

6 How the Negative Public View of Videogames Threatens Esports Sponsors

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Introduction

Esports – short for electronic sports – are closely connected to the now antiquated LAN parties where gamers would gather, in a real-world location, to compete in relatively small-scale and friendly videogame matches (Shabir, 2017). With the appearance of easily accessible high-speed internet and streaming functionalities, however, this changed (Carter & Gibbs, 2013) and gave birth to the modern, serious, and large-scale esports competitions that have been popularized around the globe (Ströh, 2017). In this sense, the current esports can be understood as professionally orchestrated videogame tournaments where the best players in the world – commonly dubbed pro-gamers or pro-players – participate (Shabir, 2017) to acquire prestige, money, and prizes (Mooney, 2018). It must be kept in mind that esports is a collective term, meaning that, like water sports, they are composed of different activities, which in this case are competitions around different videogames (Ströh, 2017). Furthermore, there are different tournament tiers (Shabir, 2017), like semi-amateur and professional (SuperData, 2017a). While low-tier tournaments generally occur with pro-gamers competing from home via internet connections (Stein & Scholz, 2016), the majority of high-tier tournaments require pro-gamers to gather in a specific real-world location – like a stadium – to compete, and fans watch either in person or online (Gifford, 2017).

The recent advancements in internet speed and streaming technologies mean that esports were only able to reach high levels of popularity recently in the early 2010s (Ströh, 2017). Nevertheless, in just a few years, they rapidly grew (Shabir, 2017) to become a worldwide recognized phenomenon. Several countries, like South Korea, now recognize competitive gaming as a sport (Hiltscher & Scholz, 2017). Moreover, they are not only the world's fastest-growing sport (Sylvester &

Rennie, 2017), but also one of the fastest-growing industries overall (Winnan, 2016). Their high popularity (CGC Europe, 2015), large worldwide reach (BI Intelligence & Elder, 2017), and relevant economic strength (Shabir, 2017) is attracting numerous consumer brands looking to use them as a marketing channel (CGC Europe, 2015). For instance, brands signed over 600 esports sponsorship contracts in just 2016 (Shabir, 2017). Some notable brands include Vodafone, Coca-Cola (Ströh, 2017), Audi, Google, Nissan, Paris Saint-Germain, Sony, Manchester City (Shabir, 2017), Samsung, Microsoft, and Red Bull (Funk, Pizzo, & Baker, 2018).

The popularity around competitive gaming is leading sponsors to gain some major return on investments (ROIs) (Freitas et al., 2020), particularly a significant boost in brand awareness (Ströh, 2017). This is because, in 2020, there were already 495 million esports fans (Newzoo, 2020a; Statista, 2020), a figure that has been enjoying a yearly increase of between 10.4% and 12.3% (Newzoo, 2020a). Ergo, some studies predict that, in 2023, there will be roughly 646 million esports fans (Newzoo, 2020a; Statista, 2020), a number that is larger than the NFL's entire fan base and in line with the fandom of various other popular sports (Shabir, 2017). The popularity of esports is so large that it already receives higher viewership numbers when compared to several well-known sports (Winnan, 2016). For instance, although the 2014 match between USA and Germany in the Football World Championship had a respectable 1.7 million viewers on ESPN (CGC Europe, 2015), the esports tournament Katowice Intel Extreme Masters had an outstanding 46 million viewers on YouTube and Twitch (Statista, 2018). Besides high exposure, competitive gaming sponsors are also enjoying increased sales figures (Freitas et al., 2020; Winnan, 2016). This is because the general esports fan, besides having an income that is above average (Ströh, 2017), is also a compulsive buyer, an early adopter of technology-related products (Winnan, 2016), and, most importantly, a strong influencer of his or her friends' and family's buying behavior (Ströh, 2017). Because of this, it was calculated that, in 2020, competitive gaming had a value of 1.34 billion US dollars (Pannekeet, 2019), a figure that is expected to have an annual growth of 9.7% (SuperData, 2017b). Furthermore, contrary to the majority of established sports, whose survivability is not entirely dependent on sponsor funds, the competitive gaming market, which is still in its early stages, is largely dependent on sponsor money to survive (Ströh, 2017). Because esports are unable to exist, in their current large scale, without sponsors, it is much cheaper to sponsor them than regular sports (Winnan, 2016).

As is evident, competitive gaming is a novel and exciting market whose benefits are attracting several sponsors (Freitas et al., 2020). However, despite this high popularity, the esports industry is still susceptible to some threats (Mooney, 2018; Shabir, 2017; Ströh, 2017; Winnan, 2016) that carry the potential of seriously damaging its entire market (Shabir, 2017; Ströh, 2017; Winnan, 2016). Hence, it is imperative that esports sponsors become aware of the risks that come with sponsoring competitive gaming because these can negatively affect their brands in multiple ways (Ströh, 2017).

Although gaming is extremely popular nowadays (Newman, 2008; Shabir, 2017; Ströh, 2017; Winnan, 2016), it still has a negative image in society (AEVI, 2018; Franke, 2015; Hilvoorde, 2016; Peša et al., 2017). Unlike sports, videogames are, in general, still not accepted by society (Peša et al., 2017). This stigma is, in fact, quite notorious (Li, 2016; Shabir, 2017), and this is a challenge to brands because there is a chance that the negativity around gaming may spread to the esports sponsors, damaging them (Ströh, 2017). Some of the critiques videogames receive include the damaging of productivity, creativity, and literacy (Newman, 2008), as well as lowering school grades, encouraging sedentary behavior, promoting obesity, and destroying reading habits (Tavinor, 2009). The act of playing a videogame is essentially seen as an unproductive activity where the gamer behaves like a mindless sheep that is completely absorbed by the game's virtual world and stimuli. This unfavorable view has led a multitude of people to infer that gamers should make better use of their time by performing more energetic and enriching activities (Newman, 2008).

Since the act of playing a videogame is perceived as an activity where the gamer is detached from the real world (Li, 2016), it is usually understood as an antisocial act (Brookey & Oates, 2015; Newman, 2008) that may promote social isolation (Peša et al., 2017). Likewise, playing a videogame is believed to be an unhealthy act (Brookey & Oates, 2015), which creates the perception that gamers are sick people who spend eight hours per day mindlessly staring at screens (Shabir, 2017). Subsequently, esports are now observed as a danger to people's health due to the dangerous fusion of inactivity and participants of a very young age demographic (Holden et al., 2018).

Competitive gaming is also famously seen as belonging to a nerd culture (Taylor, 2012). Even today, it is almost impossible to escape the derogatory portrayal of gamers as being overweight nerds who eat too many Cheetos and drink Mountain Dew and live in their parents' basements (Li, 2016). Furthermore, unfortunately, there is the stigma that gamers pay more attention to videogames than to their

jobs. These negative views are so persistent and strong that, when an employer analyzes a person's curriculum vitae, the employer will usually favor someone who did voluntary work in a sporting club over someone who has several years of experience as an administrator of a popular esports enterprise (Scholz, 2010b).

The inciting of violence has also become another negative stereotype (Hilvoorde, 2016; Scholz, 2010a; Ströh, 2017), along with gaming leading to truancy, theft, and drug use (Shabir, 2017). This has led gamers to be seen as friendless and maladjusted loners who favor the comfort of the virtual world over being with real people. And this, in turn, has created the myth that gamers are obsessive, unbalanced, and dangerous. Ergo, all events connected with violence or aggression (particularly school shootings) are commonly inferred to have been promoted by exposure to videogames (Newman, 2008). Likewise, the competitive gaming market is susceptible to the negative portrayal of violent videogames by the media. This adverse publicity puts esports under pressure because it may lead current, and potential, industry partners to leave. Brands may wish to terminate their esports sponsorships to prevent suffering collateral damage if, for instance, the mass media blames videogames for another school shooting incident (Ströh, 2017).

Gaming has also been blamed for being addictive (Ackerman, 2016; Tavinor, 2009), and the truth is that some studies have found very convincing evidence that gaming addiction may happen when people play videogames for long periods of time (Shabir, 2017). Even so, the strong competition among esports players requires them to have this taxing lifestyle if they want to be a top player (Stivers, 2017). Just like with any other profession, pro-gamers are professionals who understand that their salaries are at stake (Parkin, 2015), so it is common for the best pro-players to play videogames for 16 hours per day (Taylor, 2012). In this regard, competitive gaming is just like regular sports. If one wishes to be the best, sacrifices must be made (Parkin, 2015). Still, this grueling work ethic has caused the hospitalization of some pro-players (Stivers, 2017; Wilson, 2017) and the death of others (Şentuna & Kanbur, 2016). Furthermore, there are several negative psychological effects that can be caused by excessive gaming (Şentuna & Kanbur, 2016), like depression, ADHD, anxiety, and the famous Tetris Effect (Holden et al., 2018).

Interestingly, gambling addiction can also be caused by exposure to esports (Macey & Hamari, 2018; Teichert et al., 2017). Several people are developing adverse gambling behaviors due to how easy it is to wager on videogame skins in gambling websites (Teichert et al., 2017).

And the more they watch competitive gaming, the more probable it is that they will develop addictions related to esports gambling (Macey & Hamari, 2018). The seriousness of this issue is catapulted by the young age of most esports fans (Gainsbury et al., 2017a, 2017b) because they are more prone to developing gambling addiction issues than older individuals (Gainsbury et al., 2017b). Moreover, the esports wagering industry has become so popular that it is already larger than the entire esports economy (Gainsbury et al., 2017a), and is now the seventh most popular wagering market (Winnan, 2016).

Every single one of these elements has a negative influence on how society perceives individuals whose career is centered around videogames (AEVI, 2018). Regrettably, it is difficult to erase from society's mind the image of the shut-in and antisocial gamer who is obsessed with videogames and convert it into the image of a smart, tech-savvy, and healthy individual (Liboriussen & Martin, 2016). This cloud of negativity over gaming presents, and will continue to present, severe risks to the promotion of competitive gaming (Taylor, 2012). Based on this data, we posit the following:

***H₁*:** The negative public view on videogames (which may come from the virtual violence or from gaming or gambling addiction) is a risk to esports sponsors.

Methodology

This study employed an exploratory design and a mixed method approach. The time horizon was cross-sectional, the study setting was non-contrived, and an overt stance was adopted by the researchers.

A sample of 5,638 esports fans was used. These individuals were selected through a nonprobability purposive heterogeneous sampling method. Particularly, there was a purposeful selection of a diverse group of fans to ensure that the sample included as many unique fan perspectives as possible. To reach this diverse sample, a database was created and it comprised the 103 most popular esports games – at the time of the data collection. This database served as a guide to select the most relevant esports-related communities on Discord and Reddit – called Discord Channels and subreddits, respectively. Here we selected subreddits and Discord Channels related to one or more of the 103 games of the database. The focus was on Discord and Reddit because, according to Lee (2017), these are the two most used social websites by the videogame community. To create the database, the data from Newzoo (2020b) – which shows the 20 most viewed esports

games from January to May 2019 – was combined with the data from Esports Earnings (2020) – which shows the 100 esports games that have awarded the total highest prize money. Esports and Newzoo are commonly used by multiple researchers, like Owens (2016), Ströh (2017), Menasce (2019), Cunningham et al. (2018), Sylvester and Rennie (2017), Shabir (2017), and Jenny et al. (2018). Table 6.1 shows the aforesaid database.

Table 6.1 Most viewed and most prize money awarded to esports games

Esports videogames

<i>Tekken 7</i>	<i>PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds</i>
<i>Age of Empires II</i>	<i>Mobile</i>
<i>Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare</i>	<i>Halo 5: Guardians</i>
<i>Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3</i>	<i>Arena of Valor</i>
<i>World of Tanks</i>	<i>Shadowverse</i>
<i>Blade & Soul</i>	<i>Gwent</i>
<i>World of Warcraft</i>	<i>Paladins</i>
<i>Clash of Clans</i>	<i>Free Fire</i>
<i>Call of Duty: Black Ops 2</i>	<i>Guild Wars 2</i>
<i>Hearthstone</i>	<i>Super Smash Bros. Melee</i>
<i>Team Fortress 2</i>	<i>Dota 2</i>
<i>KartRider</i>	<i>Quake Champions</i>
<i>FIFA Online 3</i>	<i>rFactor 2</i>
<i>Ultra Street Fighter IV</i>	<i>Gears of War 4</i>
<i>Brawlhalla</i>	<i>Halo 2 Anniversary</i>
<i>SMITE</i>	<i>Injustice 2</i>
<i>CrossFire</i>	<i>FIFA 18</i>
<i>Pro Evolution Soccer 2017</i>	<i>F1 2019</i>
<i>Super Smash Bros. Ultimate</i>	<i>FIFA 17</i>
<i>iRacing.com</i>	<i>Pokémon: Let's Go, Pikachu! and Eevee!</i>
<i>Madden NFL 2018</i>	<i>StarCraft II</i>
<i>Halo: Reach</i>	<i>Dead or Alive 4</i>
<i>Halo: Combat Evolved</i>	<i>Quake III Arena</i>
<i>Old School Runescape</i>	<i>Call of Duty: Black Ops III</i>
<i>Fortnite</i>	<i>Project Gotham Racing 3</i>
<i>FIFA 19</i>	<i>Clash Royale</i>
<i>Turbo Racing League</i>	<i>Madden NFL 2017</i>
<i>Magic: The Gathering Arena</i>	<i>Super Street Fighter IV Arcade Edition</i>
<i>Defense of the Ancients</i>	<i>Rocket League</i>
<i>StarCraft: Brood War</i>	<i>Forza Motorsport 7</i>
<i>Counter-Strike: Global Offensive</i>	<i>Vainglory</i>
<i>World in Conflict</i>	<i>Street Fighter V</i>
<i>Counter-Strike Online</i>	<i>Call of Duty: Ghosts</i>
<i>Madden NFL 2013</i>	
<i>Mortal Kombat 11</i>	

<i>Pokémon Sword/Shield</i>	<i>FIFA 20</i>
<i>Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six: Siege</i>	<i>Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare</i>
<i>Mortal Kombat X</i>	<i>Attack on Titan Tribute Game</i>
<i>Magic: The Gathering Online</i>	<i>League of Legends</i>
<i>WarCraft III</i>	<i>PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds</i>
<i>Counter-Strike</i>	<i>Super Smash Bros. for Wii U</i>
<i>Call of Duty: Black Ops 4</i>	<i>TEPPEN</i>
<i>Quake Live</i>	<i>Apex Legends</i>
<i>Quake 4</i>	<i>Halo 3</i>
<i>Halo 4</i>	<i>NBA 2K18</i>
<i>Street Fighter V: Arcade Edition</i>	<i>Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare</i>
<i>Call of Duty: Modern Warfare</i>	<i>Call of Duty: Black Ops</i>
<i>Point Blank</i>	<i>Overwatch</i>
<i>Call of Duty: World War II</i>	<i>Halo 2</i>
<i>Heroes of Newerth</i>	<i>H1Z1</i>
<i>FIFA 13</i>	<i>Painkiller</i>
<i>Teamfight Tactics</i>	<i>Counter-Strike: Source</i>
	<i>Auto Chess</i>
	<i>Heroes of the Storm</i>

Note: Table based on the lists from Esports Earnings (2020) and Newzoo (2020b)

Since most esports fans have a high online affinity, a mostly closed-ended structured online questionnaire was used to collect the sample's data via self-recruitment and self-administration. Google Forms was used to develop this questionnaire, which is a popular online survey website suggested by various authors, including Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2018). In total, the requests and link to fill out the questionnaire on Google Forms were posted in 263 Discord Channels and in 392 subreddits. To ensure that only esports fans participated in the research, the first question of the survey was a simple yes/no filter item asking "Do you regularly watch and/or participate in esports?" and those who selected "No" were not able to fill out the remainder of the questionnaire. This survey was pretested on 167 esports fans in esports-related subreddits and Discord Channels from 14 April 2019 to 25 May 2019. As for the real empirical data collection, it was between 29 June 2019 and 3 December 2019. The unit of observation was the individual, and the unit of analysis was the organization. The demographic data from the sample can be viewed in Table 6.2.

It was observed that the demographic characteristics of the study's sample are representative of the general esports population since they are largely in line with the data from the literature. Specifically, 92.7% of the sample comprised males, which is extremely close to

Table 6.2 Esports fans' demographics

<i>N</i> = 5,638						
	<i>Valid</i>	<i>No answer</i>	<i>Valid (%)</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mode</i>
<i>Age</i>	5,412	226		23.05	6.062	18
<i>Gender</i>	5,560	78				
Female	407		7.3			
Male	5,153		92.7			
<i>Ethnicity</i>	5,477	161				
American Indian or Alaska Native	71		1.3			
Asian	824		15			
Black or African American	147		2.7			
Hispanic, Latino or Spanish origin	421		7.7			
Middle Eastern or North African	116		2.1			
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	38		.7			
White	4,255		77.7			
Other	197		3.6			
<i>Region</i>	5,553	85				
Africa	32		.6			
Asia	322		5.8			
Europe	1,860		33.5			
North America	3,013		54.3			
Oceania	191		3.4			
South America	135		2.4			
<i>Education</i>	5,497	141				
6th grade or less	11		.2			
7th to 12th grade	2,178		39.6			
Bachelor degree	2,332		42.4			
Master degree	525		9.6			
PhD	90		1.6			
Post-doctorate	16		.3			
Other	345		6.3			
<i>Employment status</i>	5,527	111				
Student	2,720		49.2			
Employed	2,293		41.5			
Homemaker	40		.7			
Unemployed	324		5.9			

Retired	17	.3
Other	133	2.4
<i>Marital status</i>	5,510	128
Single	4,056	73.6
Cohabiting	932	16.9
Married	480	8.7
Divorced	33	.6
Widowed	9	.2

Note: N = sample size, SD = standard deviation. For ethnicity, participants were able to select more than one option

the data from Billings, Rodgers, Rodgers, and Wiggins (2019), who indicate that 92.4% of them are male and it is also close to the data from Zolides (2015), who points out that 90% of them are male. The average age of the sample was 23.05, which is in line with the 18- to 25-years-old presented by Mooney (2018) and is close to the average age of 26 pointed out by Nielsen Esports (2017). Unfortunately, it was not possible to compare the remainder of the sample's demographic data because it is not thoroughly covered in the literature and academia.

Because of the minute literature and academic attention on the topic of esports sponsorships, the questionnaire of this research had as few questions as possible so that the small questionnaire would attract as many participants as possible and thus catapult the relevance and significance of the results. Quantitative data were analyzed with IBM SPSS Statistics 25 and qualitative data with NVivo 10. In order to abide by the social norms of anonymity, the participants were not asked for any personal data (e.g. name, email address, phone number).

Results

Figure 6.1 shows the frequencies of the data obtained by asking the question "Do you think society still has a negative perception of videogames?" The answer options to this closed-ended question were "No", "Yes, some people have negative views on videogames", and "Yes, most people have negative views on videogames". Overall, it is possible to observe that 95.7% (i.e. $n = 5,394/5,638$) of the sample feels that people have, to some extent, negative views on gaming, and that 4.3% (i.e. $n = 244/5,638$) believe that people do not have this adverse perception.

Figure 6.2 shows the frequencies of the data obtained by asking the question “Has society’s negative view on videogames ever led you to hide your interest for esports?” The answer options to this closed-ended question were “No”, “Yes, sometimes”, and “Yes, always”. This item was contingent to the filter question “Do you think society still has a negative perception of videogames?” Particularly, only the fans that selected “Yes, some people have negative views on videogames” or “Yes, most people have negative views on videogames” were eligible to answer it. Overall, it is possible to observe that 56.2% (i.e. $n = 3,031/5,394$) of the sample had to hide

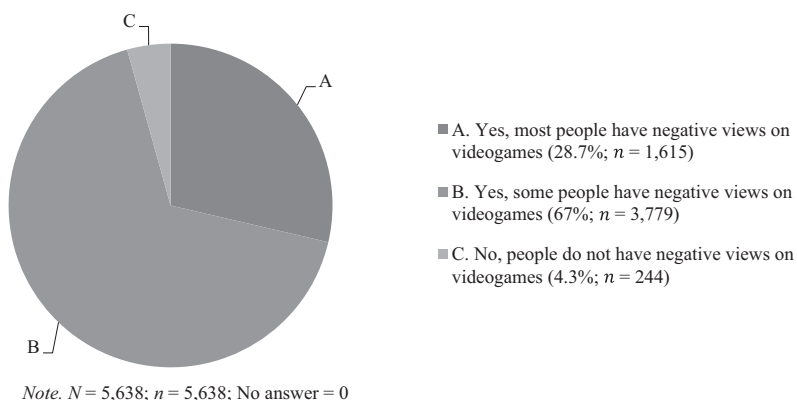


Figure 6.1 Society’s perception of videogames

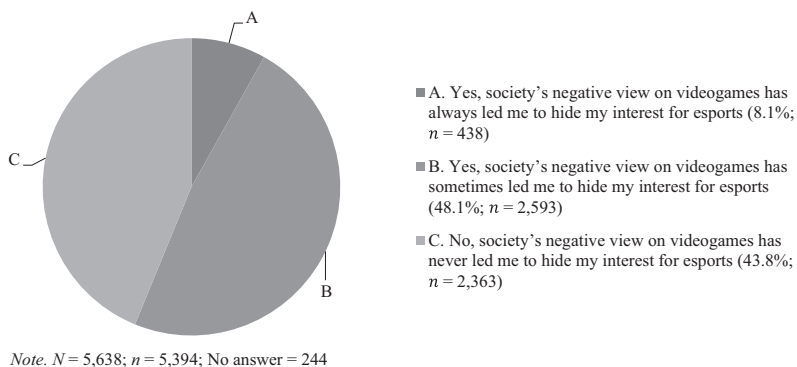


Figure 6.2 Society’s pressure to hide interest for competitive gaming

Table 6.3 Reasons that promote society's negative view on videogames

<i>Subtheme and quote</i>	<i>Fan ID</i>
Lack of acceptance of videogames and the need to better inform people	
“Video games are the future of entertainemtn and a huge money maker for sponsors and needs to be accepted asap”.	16
“The biggest thing that esports should be striving towards is gaming and esports acceptance. It’s still a huge problem for gaming that we just don’t have the image that is beneficial. If we could show people that everyone can be a gamer then esports will blossom into something beautiful”.	44
“Sponsors should be able to not only support a team, tournament, or organization, but also help increase viewership by marketing awareness of the game or team they sponsor outside of esports events, so that it (esports) loses the general stigma it has in the public’s eye”.	68
“Also possible avenue to better mainstream understanding/acceptance”.	69
“Sponsor and esport cooperation is necessary for the growth and wide spread acceptance of esports”.	75
“People should accept esports and video games more”.	102
“One problem that the e-sports community faces is the lack of acceptance of video games. People who aren’t interested in video games often look down ‘gamers’, and believe in the stereotype of unintelligent, angry, sweaty, unsocial, ultra nerdy, lazy, overweight, and misogynistic. If the public is shown how video games aren’t these evil things, and a majority of ‘gamers’ don’t match the stereotype, and acceptance of them is promoted it will entice more sponsors and help bring in more fans, even if they don’t play, like how a majority of sports fans don’t actually play the sport”.	108
“Once people are more accepting of esports, they will try it”.	173
“I think it’s sad that despite the tremendous amount of work this industry can demand, and despite how exclusive it can be for people who aren’t skillful players, people who participate in it don’t always get a fair shake as would anyone with any other 9-5 job”.	186
“Sponsors should not be the main way to get acceptance from society”.	190
“I would like more sponsorships for non-meta games (like <i>fi/a</i> mobile) and acceptance of e-gamer as a profession”.	200
“Especially creating a positive view from society to esports”.	203

(Continued)

<i>Subtheme and quote</i>	<i>Fan ID</i>
"As is, it's going to be extremely hard to get the average person to accept esports as a valid career choice".	208
"I think that once esports is widely accepted like other sports more sponsors will buy into esports".	216
"I love esports but I get mocked for doing what I love".	244
"I generally would like to see more acceptance in the public eye for especially from the older generation".	259
"If the sponsors are there only for the money, it doesn't really help esports that much in terms of popularity and acceptance".	292
"Also promoting video games as a sport and hobby from these sponsors would be important. Change the views of the public when it comes to video games".	293
"Esports is never going to catch on with older generations".	407
"ESports and video games not being considered a real sport or a joke and being laughed about is one of the main problems I often face/see. They aren't treated in the same way as physical sports".	410
Gaming addiction	
"We also need to make sure that people are educated on how to use gaming and e-sports effectively, to better their lives, rather than let them destroy themselves with addiction and the like".	14
"I really think videogames and especially E-sports have a bad influence on youth, with the dazzling prize money and huge sponsoring, it gives children the illusion that with enough practice you could be a pro, and a lot of kids fall into that trap and waste their time, forgetting it's only a game after all".	113
<i>Virtual violence</i>	
"Studies have shown that video games do not equal aggressiveness and irritableness on a large enough scale to be concerning and a lot of schools are scared to add games like that for fear of being sued I feel like".	294
"In the US/society it's video games make school shooters' garbage. I think that if brands took more initiative to do stories on players and the games themselves it would make them more relatable and people would see it's not all the stereotypes of 'skinny white male with no friends school shooter' or 'fat neckbeard dude in his 30s living in their moms basement'".	312

their interest for competitive gaming to some extent, and that 43.8% (i.e. $n = 2,363/5,394$) never felt pressured to hide this interest.

The last question of the questionnaire was an open-ended and optional item asking “Would you like to add anything else about what was addressed in this survey?” Here, 24 fans provided answers connected to the topic of study. Table 6.3 shows the complete or partial quotes from these individuals. The quotes are arranged by reasons that promote society’s negative view on videogames.

Discussion

The data confirmed H_1 that the negative public view on videogames is a threat to the sponsors of esports. According to the sample, most fans (i.e. 67%; $n = 3,779/5,638$) feel that some people possess negative views on videogames and a smaller, but still significant group (i.e. 28.7%; $n = 1,615/5,638$) believes that most individuals have these negative perspectives. Ergo, this implies that almost every single fan (i.e. 95.7%; $n = 5,394/5,638$) feels that society has negative views on videogames and just a very small number of fans (i.e. 4.3%; $n = 244/5,638$) does not feel that society possesses these adverse opinions. Going into greater detail, from the subsample that feels that people have negative views on videogames (i.e. 95.7%; $n = 5,394/5,638$), over half (i.e. 56.2%; $n = 3,031/5,394$) have felt pressured to conceal, to some extent, their interest for competitive gaming from society. Particularly, over half (i.e. 48.1%; $n = 2,593/5,394$) have, at least sometimes, had to hide their interest and a small number (i.e. 8.1%; $n = 438/5,394$) feel that they have been forced to always hide their interest for esports. Nevertheless, almost half of this subsample (i.e. 43.8%; $n = 2,363/5,394$) have never felt pressured to hide their interest for esports from society.

Overall, almost every esports fan feels that society has, to a certain degree, adverse perceptions on videogames and that, from these, over half have felt pressured to hide this interest for competitive gaming. Also, the sample’s open-ended answers showed that fans feel that society wrongly believes that videogames promote aggressiveness. Likewise, fans largely commented on how society has a high lack of acceptance of gaming and that efforts should go into better educating them to not believe in the unfounded and adverse rumors that have continuously haunted the videogame industry and that, instead, they should be educated on the benefits of gaming. This was the most common argument. Still, fans agreed that esports and gaming can, in fact, cause addiction and that, to avoid this, effective preventive measures should be applied.

The empirical data was largely in line with the literature. The sample's data was in sync with Taylor (2012), Tavinor (2009), Shabir (2017), Peša et al. (2017), Newman (2008), Li (2016), Hilvoorde (2016), Franke (2015), Brookey and Oates (2015), and AEEVI (2018), who point out that society usually has a negative perception of videogames, and with Peša et al. (2017), who indicates that videogames are not well accepted by some people. Multiple fans, as well as Ströh (2017), Shabir (2017), Scholz (2010a), Newman (2008), and Hilvoorde (2016), stated that society usually believes that gaming promotes real-world violence.

Interestingly, although Tavinor (2009), Shabir (2017), Scholz (2010b), Newman (2008), and Ackerman (2016) point out that society wrongly believes that gaming promotes addiction, Fan ID 14 and 113 commented that they feel that videogames can be addictive to some individuals and that suitable preventive measures should be applied. These comments are in sync with Shabir (2017), who states that multiple studies have shown that excessive gaming can lead to addiction.

Fan ID 108 as well as Peša et al. (2017), Newman (2008), Liboriussen and Martin (2016), and Brookey and Oates (2015) mentioned that society thinks that gaming promotes antisocial behaviors and isolation. Fan ID 108 also commented that society sees gamers as nerds, and this is in sync with the data from Taylor (2012) and Li (2016). Lastly, AEEVI (2018) as well as Fan ID 186, 200, 208, 244, and 410 mentioned that society does not take seriously people who turn gaming into a career.

Conclusions

The overall findings carry significant and highly relevant implications for all current, and potential, esports sponsors that wish to obtain a better understanding of how the negative public view on gaming can negatively affect their brands. As Newman (2008) indicates, since its creation, society has negatively perceived gaming. Therefore, it is only logical for consumer brands to be hesitant to connect their companies with esports and this research showed that this hesitation is justified.

There is the ever-present risk of the sponsoring brand being damaged by a negative brand image transfer, and this threat becomes even greater if the brand is sponsoring violent videogames or if there have been any real-world acts of violence. If, in the recent years, there have been real-world acts of violence in the country where the esports tournament is taking place, then the danger of the sponsor's image being

negatively affected catapults. Esports sponsors should be especially watchful of this latter detail. Also, despite multiple scientific articles showing that videogames do not promote aggressive behaviors, and although the most serious or large-scale incidents of violence across the world are not linked to gaming, the companies that sponsor violent videogames can still suffer from collateral damage and have their brand image damaged. Because of this, companies that sponsor non-violent videogames are much less prone to suffer from this threat. Nevertheless, it is better for brands to not publicly criticize violent videogames because this may lead esports fans to develop a negative perception of the company.

This does not mean that companies that just focus on the sponsoring of non-violent games are protected from being negatively perceived by society. The stigma around gaming is so pervasive that just being associated with any kind of videogame can be detrimental. Thus, it is suggested that brands base their decision to sponsor esports on two elements. First, brands should bear in mind their target audience. If the brand is endemic to esports and gaming, then it will not be much affected by this threat because their only consumers are gaming and esports fans, not the general public who has a negative opinion on videogames. Even if society in general becomes aware that this brand is sponsoring esports, and develops a negative perception of the company, the brand will not be affected because these individuals would never buy any of the company's products despite it sponsoring esports or not. In terms of non-endemic companies (i.e. those that target both gaming fans and the general public), a careful consideration should go into determining if esports fans constitute an audience attractive enough to justify taking this risk and if the countries where their most lucrative target audiences reside tend to have adverse perceptions of gaming. Second, brands should bear in mind their partners, investors, and shareholders. If the company's business connections value modernity, as well as current and up-to-date trends, the sponsoring competitive gaming is prone to catapult how positively these business partners perceive the brand. However, if the company's business connections do not value any of these elements, much less gaming, then it may be better to not associate with esports.

Despite the risks, and just like multiple authors and fans mentioned, esports and gaming in general are starting to become more accepted by society. It is true that, at this time, companies that sponsor competitive gaming are likely to be, to some extent, negatively perceived for associating themselves with videogames, but the seriousness of the dangers that accompany this threat are steadily decreasing.

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