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# Esports Sponsorships: The Double-Edged Sword Effect of Having a Very Vocal Audience

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**Abstract.** Esports fans have been known for being heavy consumers of competitive gaming content and for being digital natives who love to comment about esports on numerous social platforms. This has attracted various sponsors interested in capitalizing in this social buzz. However, there have been signs that this high vocality can in fact heavily damage several sponsors. Hence, this research aimed to determine if esports fans' high vocality is a benefit and/or a risk to these sponsors. To achieve this, we adopted a qualitative exploratory design to interview, via digital platforms, 10 esports sponsorship experts. In total, we interviewed two endemic and three non-endemic esports sponsors and five marketing agencies with experience in esports sponsorships. They were sampled via a nonprobability purposive heterogeneous method and were reached via the companies' website contact sections. Data were analyzed with the assistance of NVivo 10. The overall results showed that all experts agreed that this high vocality can both benefit and damage esports sponsors. The uniformity in the answers showed that this element is not a greater benefit or risk to a particular type of esports sponsor. Ergo we considered that the high vocality of esports fans is a double-edged sword. This study is necessary because, despite esports' massive growth, this field has received scant scientific attention, with the specific areas of esports marketing and esports sponsorships being even more severely overlooked. Besides, from a business standpoint, the findings are highly significant for every sponsor looking to better comprehend esports and its fanbase.

**Keywords:** Esports, Sponsorships, Consumer behavior, Market analysis, Marketing.

## 1 Introduction

Electronic sports (esports) are professionally organized videogame competitions where highly skilled gamers – commonly dubbed as *pro-players* or *pro-gamers* – compete [1] to earn prestige, money, prizes, etc. [2]. Just like water sports, esports is a collective term. That is, it is comprised of a large number of disciplines (i.e. videogames) and a competition can feature various tournaments of different games [3]. The

competitions are divided into numerous tiers of professionalism [4], including amateur [5], high-tier amateur, and professional [6]. While most low tier competitions are held via the internet, with players competing from their residences [7], high-tier and popular tournaments are carried out in large spaces, like major arenas, where enthusiastic fans gather to personally watch their favorite pro-gamers compete in eye-catching matches that are also streamed over the internet [8].

Although esports only started gaining popularity in the beginning of the 2010s [3], they have, in a very short time [1], become a worldwide phenomenon [9]. Competitive gaming has already been recognized as an official sport in South Korea and several western countries are following suit [9]. Esports has only now reached this threshold because information and communication technologies just recently reached a state where streaming and social networking have become accessible to the general consumer [10]. Now, competitive gaming is, not only the world's fastest-growing sport [11], but also one of the fastest-growing industries overall [4]. Their high economic significance [1] allied with their large international reach [12] and popularity has attracted the attention of numerous consumer brands who now view it as an important marketing channel [13]. Ergo, just in 2016, over 600 sponsorship[1] contracts were signed [1]. Among the most popular esports sponsors, there are brands like Microsoft, Samsung, Red Bull [15], Vodafone, Coca-Cola [3], Paris Saint-German, Nissan, Google, Manchester City, Audi, and Sony [1].

There are numerous benefits that are attracting sponsors to esports. One of the main benefits sponsors seek to obtain is an increased brand awareness [3]. Specifically, sponsors have been attracted by esports' massive audience [3]. In 2020, it is estimated there were 495 million esports fans and this number is expected to increase to 646 million by 2023 [16; 17], a value much higher than the whole NFL audience and in line with the fan-bases of other popular sports [1]. And this audience has been increasing between 10.4% and 12.3% per year [16]. Competitive gaming is filling out entire football stadiums [3] and receiving higher viewership levels than the highest-profile events in sports. For instance, while 1.7 million people tuned in to WatchESPN to see Germany face the United States in the 2014 Football World Championship [13], 46 million people tuned into Twitch and YouTube to watch the Intel Extreme Masters esports tournament in Katowice [18]. Another benefit sponsors seek to attain is increased sales [4]. It has been found that esports fans have an above-average income [3] and are compulsive buyers, early adopters [4], and influencers of the buying behavior of technology-related products [3]. Furthermore, this market was estimated to be worth 1.34 billion US dollars in 2020 [19] and this value has been increasing roughly 9.7% per year [20]. An additional benefit esports sponsors obtain is a surprising general acceptance of sponsorships [3]. Unlike other industries where sponsorship activities are under the risk of being perceived as unwanted or intrusive [21], esports fans have shown to understand that esports cannot survive without spon-

[1] According to the International Chamber of Commerce [14], a sponsorship is a mutually beneficial commercial partnership where an entity (i.e. a sponsor) provides funding, or another type of support, to a second entity (i.e. the sponsored party) to acquire the right to associate its image, brands, and products with the second entity through promotional activations.

sors [3]. Hence, there is a general positivism around esports sponsorships [22]. This dependency also gives rise to the benefit of it being much cheaper to sponsor esports than most sports [4] and to the benefit of the brands that sponsor esports acquiring an improved brand image. This latter benefit arises from the fact that fans perceive esports sponsors as supporters of the fragile industry they love [1].

Besides these appealing benefits, it has also been assumed that esports fans' intimate connection with digital media can have a significant positive effect on esports sponsors [1]. This is because their main demographics – millennials and generation Z – are known for having a very high online affinity. Esports fans and gamers have come together in multiple e-communities that reside in various social media, forums, websites, and other channels like in-game guilds and clans. These communities have developed into an ecosystem where any gamer can very swiftly meet, communicate, and share esports content [3]. In essence, esports fans can be perceived as digital natives [1; 3]. Unlike the preconceptions of old, which saw gamers as friendless lone introverts who would shy away from any kind of social contact [23], this audience, in fact, actively seeks social interactions and loves meeting new people and belonging to a community [24].

The truth is that esports fans are extremely vocal [25; 26]. They love to interact with one another and even with the general gaming fans who might not be into esports [1]. Data shows that 51% of esports fans chat with other gamers on a regular basis and that 69% make use of social platforms while gaming [26]. The main promoter of this high vocality is esports' intimate connection with the internet. Almost all esports-related social activity happens on social networks [27]. Streams of esports events feature integrated chats that allow fans to communicate and interact with one another and even with the streamers themselves. This means that fans actively participate in the event and are immersed in the experience [28]. Another element that catapults this high vocality is the fans' love for esports [4]. The fans are very deeply engaged and highly attached and passionate about esports [3]. During offline tournaments, it is common for esports fans to wear their favorite team's apparel, cheer, and wave flags [13]. A study found that 63.4% of fans consume 5 to 10 hours of esports content per week and another one concluded that roughly two-thirds of esports fans consider esports watching to be their most important hobby, and some even see it as their passion [3]. This high involvement makes them a very valuable consumer target from a marketing perspective [3; 29]. In fact, one of the main reasons why sponsors have entered esports is because they want to reach this passionate audience [30]. The attractiveness of this audience is also catapulted by the fact that roughly one-fifth of esports fans enjoy following esports sponsors activities on social platforms [22]. It is because of this that some brands prefer to sponsor a pro-player that is very social and constantly interacts with its audience over someone who is a better player [31]. A pro-gamer who is very social will also promote his sponsors more to his hundreds of thousands of enthusiastic fans [13].

In essence, esports fans love to use a plethora of social platforms (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and Reddit) to talk about esports and this heavy communication creates a buzz that significantly increases the sponsors' presence in social and digital media [22]. However, having a very vocal audience can also bring about

some risks to sponsors, like being much more susceptible to backlashes [4] and extreme criticism [13]. Because of the issues of this ambivalent dichotomy, this research aimed to determine if esports fans' high vocality is a benefit and/or a risk to esports sponsors. In other words, this study sought to answer the research question: How does esports fans' high vocality affect esports sponsors? This study is necessary because, despite esports' massive growth [29], this field has received scant scientific attention [29; 32; 33; 34], with the specific area of esports marketing [28; 29; 35] and esports sponsorships being even more severely overlooked [3; 36; 37; 38].

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 The Benefits of Having a Very Vocal Audience

Multiple sponsors have entered the esports scene with the intent of capitalizing on the fans' high vocality and were very successful. For example, when sponsoring the professional team Astralis, Audi noticed that just the media exposure caused by the fans' buzz on social media was worth more than 10 times what the brand had initially invested. And this was just during one edition of the DreamHack and ELEAGUE tournaments. Even more impressive was that 82% of the buzz had come from only the ELEAGUE event. This was largely because Astralis had a terrific performance and won the tournament [22].

Esports sponsors have been able to reach millions of fans on social media like Facebook and Twitter on a daily basis [13]. This is mainly because of esports fans' constant use of social platforms to talk about gaming and esports [22]. Instead of just reading tournament or pro-player posts, or information about them, fans prefer to show their support in much more visible ways, like through social media. This, in turn, creates a lot of buzz and exposure around esports entities and the brands that sponsor them [4]. Whenever fans witness an exciting moment in a match they immediately comment about it on various chats and forums. This propagates the excitement, which in turn boosts esports' viewership levels [25]. All of the hype that the propagation of these messages creates is very attractive for sponsors as it provides them with a large reach in a hyped-up environment. By reaching fans when their emotions are exponentially high, sponsors also benefit from positive brand image transfer [4].

This aspect of positive association has been given further relevance by a joint research between the consultancy agency Accesso and the Asociación Española de Videojuegos (AEVI) which revealed that 98% of all esports-related communications on social media have a positive sentiment (i.e. acceptance, support, gratitude, etc.) and just 2% portray negative emotions. This is a highly significant contrast to the common communication dynamics of general social media which show much higher toxicity. According to AEVI, this abundance of positive emotions is one of the primary reasons why so many sponsors have entered the esports scene [27].

Since these fans like to talk about esports and all aspects related to it [4], this also means that they are important influencers of their social environments. Their capability of influencing other people's buying behavior means, that by sponsoring esports,

brands are reaching, not only the core fan-base, but also a much larger consumer group [13]. On average, an esports fan influences the buying behavior of technology products of at least four family members or friends [3; 13]. Interestingly, some sponsors have indicated that what they seek the most in esports is not a boost in sales. Instead, they wish to build their brand with the help of this community's enthusiastic buzz [31]. And, as the esports community grows, they are becoming increasingly more vocal, which in turn creates even more opportunities for brands [4]. Based on these arguments, we propose the following:

**$H_{1a}$:** The high vocality of esports fans is a benefit to esports sponsors.

### 2.2 The Risks of Having a Very Vocal Audience

Esports fans are extremely critical [13]. So much so that any sponsor who communicates with them without a profound esports knowledge is under the risk of being heavily criticized [26]. For instance, fans will frown upon any sponsor that seems to only be interested in making a sale [37]. The critical nature of esports fans means that brands must enter esports with caution since poor activations can result in severe brand damage and negative ROIs [13]. Because of this, it is vital that sponsors learn about the esports culture and its fans [22; 26]. Still, even sponsors with esports knowledge can be heavily criticized. For instance, Bud Light decided to create a pro-team called Bud Light All-Stars by asking fans to choose pro-players from a selection they presented [1]. The act of involving esports fans with sponsorship activations and allowing them to participate has shown to increase their overall satisfaction with the brand [4]. However, the sponsor was strongly criticized and even accused of only being interested in acquiring popular brand ambassadors rather than strictly building a strong team [1].

The high vocality is also affecting esports women. There have been several instances of women facing brutal online chats with asinine messages that range from scary to outright rage [4]. Kelly "kellyMILKIES" Ong, is one of the many examples of female pro-players who even received photoshopped pictures with her face on naked bodies or images showing her being raped or murdered [39]. This discredits the professionalism of the esports scene and puts the brands that sponsor it in a risky situation [4].

Esports fans can be quite brutal and rude with their language. One study that analyzed various esports-related chats, forums, and websites found a plethora of tweets and posts containing homophobia, misogyny, harassment, transphobia, general hate, and even death and rape threats, as well as threats of physical violence [40]. However, it is not only the fans that use inappropriate language. There have been pro-gamers who did the same, like Jake "orb" Sklarew and Greg "IdrA" Fields, who started using offensive language. This led a large number of fans to organize campaigns and complain to their sponsors. The fan criticism was so voracious that the sponsors had to fire the pro-players [39].

Esports fans can easily generate backlashes against anything they disagree with. An example of this occurred in 2014 during the finals of *CS:GO* at DreamHack. During the event, team Fnatic exploited a glitch that allowed them to easily shoot all ad-

versaries in the entire map and win the match. However, after being caught, instead of pleading guilty, Fnatic accused the opposing team of also exploiting glitches. This resulted in DreamHack announcing that the finals had to be repeated. But this created a lot of controversies and led the very vocal fans to inundate several social channels with heavy backlashes against Fnatic and its sponsors. The fan backlash was so strong that Fnatic was forced to give up the tournament [4]. According to Ströh [3], these fan backlashes are a threat to esports sponsors.

Also, whenever a sponsored pro-player loses a match, the sponsor will suffer from negative brand image transfer and lose credibility [31], especially because of the negative comments that will spread over the internet about the pro-player's defeat and how the sponsors may be partially to blame [4]. In the same vein, poorly organized tournaments will result in the events' main sponsor being heavily criticized. For instance, during the 2007 grand finals of the World Cyber Games – whose main sponsor was Samsung – the fans saw Song "Stork" Byung Goo exploiting a glitch to win the game, but the referees did not notice this, and before the referees became aware of the situation, Stork's opponent gave up the match. This generated a severe uproar among the fans and heavy commentary among esports reporters. The discussion became so profound that it caught the attention of multiple South Korean general media, which led to a further spreading of the issues caused in a major tournament sponsored by Samsung. As of today, the event is still recalled as an aberration. Another way that the sponsor can be heavily criticized is when the products they bring to the event malfunction. For example, there have been several instances of sponsor monitors turning off during esports matches and, unfortunately, these incidents are not forgotten. They go on to be deeply criticized by the fans on various online communities. A different issue that goes on to be heavily discussed by fans and can damage the sponsor's image is when a tournament does not give the winners the prize money. This is an issue that has become commonplace in several esports tournaments and has put the image of both the tournament organizers and sponsors at risk [41]. All of these issues led us to propose the following:

**$H_{1b}$:** The high vocality of esports fans is a risk to esports sponsors.

## 3 Methodology

To reach the goal of this research, we adopted a qualitative exploratory design. An overt stance was used in a non-contrived setting and in a cross-sectional time horizon. The sample was composed of 10 esports sponsorship experts. Specifically, two endemic esports sponsors (EESs), three non-endemic esports sponsors (NEESs), and five marketing agencies (MAs) that worked in the field of esports sponsorships. Only one expert in esports sponsorships was contacted for each of these organizations. These individuals were sampled via a nonprobability purposive expert heterogeneous methodology. Specifically, there was a deliberate selection of a diverse group of individuals with large amounts of knowledge and experience in esports sponsorships. To ensure these organizations had been working with esports sponsorships for a relevant

amount of time, only organizations with at least two years of experience in esports sponsorships were contacted. The sample was reached by contacting the organization's marketing departments or directors via the companies' website contact sections or by sending them an email to the addresses in the aforementioned sections. Both the unit of analysis and the unit of observation was the organization.

The empirical data was gathered via an interview with each expert. In the interviews, besides asking questions on the company's characteristics, the experts were asked to answer the open-ended question "How beneficial and/or harmful do you believe the esports fans' high vocality can be for esports sponsors?" The interviews were mostly held on Skype, with some being conducted on other digital platforms (i.e. Microsoft Teams and Zoom) at the request of some interviewees. Prior to starting the interviews, the questionnaire was pretested between 14 April 2019 and 21 May 2019 on nine individuals with expertise in the areas of management, marketing, and general scientific research. Afterwards, the empirical data collection began on 15 August 2019 and ended on 12 December 2019. The data were analyzed with the assistance of the computer software NVivo 10. To comply with the confidentiality norms of social research, all sensitive data that could allow the research subjects to be identified (e.g. company name, exact year of foundation, etc.) were either modified or not included in the study.

Regarding the specifics of the sample members, EES1 was founded in the 1980s and operates internationally in the gaming retail industry. EES1 has been sponsoring esports for two years, has sponsored roughly nine esports entities, and has been connected to roughly seven esports videogames. The interviewee's position within EES1 was of head of partnerships.

EES2 was founded in the 2010s and operates internationally in the gaming chair industry. EES2 has been sponsoring esports for roughly seven years, has sponsored roughly 44 esports entities, and has been connected to roughly 41 esports videogames. The interviewee's position within EES2 was of country general manager in the United Kingdom, Brazil, Spain, and Portugal.

NEES1 was founded in the 2010s and operates internationally in the industry of consumer electronics (with special focus on smartphones, phone cases, and headphones). NEES1 has been sponsoring esports for three years, has sponsored roughly four esports entities, and has been connected to roughly 11 esports videogames. The interviewee's position within NEES1 was of head of global brand partnerships.

NEES2 was founded in the 1920s and operates nationally (i.e. in the USA) in the insurance industry. NEES2 has been sponsoring esports for two years, has sponsored roughly 12 esports entities, and has been connected to roughly six esports videogames. The interviewee's position within NEES2 was of director of marketing, media, and sponsorships.

NEES3 was founded in the 1990s and operates nationally (i.e. in the USA) in the craft beer and brewing industry. NEES3 has been sponsoring esports for two years, has sponsored roughly 14 esports entities, and has been connected to roughly six esports videogames. The interviewee's position within NEES3 was of community, partnerships, sponsorships, and major events manager.

MA1 was founded in the 2000s and operates internationally by exclusively providing marketing advice in the esports and videogames sector. MA1 has been connected to esports for approximately 11 years, has assisted roughly 100 esports sponsors, and has been connected to roughly 35 esports videogames. The interviewee's position within MA1 was of founder and director.

MA2 was founded in the 2010s and operates internationally by exclusively providing marketing advice in the esports and videogames sector. MA2 has been connected to esports for two years, has assisted roughly 40 esports sponsors, and has been connected to roughly 39 esports videogames. The interviewee's position within MA2 was of founder and director.

MA3 was founded in the 2010s and operates internationally by exclusively providing marketing advice in the esports and videogames sector. MA3 has been connected to esports for two years, has assisted roughly 100 esports sponsors, and has been connected to roughly nine esports videogames. The interviewee's position within MA3 was of founder and director.

MA4 was founded in the 1990s and operates internationally by providing marketing advice in various sectors, including esports and videogames. MA4 has been connected to esports for approximately four years, has assisted roughly 15 esports sponsors, and has been connected to roughly 15 esports videogames. The interviewee's position within MA4 was of account director and esports specialist.

MA5 was founded in the 2000s and operates internationally by exclusively providing marketing advice in the esports and videogames sector. MA5 has been connected to esports for approximately six years, has assisted roughly 50 esports sponsors, and has been connected to roughly 43 esports videogames. The interviewee's position within MA5 was of senior market analyst and esports specialist.

## 4 Results and Discussion

The overall results confirmed $H_{1a}$ and $H_{1b}$, meaning that the high vocality of esports fans is both a benefit and a risk to esports sponsors. The empirical data showed that all experts agreed that this high vocality can benefit sponsors and that all also agreed that it can damage them. This showed that there was no difference in opinions between the different members of the sample (i.e. EESs, NEESs, and MAs). Hence, the data did not point to this being a greater benefit or risk to either endemic or non-endemic sponsors. Ergo we considered that the high vocality of esports fans is a double-edged sword for all types of esports sponsors.

The experts provided very insightful commentaries. Regarding the benefits of high vocality, it was stressed that fans will show highly positive reactions when brands correctly carry out a sponsorship. Amongst the favorable responses, MA5 stated that brands can expect "really big positive language and positive sentiment . . . in online communities, on social media, etc. . . . It's an improved brand image". This shows how the high vocality of a happy community that makes heavy use of digital platforms can significantly benefit the sponsor. Similarly, MA4 indicated that there was a tournament sponsored by DHL that the fans loved so much that they even started

chanting “DHL! DHL! DHL!” at the stadium. This shows an unprecedented love for brands that carry out well-coordinated sponsorships. The response of MA4 is pretty much in line with EES1, who provided one of the most relevant responses from all the experts by stating that the esports fan-base shows more support and love for the sponsors than the communities of almost any other sport or sponsored area.

A number of experts indicated some suggestions and tactics to correctly activate the sponsorships and make the most out of the positive aspects of this high vocality. Particularly, it was stressed that sponsors should thoroughly study esports (MA3) and the fan-base before signing any sort of contract (MA5). It is imperative that the sponsorship is relevant (MA3) and authentic (NEES1). Specifically, the promotions must resonate with fans (MA5) and show that the brand cares and is passionate about esports and that it truly wants to be a part of competitive gaming (NEES1).

Concerning the dangers of high vocality, the experts pointed out that sponsorships must be very carefully planned as some brand actions can easily result in extremely negative fan reactions. Amongst these, EES1 gave examples of fans who boycotted esports sponsors. EES2, NEES2, NEES3, and MA4 noted that there have been several instances of sponsors who suffered from strong verbal backlashes from the fan-base on multiple social media and forums. Similarly, MA2 indicated that some esports communities were even completely outraged at the sponsors. MA1 and MA2 stressed that a large number of fans can become so angry at some sponsors that they will do all they can to damage the brand and its image. According to MA2, one example of this is through the creation of damaging memes based on the sponsor or on people that work for the brand. MA2 also made the very important remark that, because this audience is deeply socially connected, they will never forget the sponsors’ wrongdoings or mistakes. They will do all they can do burn the sponsors’ image to the ground and will not give up that easily or so soon. NEES1, NEES2, and MA2 reported that the negative communications about the sponsor will possibly spread and lead both the esports fans and some of the general gaming audience to develop a resistance to the sponsorship actions of the brands they are not happy with.

Several experts indicated some of the sponsor actions that lead fans to spread negative communications about the brand. These include: communicating or presenting views that are not in line with the community’s general opinion (EES1), being unauthentic (NEES1), poorly activating a sponsorship or advertisement (NEES1; MA1; MA2; MA5), showing a lack of knowledge about esports and its fan-base and a lack of interest in learning about them, and appearing like an overly commercial brand whose only goal is the selling of products and services (MA3). Figure 1 shows how esports fans generally react to correct and poor sponsorship activations.

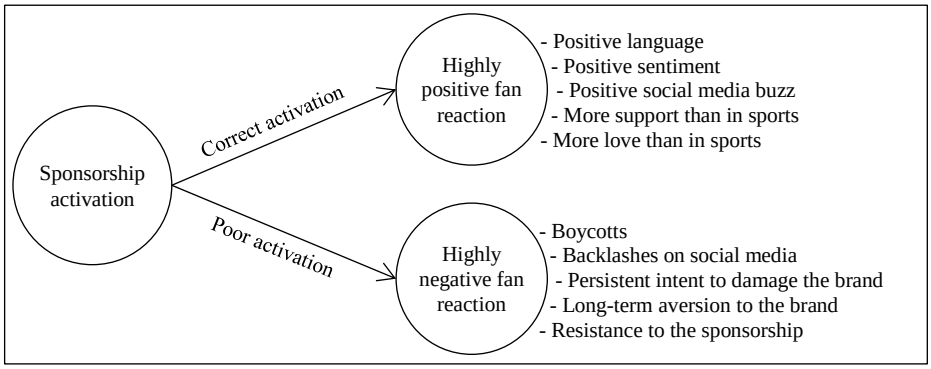


**Fig. 1.** Esports fans' reactions to correct and poor sponsorship activations

EES2 also pointed out that, sometimes, it is very difficult for a sponsor to not anger the fan-base and be negatively affected by their high vocality. EES2 gave the example that whenever a sponsored player is involved in a controversy, the brand must cancel the sponsorship to avoid being seen as a supporter of disrespectful behavior by the fans. However, while this will calm some fans, it may also lead others to criticize the sponsor for canceling a sponsorship for minor reasons and contributing to esports' high volatility. In a similar example, EES2 also reported that fans often heavily criticize brands that sponsor female pro-gamers by saying that the brand is exploiting women by using them to call the attention of male esports fans. However, whenever a brand refuses to sponsor a female pro-gamer, the brand is also harshly criticized for being misogynistic. Figure 2 illustrates these two examples of when a negative fan reactions cannot be avoided.

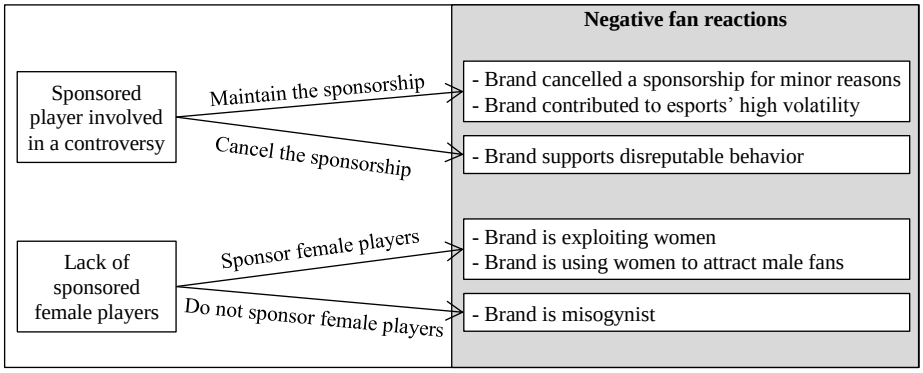


**Fig. 2.** Instances where negative fan reactions cannot be avoided

A large number of similarities were found between the empirical data and the literature. In terms of the benefits of high vocality, EES1 and MA5 were somewhat in sync with AEVI [27], who indicated that 98% of esports-related communications on social platforms have a positive connotation, which is largely above the general sentiment

found on social media where negative communications are far more prevalent. Just like these experts, AEVI also noted that this positivism is one of the main reasons why sponsors are attracted to esports. Similarly, EES1, MA4, and MA5 were in accordance with CGC Europe [13] and Ströh [3], who pointed out that esports fans are highly involved and emotive. These same experts were also in line with BI Intelligence and Elder [12], Franke [29], and Nielsen Esports [22], who defended that esports fans are very passionate and engaged.

Regarding the negative side of high vocality, EES2, NEES2, NEES3, and MA4 were in sync with Nichols [26] and Winnan [4], who stressed that esports fans can be extremely harsh in their high vocality. Particularly, Nichols [26] defended that sponsoring esports without a deep knowledge of the sector will probably anger the fan-base and result in heavy criticism. And Winnan [4], pointed out that an angry esports fan-base can easily flood various social platforms with heavy backlashes against brands. Similarly, EES2, NEES2, NEES3, MA1, MA2, and MA4 were in line with CGC Europe [13], who reported how exceedingly critical esports fans can be.

### 4.1 Managerial Implications

From a business standpoint, the findings are highly significant for every brand with an interest in sponsoring esports as well as for those looking to comprehend how the esports fans' high vocality might positively or negatively affect them. It is imperative that esports sponsors come to terms with the fact that they are entering a field of highly passionate individuals and that they will be touching on something deeply loved by a large and hyper socially-connected audience. Hence, and as stressed by MA1, depending on how the sponsorship is conducted, "the audience will love you or hate you." Despite there being a large fan-base and reports of an abundance of positive sentiment on esports-related fan communications, sponsors have to understand that, as MA4 indicated, "the advantage of having a highly engaged community also brings the disadvantage of having a very protective community." Just like EES2 indicated, the fans can "make your social media increase and decrease as they please, both in terms of followers and in making posts go viral, etc." In essence, the highly vocally of the esports fan-base, which is promoted by their high engagement, passion, and heavy use of social media, has a strong influence over the sponsorships' success and the brands' ROIs, like brand image, awareness, and sales.

The fans' heavy commentary means that it is vital that brands interested in sponsoring esports carefully study it before engaging with the scene. The sponsors with a high understanding of the fan-base and general competitive gaming will be much more likely to activate sponsorships that are in sync with the community's desires and will be able to naturally integrate into the scene. As a result, the fan-base will have a highly positive response to the sponsors' activations. Ergo, taking the time to thoroughly figure out esports and its fan-base, focusing on relevancy and authenticity, showing love and interest for competitive gaming, and performing activations that truly resonate with fans are key elements to benefit from the fan-base's high vocality and reap ROIs like positive fan sentiment, improved brand image, brand loyalty, and increased sales and awareness.

Notwithstanding the aforementioned tactics, sponsors must still be wary. Particularly, brands must make sure their advertisements do not contradict nor offend the fan-base opinions and views and avoid being seen as self-centered sponsors whose only interest is selling. Furthermore, sponsors must be careful so that angered esports fans do not flood their social media pages with hateful comments. Firstly, because this may lead the general consumers to develop negative impressions of the brand due to seeing a large number of people angry at the brand. And secondly, if people outside the esports sphere take notice of esports fans' occasional rude language and views, the image of the brands that sponsor this industry may be heavily damaged. Although rude and disrespectful language might be commonplace in social media, if the general consumer becomes aware that a brand is supporting what is supposed to be a professional industry where both pro-gamers and fans make use of offensive language, it may negatively affect their views of the brand.

It is also advised to thoroughly ponder which entities the brand should start or stop sponsoring. As EES2 indicated, several sponsors will be faced with situations where basically any brand decision will anger some fans. EES2 also stressed that, while sports entities are mostly safe to sponsor, esports entities must always be closely watched by their sponsors due to their youth, professional inexperience, and higher chance of engaging in disreputable behavior. Hence, esports sponsors must not associate themselves with entities that may put them in delicate situations. Ergo, it is imperative to know which esports entities are the safest to sponsor. This again shows the importance of carefully studying esports prior to engaging in any kind of sponsorship.

The high vocality of this audience has attracted a large number of sponsors but, as EES1 defends, can also repel some. The harshness of this high vocality was wholly pictured by MA1 when he noted that the heavy use of the internet and social media by the fans and the existence of platforms like Reddit mean that the community will never forget bad or poor sponsor conducts or activations and will not easily give up on attacking the sponsor. Similarly, MA2 also stated that "the internet never forgets . . . once you screw up with the internet it's really tough and expensive to get back on track. You might as well drop esports for a year and then come back." These problems highlight the importance of cautiously developing sponsorships that use this high vocality as a tool to benefit the sponsor instead of harming it.

## 5 Limitations and Future Research

This study was limited by the lack of scientific research and reliable literature on the specific topic of esports sponsorships, esports marketing, and on the behavior of esports fans. Another limitation was the difficulty to contact and interview a large number of experts in esports sponsorships, which resulted in the lack of an equal number of EESs, NEESs, and MAs. This could have biased the results to more strongly represent the views of MAs – which comprised half of the sample – and less the opinions of EESs and NEESs.

Future studies should build upon the findings of this research and focus on analyzing how effective are this study's suggested tactics to maximize and mitigate the ben-

efits and risks of having a very vocal audience, respectively. It would also be interesting to verify if there are more esports sponsors being benefited or damaged by this high vocality and to interview more sponsors and marketing agencies in search of more specific examples of how and why some sponsors are greatly benefited by this high vocality while others are severely damaged by it.

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