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EDITOR'S NOTE

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Introduction

- 1 Electronic sports (i.e. eSports) are professional videogame competitions (Brenda, 2017; Ströh, 2017) in which skilful players (usually nicknamed as *pro-players*) compete in order to win money, prizes and prestige (Mooney, 2018). ESports are not comprised of a single sport, ergo they cannot be compared to a homogeneous sport like football. ESports are more akin to a heterogeneous category of sports. Just like water sports refer to all sports that are played in an aquatic environment, eSports refer to all sports that are played through the use of videogames (Ströh, 2017). Similarly to any sport, eSports possess multiple tiers of professionalism (Winnan, 2016). While low tier tournaments are usually held through a virtual environment, with pro-players competing from their own houses through the internet (Stein & Scholz, 2016), high tier tournaments occur in large arenas, such as football stadiums, full of enthusiastic fans (Gifford, 2017). Here, high-end computers are placed at the centre of the stage, where the pro-players sit and giant screens on the stadiums show the virtual action to the passionate audience. These competitions are also broadcasted through multiple digital platforms to millions of interested fans around the world (Shabir, 2017).
- 2 Despite having only started to gain popularity in the 2010s (Ströh, 2017), this subindustry of the videogame market has already become a worldwide phenomenon (Hiltscher & Scholz, 2017) of great economic significance (Shabir, 2017), with a massive international reach (BI Intelligence & Elder, 2017). No sport in history has grown so fast as eSports (Kuhn, 2009; Sylvester & Rennie, 2017). In fact, their growth-rate rivals the top forms of digital entertainment (AEVI, 2018). This popularity has turned eSports into an important marketing channel for all types of consumer brands (CGC Europe, 2015) and attracted the attention of numerous firms interested in capitalizing on its success. As such, just in 2016, the eSports industry signed over 600 sponsorship contracts (Shabir, 2017). In essence, a sponsorship is a commercial and mutually beneficial partnership in which an entity (the sponsor) finances a second entity (the sponsored party) or provides another type of support to it so that the sponsor can have the rights to associate its brands, products, and image with the sponsored party through promotional activations (International Chamber of Commerce, 2011).
- 3 That being said, not everything in eSports is good news. Just like with any sport, eSports are already being plagued with several issues (Funk, Pizzo & Baker, 2018). A significantly large mass of sponsors has already experienced first-hand the problems of eSports and, as a result, had their brand image negatively affected. These bad

experiences have led numerous brands to terminate their eSports sponsorships. However, it is believed that many of eSports issues could have been avoided if these brands had an idea or a source that could inform them of the best tactics to effectively enter this market as sponsors (Winnan, 2016). And this is another of the great problems that eSports sponsors face: no matter how big, popular or experienced, most brands simply do not know how to conduct good businesses in eSports (Scholz, 2019).

- 4 Yet, surprisingly, despite all the interest from sponsors on eSports' attractive marketing features (Ströh, 2017), as well as all the issues surrounding eSports (Winnan, 2016) and all the unawareness of how to correctly activate eSports sponsorships (Scholz, 2019), this area of knowledge has received sparse academic and scientific attention (Ströh, 2017). Academia is in dire need of research that can effectively inform sponsors of not only the pros of sponsoring eSports, but also of all the cons (Shabir, 2017) and the tactics to efficiently tackle this new and unknown market. Proof of this is the fact that one of the main reasons why sponsors had their brand image damaged is because they were unaware of the issues that haunt the competitive gaming scene. Another reason is that some did not gain the kind or amount of ROIs (return on investments) they were expecting (Winnan, 2016). This issue of lack of research is further accentuated by the fact that the speed at which studies on eSports are being published is unable to keep up with the rapid evolution of this market. In addition, few studies have attempted to analyse eSports through a marketing perspective (Franke, 2015). Overall, several authors agree that there is very few literature informing brands of the sponsoring environment of eSports . This is quite concerning as eSports are completely dependent on sponsors and cannot survive without them . Therefore, this research had the main objective of identifying the effects and tactics of eSports sponsorships. Within this, there were three goals: (1) identifying the pros of sponsoring eSports, (2) identifying the cons of sponsoring eSports and (3) evaluating the sponsorship tactics that seek to take advantage of the aforementioned pros and avoid the aforesaid cons. By reviewing the most relevant literature on this subject, we hope not only to provide both eSports sponsors and researchers with a reliable framework on what sponsors can realistically expect to gain from sponsoring eSports, but also to inform them of eSports' possible dangers and pitfalls and guide them through the best business practices to effectively tackle this market in a way that maximizes both their ROI and sustainability.

1. Methodology

- 5 This research took the form of a review article. The study used an exploratory qualitative methodology focused on gathering, assessing and synthesizing the most relevant literature from the specific field of eSports sponsorships. Because eSports are a new phenomenon and there is no literature directly addressing what are the pros, cons or tactics of sponsoring eSports, this was an integrative literature review. As it is common in integrative reviews, and as recommended by Efron and Ravid (2019) and Toronto (2020), the contemporary literature was put under academic scrutiny to stress current knowledge, perspectives and frameworks on the topic of interest and generate new ones. We particularly followed the indications of these authors on the most appropriate ways of conducting integrative reviews to enhance the reliability of the study. Thus, and as suggested by Efron and Ravid (2019) and Toronto (2020), after

presenting the research objective (i.e. to identify the effects and tactics of eSports sponsorships), we proceeded to: (1) locate all the main online databases where reliable literature could be gathered; (2) establish a transparent and effective search procedure; (3) filter all the literature from the selected databases based on a predetermined and unbiased exclusion and inclusion criteria; (4) abstract relevant data from the selected literature according to a standardized format; (5) examine the core aspects of the study topic and deconstruct them into their most basic elements; (6) compose the review; and (7) develop a conceptual framework that encompasses the research's main findings. These steps will now be exposed in greater detail.

- 6 The main databases used to search for the most pertinent literature were: Web of Science, Scopus, Science Direct, Sage Publishing, Emerald Insight, Google Books, Google Scholar and Taylor and Francis Online. Relevant data was also found in the following statistics websites: SuperData, Statista and Newzoo. Since there is no popular or widely known literature directly addressing the issues of pros, cons and tactics in eSports, the search procedure was limited to using keywords to locate the literature. These were: "eSports", "electronic sports", "competitive gaming", "sponsorship", "brand", "market", "industry", "pros", "benefit", "opportunity", "cons", "risk", "threat", "tactic", "strategy" and "procedure". The almost non-existent literature on eSports sponsorship studies required the use of a light filter in selecting which literature to exclude and include. This made it necessary to analyse a wide variety of studies, including both theoretical and empirical research which, according to Efron and Ravid (2019) and Toronto (2020), is one of the core strengths of integrative reviews. Nevertheless, priority was given to the most up-to-date literature on eSports sponsorships. The fast-evolving nature of eSports required preference to be given to the most recent literature as old data may provide obsolete and outdated information. Exceptions were made only for literature that presented significantly valuable data and perspectives or articles containing long-standing and prevalent literature on general sponsorships and marketing. As such, most selected literature was not older than 2017. In total, this study made use of 29 literary references, with 21 having been published between 2019 and 2017, six having been published between 2016 and 2008 and only two having been published between 1999 and 1994. It must be noted that these figures do not account for the nine literary sources used to support the paper's methodological reasoning, in which case the paper would total 38 literary references. Likewise, to enhance the quality and reliability of the research, this study made use only of journal articles, published books, academic works and statistics websites. This research only included data from statistics websites with a large number of eSports studies and did not include data from statistics websites with a small number of published eSports reports. This research also did not make use of data from general eSports and gaming websites as these are lacking in both reliability and quality.
- 7 After collecting the literature, the most relevant data was abstracted and analysed with the help of NVivo 10. Multiple researchers, including Baxter, Courage and Caine (2015), Chae, Ha and Seo (2017) and Haq and Rehman (2017), qualify NVivo as the best Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) and various others, like Destefani and Whitfield (2008), Lottridge *et al.* (2010), Özbilgin and Tatlı (2007) and Riazi (2016), consider it the most used one. NVivo allowed to deconstruct the literary data into its most basic elements and organize them according to the three core topics

of interest (i.e. the main pros, cons and tactics of sponsoring eSports). After identifying these three elements, the review was written and structured around them.

- 8 As reported by Efron and Ravid (2019) and Toronto (2020), when addressing emerging topics (such as the present theme of eSports sponsorships), preliminary conceptualizations like new perspectives and frameworks should be presented. Hence, after presenting the main findings from the integrative review, a conceptual framework of the main pros, cons and tactics of eSports sponsorships was developed on NVivo 10. The purpose of developing this model, as suggested by Toronto (2020), was to present a critical analysis of the conceptual and empirical literature, draw attention to potential future research necessities and provide a basis on which future studies may be based on.

2. Findings of the literature review

2.1. The pros of sponsoring eSports

- 9 According to the literature, for brands, one of the most attractive aspects of eSports is its massive (Ströh, 2017) and rapidly growing audience (BI Intelligence & Elder, 2017). In 2019, there were approximately 454 million eSports fans (Newzoo, 2019). To put the size of the eSports audience into perspective, while the 2014 Football World Championship match between Germany and the United States was viewed by 1.7 million people on WatchESPN (CGC Europe, 2015), the 2017 Intel Extreme Masters Katowice eSports tournament was watched by 46 million fans on streaming platforms like Twitch and YouTube (Statista, 2018). Also, because of its yearly growth of about 13,5% (Shabir, 2017), and an expected fan-base of 645 million by 2022 (Newzoo, 2019), which is bigger than the entire NFL audience and comparable to that of other traditional sports (Shabir, 2017), brands like Samsung, Red Bull, Microsoft (Funk *et al.*, 2018), Google, Nissan, Audi, Sony, Manchester City, Paris Saint-Germain (Shabir, 2017), Coca-Cola and Vodafone (Ströh, 2017) entered this market in order to enhance their brand awareness (Taylor, 2012). Also, recent research shows that eSports sponsorships are indeed effective in increasing brand awareness as it has been shown that 66,9% of eSports viewers correctly recalled the main sponsors of several tournaments (Ströh, 2017).
- 10 This possibility of showing the brands' products to a large audience also implies that sponsors can benefit from increased sales (Winnan, 2016). This is a possibility further supported by the fact that the eSports audience has a generally higher than average income (Ströh, 2017) and that they are compulsive buyers (Winnan, 2016) and technological influencers (Ströh, 2017) of their households and social environment (CGC Europe, 2015). Regarding market value, it was calculated that the eSports industry was worth 1.13 billion US dollars in 2017 and 1.24 billion US dollars in 2018. This represents a highly significant annual increase of 9,7% (SuperData, 2017). Similarly, in terms of global revenue, in 2016 the eSports industry accumulated a total revenue of 900 million US dollars (Mooney, 2018) and, thanks to the investment of multiple sponsors and other companies, it is expected that, in 2020, this value will increase to 1.5 billion US dollars (Shabir, 2017).
- 11 However, when sponsoring, most brands face the risk of their marketing activities being seen as intrusive or unwanted endeavours (Crompton, 1994). Fortunately, the

eSports audience has proven to understand the economic necessity of sponsors (Ströh, 2017). In fact, research has shown that 55% of these fans have positive attitudes towards the presence of sponsors in eSports (Nielsen ESports, 2017). This acceptance (Ströh, 2017) could be related to the fact that eSports are almost entirely dependent on sponsors to survive (Taylor, 2012). Consequently, because sponsors are responsible for 74% of eSports total revenue (SuperData, 2017), and also due to the infancy of the industry, it is much cheaper to sponsor eSports than other sports (Winnan, 2016). Because of this, just in 2018, eSports sponsorships generated \$694 million in revenues (Newzoo, 2018), with some brands reporting ROI (return on investment) ratios of 500%. This dependency on sponsors (Taylor, 2012) also means that brands are able to benefit from an improved brand image. Being mostly composed by millennials, the eSports fan-base is cause-driven, and the infancy of the industry, coupled with its current incapacity to sustain itself, makes it a cause. Thus, sponsoring eSports shows fans that the brand is helping to improve and support something that is important to them. This in turn positively enhances their perception of the brand and leads to an improved brand image (Shabir, 2017).

2.2. The cons of sponsoring eSports

- 12 Despite the positive aspects, eSports are not exempt of problems. This industry is susceptible to a spectrum of risks with the potential of negatively affecting its entire ecosystem and stakeholders. ESports sponsors must be aware of these issues as they can lead to various unwanted or unforeseen negative effects, like negative brand image transfer. Since there is a high probability of the sponsor's image being associated with the sponsored party, companies must tackle this market very carefully (Ströh, 2017).
- 13 The medium has suffered from multiple incidents of disreputable behaviour and corruption (Shabir, 2017). Some examples include: toxic behaviour, sexism, illegal and unregulated gambling, match-fixing, cheating, cyber-attacks and doping (Ströh, 2017). Several players have been caught using cheating software (Mooney, 2018), like aim bots, which are used to obtain an unfair competitive advantage (Ströh, 2017). Others have been caught leading distributed denial of service (DDoS) attacks, which seek to artificially slowdown or freeze the adversary's internet connection (Shabir, 2017). They seek to influence the competition's results, not only to capitalize from the tournament's prize money, but also to profit from the eSports gambling market. In the recent years several tournaments have been suffering from these problems and it has led to several scandals, with famous pro-players being arrested in South Korea and a professional player attempting suicide after declaring that his superior requested him to purposefully lose a match. These acts have placed the whole industry at stake and are a large risk to sponsors as the damage to the integrity and reputation of eSports may spread to sponsors (Ströh, 2017). In the same vein, although it is commendable that both men and women are able to compete in the same tournaments without any kind of male and female divisions, eSports still suffer from discrimination, sexism and harassment issues (Winnan, 2016).
- 14 The scene is also susceptible to the still ever present negative views that society and the media have on eSports (Shabir, 2017). It is common for gaming to be associated with violence and lower grades (Ströh, 2017). The media tend to portray gamers as sick antisocial individuals who stare at screens for far too long (Shabir, 2017). It is also

common for the media to accuse videogames of training homicides and promoting school shootings. This has led to the popularization of the term *killer games*. These aspects can be quite dangerous, as sponsoring brands can easily be associated with these negative accusations (Ströh, 2017). In the same vein, any sponsorship brings forth the risk of the sponsored party underperforming. If the sponsored player loses, the brand may be associated with losing. Brands have to avoid these negative associations (Crompton, 1994) because sponsorships are long-term investments (Korpimies, 2017).

- 15 One of eSports' main problems is that it is a recent industry (Shabir, 2017). Being a new industry means that this is a fairly unknown marketing landscape (CGC Europe, 2015; Franke, 2015) and it will take some time for brands to get in sync with its intricacies, nuances and dynamics. It will also take some time for brands to decipher the eSports community language, especially because successful eSports advertising campaigns are very different from traditional or social media advertising (CGC Europe, 2015). There are already stories of brands that applied completely unfit sponsoring strategies in eSports and, as a result, were perceived in a very negative way by eSports fans (Shabir, 2017).
- 16 The recent nature of eSports also implies that this is a scene where brands must face the problems of an unstable and volatile environment. There are multiple organizations trying to control the medium (Winnan, 2016) and there is a severe lack of regulation (Mooney, 2018). And it is not only eSports that are unstable (Winnan, 2016): the short lifespan of videogames' popularity means that a currently profitable game to sponsor may provide very few revenues in the near future (Ströh, 2017). Furthermore, brands must bear in mind that, although eSports have found some success in TV, the truth is that Twitch and YouTube are by far the most dominant platforms for the consumption of eSports content. Roughly 98% of people watch eSports through Twitch or YouTube. Hence, sponsorships outside these channels will fail to reach a large audience (Ströh, 2017).

2.3. The tactics for sponsoring eSports

- 17 In order to capitalize from the potential benefits, brands must understand that, although eSports are currently dependent on sponsors (Taylor, 2012), more and more brands are entering this market, which implies that it will not take long for sponsoring costs to rise (Ströh, 2017). Because of this, interested brands should start sponsoring as soon as possible (Winnan, 2016). Even the head of Coca-Cola Gaming stated that this is the best time to enter this market (CGC Europe, 2015). However, it is vital that sponsors go beyond simple logo placement strategies (Taylor, 2012). Competitive gaming is based on consumer experiences. In this sense, the implementation of strategies in which brands participate in the scene, improving and enhancing consumers' experiences, will lead to a significant improvement in brand image (Seo, 2013).
- 18 The sponsoring of players and teams is very effective, not only because fans will attribute the sponsors the same positive characteristics players have (Bennett, 1999), but also because of the sheer massive exposure that these individuals get. Besides being watched by millions of fans during tournaments, professional players are seen as the celebrities of eSports and tend to stream their training sessions, which are watched by thousands of followers (Ströh, 2017). Similarly, the sponsoring of tournaments has the potential of increasing brand awareness (CGC Europe, 2015) and leading to brand image

transfer, with the sponsor's image being improved. Sponsoring games through in-game branding has also proven to be an effective sponsoring strategy as it allows brands to maximise display time and sponsorship effectiveness. By being an integral element of the match, brands have a much higher increase in brand awareness (Ströh, 2017).

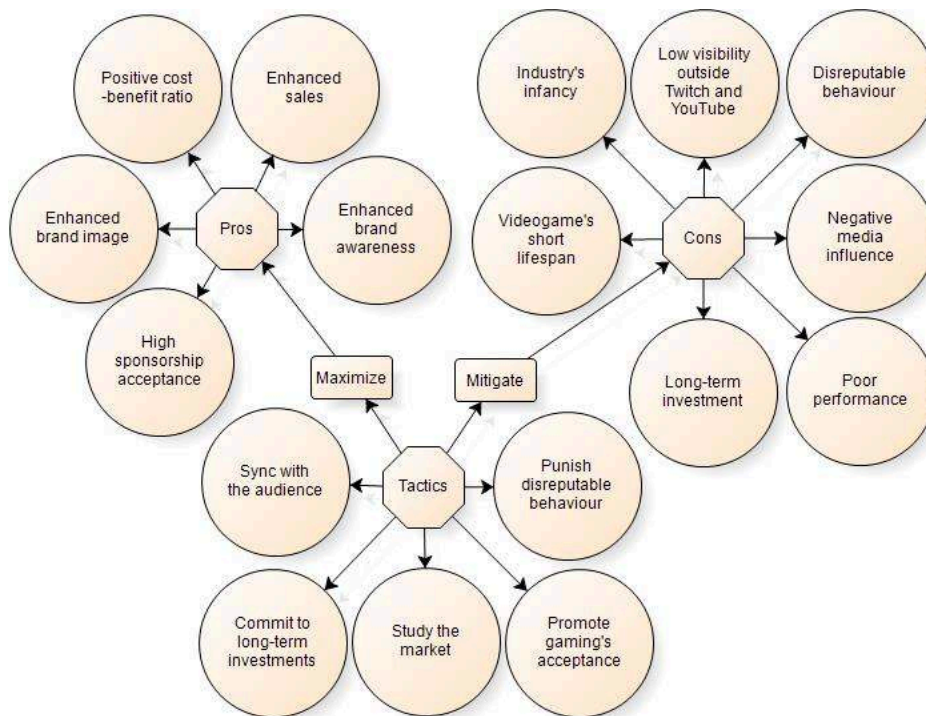
- 19 In order to prevent or minimize the potential risks, sponsors must make sure that they have a deep, relevant, and up-to-date knowledge about eSports. This will ensure that they are prepared to successfully tackle this new market (Shabir, 2017). Brands must understand that eSports sponsorships must be developed according to the specificities of this particular market (Ströh, 2017). Being in sync with the fan-base is also vital (CGC Europe, 2015), as this will ensure that the brand will be able to establish a connection with the audience (Burton, 2017). It would be wise here to mimic Comcast Xfinity's sponsoring strategy, in which the brand let their eSports sponsorship be handled by a selection of their employees who were real eSports fans. Since these individuals had a genuine love and first-hand knowledge about eSports, they were able to develop the most ideal strategies to effectively connect with this audience at an emotional level. Another strategy would be to study the eSports market. Here, Intel shines with its strategy of providing professional eSports players with PCs made from their own components (Shabir, 2017) and Gillette by providing free grooming services to professional players and tournament attendees. The act of actually helping eSports in some way instead of simply placing your logos helps to diminish any kind of scepticism about the sole commercial objective of the brands and shows that they also have some altruistic reasons behind their sponsorships (Ströh, 2017).
- 20 It is important to dispel the negative perceptions associated with videogames (Taylor, 2012) and promote its benefits. This will help make gaming and eSports more acceptable. Some sponsors have even begun awareness campaigns to sensitize people to the benefits of videogames, including the improvement of motor skills, media literacy and teamwork (Ströh, 2017). It is also imperative to punish any kind of disreputable behaviour that may happen in the scene, as these incidents may lead to an increase in negative perceptions and loss of integrity (Sylvester & Rennie, 2017). To fight the lack of regulation and disreputable behaviour, brands that sponsor or organize entire eSports tournaments should follow Valve's lead and permanently ban from their tournaments all individuals and entities connected to disreputable or corruptive practices. Another option would be to partner up with other companies for external help, like Sportradar, a company specialized in preventing the manipulation of matches in sports and eSports (Ströh, 2017). To promote the female presence in eSports, Bandai Namco has come up with the ingenious solution of creating tag-team tournaments where each team has to be composed of one man and one woman (Mooney, 2018).
- 21 Finally, sponsors must make sure that their investments are long-term. The simple showing of an isolated advertisement will not suffice (Korpimies, 2017). It does not matter what is being sponsored; a long-term sponsorship will always be more effective and beneficial than a short one (Yang, Sparks, & Li, 2008).

Discussion and conclusions

- 22 Sponsorships are eSports' main source of revenue (Scholz, 2019). As such, it is of the utmost importance for brands to be aware of this new and emerging market, of the

ROIs they can expect to reap from sponsoring it and the best tactics to maximize these potential ROIs. That being said, however, it is also vital that brands become aware of the threats that may negatively affect their brands and the best tactics to mitigate these potential dangers and pitfalls. While the identification of the main pros will enhance the attractiveness of the eSports market, identifying the main cons will enhance the sustainability of both this industry and its sponsors. Throughout this research, it was possible to identify five main pros (i.e. high sponsorship acceptance, enhanced brand image, positive cost-benefit ratio, enhanced sales and enhanced brand awareness), seven main cons (i.e. videogame's short lifespan, industry's infancy, low visibility outside Twitch and YouTube, disreputable behaviour, negative media influence, poor performance and long-term investment) and five main tactics to help maximize and mitigate the aforementioned pros and cons, respectively (i.e. punish disreputable behaviour, promote gaming's acceptance, study the market, commit to long-term investments and sync with the audience). These main findings, and their relations, are summarized and given visual representation in Figure 1.

Figure 1 - The pros, cons and tactics of eSports sponsorships



- 23 Although eSports' massive popularity is fairly recent (Ströh, 2017), this market has, in a surprisingly short amount of time, reached the same popularity as some other popular traditional sports (Winnan, 2016). The industry's dependence on sponsors (Taylor, 2012) and the extremely high audience figures, coupled with their acceptance of sponsorships and tendency to spend, means that this market offers numerous benefits for sponsors to capitalize on (Ströh, 2017). So much so that this market has been labelled as an "advertising goldmine" (Shabir, 2017, p. 26). Brands can choose between sponsoring players, tournaments or even the games themselves (Ströh, 2017). These strategies will be even more successful if brands focus on bringing relevant additional value to the scene (Seo, 2013).

- 24 However, despite the attractiveness of the eSports market, the multiple risks related to its infancy, like discrimination (Ströh, 2017), lack of regulation and corruption, present serious problems to all stakeholders (Shabir, 2017). Even so, any sponsor can find success in eSports (BI Intelligence & Elder, 2017) as long as they carefully analyse the market. This will allow the creation of strategies that mitigate several of its issues and shield the brand from unwanted repercussions (Ströh, 2017). It is crucial that brands implement their sponsoring strategies as soon as possible (Winnan, 2016) in order to avoid sponsorship clutter and higher sponsoring costs (Ströh, 2017). At the same time, sponsors must be prepared to face the numerous risks of disreputable behaviour and negative media influence that this young, unstable (Shabir, 2017) and unknown industry may present (Franke, 2015). It is vital that brands study this market (Shabir, 2017) to better connect with its audience (CGC Europe, 2015) and commit to not only long term investments (Korpimies, 2017), but also to punishing any type of disreputable behaviour (Sylvester & Rennie, 2017) and promoting society's acceptance of gaming. These strategies will ensure a much higher success rate of the sponsorship activities (Ströh, 2017).

Limitations, originality and implications

- 25 Despite the considerable size that the eSports market was able to achieve, the short amount of time that it took to do this has led academia to just recently becoming aware of its value. Hence, at the present time, there is a great shortage of eSports literature and an even more severe lack of research into the particular field of eSports sponsorships. Hence, this research expands the scant knowledge base of the recent eSports field and provides new insights into the extremely sparse area of eSports sponsorships. Being a young industry, this investigation provides interested brands with useful information on not only the potential benefits that brands can expect from eSports sponsorships and the brand threatening risks that it may entail, but also on how to effectively tackle this market, capitalizing on its potentialities while avoiding its dangers.

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ABSTRACTS

This research aimed to identify the pros and cons of sponsoring eSports, as well as the tactics to maximize them and mitigate them, respectively. An exploratory method focused on an integrative literature review was used. The most attractive elements are the enhancement of brand awareness, image and sales, the high sponsorship acceptance and a positive cost-benefit ratio. Hence, brands should start sponsoring pro-players and tournaments, perform in-game branding, and create relevant-added value as soon as possible. The most threatening elements are disreputable behaviour, negative media influence, the industry's infancy, the videogames' short lifespan, long-term investments, poor performance, and the low visibility outside Twitch and YouTube. As such, brands must be in sync with the audience, punish disreputable behaviour, promote gaming's acceptance, study the market, and commit to long-term investments.

Este estudo procurou identificar os prós e os contras do patrocínio de eSports e as táticas para os maximizar e os mitigar, respetivamente. Foi usado um método exploratório focado numa revisão integrativa da literatura. Os elementos mais atrativos são o aumento do reconhecimento, da imagem e das vendas e a alta aceitação de patrocínios e boa relação custo-benefício. Assim, as marcas devem patrocinar jogadores e torneios profissionais, realizar *in-game branding* e criar valor adicional relevante o mais rápido possível. Os elementos de maior risco são o comportamento desonroso, a influência negativa dos *media*, a infância do setor, a vida curta dos videogames, os investimentos a longo prazo, o baixo desempenho e a baixa visibilidade. Portanto,

as marcas devem sincronizar-se com o público, punir comportamentos desonrosos, promover a aceitação dos videojogos, estudar o mercado e comprometer-se a longo prazo.

INDEX

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