales and revenue (Lu, 2017). And this objective is not out of reach as the eSports audience is characterized by being wealthy individuals (CGC Europe, 2015; SuperData, 2015) and avid spenders (CGC Europe, 2015; Eventbrite, 2015; SuperData, 2015). Such spending power has attracted several brands to this market (Härig, 2015). Furthermore, eSports fans are technological influ-

encers. It is estimated that one gaming enthusiast has the ability to influence the technological buying decisions of about four people (CGC Europe, 2015). The characteristics of these fans has allowed eSports sponsors to earn significant revenues (Shabir, 2017). While in 2017, eSports sponsorship revenues reached a total value of $266.3 million (Newzoo, 2017), it is expected that, in 2018, this value will increase to $359.4 million (Newzoo, 2018). Besides enhanced sales, some sponsors of South Korean eSports have reported return-on-investment (ROI) ratios of about 500% (Taylor, 2012).

The bilateral communication prowess of the streaming technologies that characterize eSports has given rise to the unique opportunity of establishing a continuous and contagious communication between sponsored professional players and their fan-base (Ströh, 2017). The fact that these pro-players are constantly performing live streams on platforms like Twitch allows them to stay in continuous contact and interact with their fans through the live-chats of these streaming services (Nielsen Esports, 2017). This allows sponsoring brands to stay in constant contact with this target-market and enhance engagement (Ströh, 2017). Considering that pro-gamers are seen as celebrities (Jin, 2010; Ströh, 2017), they serve as important influencers and advocates of a brand (Ströh, 2017). If pro-players show support for a specific brand, fans will follow and buy that sponsors' products (Shabir, 2017).

In this day and age, long are gone the times when companies had complete control over their brand image. At the present time, consumers also have the ability to control a brand's image, with their opinions being easily posted online for the entire world, and potential customers, to see (Nunes, Bellin, Lee, & Schunck, 2013). In this sense, the sponsoring of eSports allows any brand to be perceived as more positive and modern (Ströh, 2017). This is because when a brand sponsors eSports it is showing that it supports, not only this new industry, but also its organizations and professional players. That is, the brand is showing that it supports and is adding value to something that this audience clearly cherishes, which in this case are eSports (Shabir,

2017). By being involved in something that is important to them (Pitkänen, 2015), fans will start having a more positive perception of the sponsoring brand. And the brand will not only benefit from an enhanced brand image, it will also gain prestige, credibility (Shabir, 2017), build brand loyalty. This latter benefit is only made possible because eSports fans have proven to be loyal to the brands and people that support this industry (Pitkänen, 2015). These various benefits will further enhance the sponsor's probability of a significant return-on-investment (Shabir, 2017).

Contrary to other sponsoring mediums, where people tend to see sponsorships and advertisements as unwanted and cumbersome presences, in eSports, fans seem to have a much more positive and understanding perception of these marketing investments (Ströh, 2017). With the industry's growth and evolution into the edges of mainstream culture, there has been an increasing fear that the eSports audience would grow tired and become skeptical of the ever-increasing presence of sponsorships in eSports. However, market research has proven otherwise. On average, 55% of fans presented positive attitudes towards the presence of sponsors both in tournaments and streams, 38.25% had a neutral attitude towards such practices, and just 6.75% showed negative feelings about brands entering the eSports scene (Nielsen Esports, 2017). A research conducted by Ströh (2017) also showed similar data, with fans having largely positive attitudes towards eSports sponsorships. However, the researcher noted that fans do recognize that these sponsoring brands are not altruistic entities. Still, they realize that they are a necessity for the economic well-being of the industry. Because they know that the very existence of what they love is dependent on sponsors, fans perceive sponsorships in this medium as something likable and even necessary, instead of annoying or disturbing.

Furthermore, it has been found that, in eSports, both endemic and non-endemic brands can find success as sponsors (BI Intelligence & Elder, 2017; Ströh, 2017). Although it is true that companies whose product offer is related to the gaming industry still have the

upper hand when it comes to sponsoring eS-ports (CGC Europe, 2015), representing 95% of total eSports sponsors, competitive gaming's cost-effective ways of reaching the masses is increasingly attracting more and more non-endemic brands (Ströh, 2017). For example: Gillette was one of the sponsors of the 2017 iteration of Intel Extreme Masters (IEM), PokerStars sponsored Team Liquid, and Vodafone sponsored the G2 eSports team (Shabir, 2017). While not investing as much as endemic brands, non-endemic sponsors are still significant contributors to the continuous growth of this industry. Even though non-endemics are still quite hesitant to sponsor eSports, research has found that the eSports audience also has a positive attitude towards the presence of non-endemic sponsors. The study revealed that they are glad that non-endemics are entering the scene as sponsors and that 70% want more of these kinds of brands to sponsor eSports. Furthermore, non-endemic brands tend to have the same level of brand recall as endemic ones and have found the same level of success. An example is the German financial services group Wüstenrot Bausparkasse AG, which was the main sponsor of the 2016 edition of ESL (Electronic Sports League) Frühlingsmeisterschaft and reported to be very happy with the sponsorship results and that they wanted to continue sponsoring eSports (Ströh, 2017).

Another benefit from sponsoring eSports is the access that it provides to its main demographic (i.e. millennials) which are quite desirable to sponsors (Shabir, 2017). This is because eSports fans represent a demographic that is becoming increasingly harder to reach via traditional media channels (Li, 2016). However, in eSports, this demographic is the medium's main audience and, like stated before, is quite open to sponsorships and advertisements inside the competitive gaming sphere (Ströh, 2017). As such, the act of sponsoring eSports exposes brands to a target-audience that cannot be as easily reached through any other means (Cunningham et al., 2018; Shabir, 2017).

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As we have seen until now, the main benefits of eSports sponsorships are: enhanced brand awareness, increased sales and return-on-investment, higher engagement, improved brand image and brand loyalty, audience acceptance of sponsorships, success of both endemic and non-endemic brands, and access to an elusive demographic. Now we will move on to the risks that this new medium is presenting to sponsors.

The Risks of Sponsoring eSports

Despite being a new and exciting industry, eSports present several issues (Mooney, 2018) that have the potential of affecting its entire ecosystem, including sponsors. It is crucial that brands become conscious of these risks as they may lead to several, and serious, negative effects (Ströh, 2017).

The act of sponsoring brings forth the risk of being associated with disreputable behavior, which has the very high potential of significantly damaging the sponsor's image. Shameful behavior may come from multiple sides, including from the sponsored party or from the spectators themselves (Crompton, 1994). Although aggressive behaviour has been a rare sight in eSports (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017), the same cannot be said for toxic behavior, which has had some unfortunate appearances. In general, the more competitive the scene around a specific gaming title is, the higher the odds of there being toxic behavior. Some examples of toxic be-

havior include: antisocial behavior, foul language, and breaking of multiple other rules of co-existence. These are serious issues as they tend to lead to a bad viewing experience (Neto, Yokoyama, & Becker, 2017). Another similar form of disreputable behavior is sexism which, coming from a scene that is still largely dominated by a male audience, has led to multiple women (both fans and professional players) to have a constant fight with heckling, harassment (Mooney, 2018), and discrimination issues. These occurrences compose a serious threat to the sponsors' image because negative news can easily spread and damage their brands' reputation (Ströh, 2017).

Besides this, there have also been several occurrences of corruption, including: doping, match-fixing, cheating, gambling, and DDoS (distributed denial of service) attacks (Ströh, 2017).

The alluring and ever increasing million-dollar prize pools of competitive gaming have resulted in some individuals to attempt to enhance their chances of winning through cheating methods. Some examples of these occurrences include the use of complex macros, aim bots, wallhacks, and software that grants players with hidden, but valuable, tactical information. As of now, one of the most famous cheating incidents happened during the CS:GO finals of the 2014 edition of DreamHack. During the tournament, two teams had already been caught cheating and disqualified. However, during the finals, Fnatic was caught exploiting a glitch and, when confronted with this allegation, accused the opposing team of also exploiting another glitch. These incidents discredit competitive gaming and tarnish the sense of sportsmanship (Winnan, 2016).

Another form of cheating is doping (Ströh, 2017) and it has quickly turned into quite a serious issue in eSports, with one professional player stating that everyone is doing it. Drugs like Adderall have become popular in the scene and there are even specialized drugs being sold over the internet whose cocktail-like combinations of stimulants pose serious threats to players' health. Furthermore, little is known about these drugs side-effects and how to counter the health challenges that they may present (Holden, Kaburakis, & Rodenberg, 2018).

Competitive gaming's popularity has turned it into the seventh biggest betting market, receiving more bets than golf and rugby (Schneider, 2015; Winnan, 2016). However, while there are indeed legal ways of betting in eSports, there have also appeared several illegal eSports betting websites. There are various online eSports gambling websites that are not regulated nor licensed, and do not check the bettor's age or if he is from a country where gambling is illegal (Mooney, 2018). And with today's online platforms, it is very easy for anyone (including minors) to gamble on eSports (Shabir, 2017). As such, illegal betting has turned into a serious problem that is putting the integrity of the entire scene at risk (Ströh, 2017).

The growth of this industry has also led multiple professional gamers to manipulate the results of their own matches in order to benefit from bribes or gambling (i.e. match fixing). This has resulted in some scandals. Some examples include professional players being arrested South Korea and a pro-gamer attempting suicide after declaring that he had been ordered by his team manager to purposely lose in order to profit from the gambling market. Although match fixing is currently low in the eSports sphere, the industry's accelerated growth may eventually attract the attention of organized crime (Ströh, 2017).

Another form of manipulating results is through DDoS and other cyber-attacks, which seek to slowdown or disrupt the internet connection of specific pro-players. The cyber attackers who do this usually look to make a particular team win in order to (once again) benefit from the gambling market. This is another aspect that threatens the integrity and legitimacy of the eSports scene. Still, several organizations like ESIC (Esports Integrity Coalition) have done their best to fight corruption (Shabir, 2017).

Although several studies have showed little to no evidence that gaming promotes aggressiveness, obesity, or antisocialism, multiple politicians, parents, academics, and others,

continue to accuse gaming of negatively affecting peoples' lives (Crawford & Gosling, 2009). As we all known, gaming is not as socially accepted as sports, often being perceived as nothing more than a waste of time that leads to addiction (Peša, Čičin-Šain, & Blažević, 2017). Unfortunately, both the videogame industry and its audience have continuously suffered from such stereotypes. Furthermore, the media has had the tendency to blame videogames for school shootings and other incidents. This massive spreading of negative news about videogames and eSports puts sponsoring brands at the risk of suffering from collateral damage (Ströh, 2017).

The gaming industry's accelerated pace also means that new videogames are constantly being released. Game developers want to release their newest games as soon as possible in order to create new sources of revenue (O'Beirne, 2011). However, this, coupled with the constant restructuration of licensing deals, means that the list of games that are featured at tournaments is constantly being altered (Zolides, 2015). Even extremely popular games tend to eventually be replaced in the eSports scene (CGC Europe, 2015). Because of this, brands that sponsor a single title are at risk that the game they are sponsoring loses popularity, which will lead to a much smaller reach for their advertising messages (Ströh, 2017).

The last problem of eSports is the infancy of its own industry (Shabir, 2017). Having only attained a significant level of popularity by around 2010 (Franke, 2015), this market is still in its adolescence (Fields, 2011). This means that the industry still has some problems to face (Keiper, Manning, Jenny, Olrich, & Croft, 2017). Problems that any young industry usually has to face (Winnan, 2016).

Among those issues is a severe lack of regulation (Mooney, 2018; Winnan, 2016), and a lack of coherence in them (Sylvester & Rennie, 2017), which give birth to several legal issues and lead to a climate of considerable uncertainty (Shabir, 2017). The scene is also still quite fragmented, with multiple tournaments happening at the same time and featuring the same tiles (Sylvester & Rennie,

2017). The multiple governing bodies and leagues create a confusing and conflicting environment (Winnan, 2016), which is further worsened by the lack of a single, clear, and identifiable governing body that covers all tournaments and events (Sylvester & Rennie, 2017). Lastly, the scene is still quite volatile, with multiple teams and organizations that, despite appearing commercially viable at first sight, suddenly disappear (Shabir, 2017).

Such instability poses an extremely high risk for brands, as there is the probability that the organization or team that they sponsor may suddenly disappear, making significant amounts of investments go to waste (Shabir, 2017). The multiple problems associated with the infancy of this industry have led multiple authors to compare it to the Wild West (Holden & Ehrlich, 2017; Hollist, 2015; Li, 2016; Shabir, 2017).

As was shown, the main risks of sponsoring eSports are: disreputable behavior (including toxic behavior, doping, match-fixing, cheating, gambling, and DDoS attacks), adverse social and media influence, instability of games and genres' popularity, and infancy of the industry (including lack of regulation, legal issues, fragmentation, lack of a main and all-encompassing governing body, and volatility). According to Ströh (2017), companies do not want to be associated with these aspects because all of these issues put the image of the sponsoring brands at risk.

Conclusion

Through this literature review it was possible to observe that, although there is a significantly limited academic and scientific literature on the subject of eSports (Ströh, 2017), and more so on eSports sponsorships (Hallmann & Giel, 2018), this industry offers several opportunities to sponsors, which can greatly benefit their brands (Ströh, 2017), but also presents several risks, which have the potential of provoking lasting damages (Shabir, 2017).

There have been several successful sponsorships in eSports (Ströh, 2017). The brands

that have been able to capitalize from the success of this industry have benefited from an improved brand image, enhanced awareness, greater loyalty and engagement from customers, higher sales and ROI, and access to an elusive demographic that accepts sponsorships, even from non-endemic brands. Because of all these very attractive potential benefits, authors like Shabir (2017) have labelled this market as an "advertising goldmine" (p. 26).

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However, despite the marketing attractiveness of the eSports industry, it also presents multiple risks for interested brands (Ströh, 2017). By sponsoring, companies are susceptible to being associated with any kind of disreputable behavior that may occur in the scene, to be negatively affected by the still existing adverse social and media perspectives on gaming, and to have unsuccessful investments due to the very unstable popularity of games and due to the infancy of the industry, which creates a very unpredictable and volatile environment.

These risks, which have the potential of significantly damaging the brands' image, present a problem for all stakeholders, including sponsors (Shabir, 2017). In order for an industry as big as eSports to maintain a sustainable and balanced environment, it needs to solve these problems (Sylvester & Rennie, 2017). However, the market is still at an infant stage of economic development and needs more time to grow in order to reach its true full potential (Asociación Española de Videojuegos, 2018). According to Franke (2015), the continuous evolution of eSports is showing signs that they are slowly solving these problems and steadily turning into a generally more organized and standardized industry.

It is important to note, however, that most of these issues are not exclusive to eSports. The great majority of other sports also suffered from these problems in their first decades of existence, and still continue to suffer from several of these issues today. Regardless, they still manage to survive, be profitable, attract sponsors, and provide them with great benefits. And eSports are proving to be no different (Winnan, 2016).

Despite its hazards, there is hope for the future, and it seems to be a bright one for eSports. Since its small beginnings to the present internationally popular and stadium filling tournaments, the eSports industry has always shown its resilience and perseverance, being able to overcome and survive through every obstacle that threatened its existence and growth. This medium has always had a unique behavior (e.g. not being dependent on traditional media to survive) and implemented innovative tactics (e.g. taking advantage of the new streaming technologies). Regardless of all of its shortcomings and risks (Shabir, 2017), the benefits of the industry, coupled with its resilience and ability to remedy undesirable aspects of the scene, means that brands have a lot to gain with eSports sponsorships (Ströh, 2017).

It is undeniable that the scene is not perfect as of now, but it is also undeniable that the era of eSports has already begun and is proving to be extremely successful. This market is evolving much faster than any other sport ever has (Winnan, 2016), and, as it develops, it will become more efficient, attractive, valuable, and profitable, which in turn will offer greater benefits to sponsors (Ströh, 2017). Furthermore, even at the present time, any sponsor has the potential to find great success in the eSports industry (BI Intelligence & Elder, 2017).

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