How do sport and eSport enthusiasts differ in their perception of brand image?

A study in the context of sponsorship, from a consumer perspective

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Abstract

In October 2017, the Olympic Committee rendered official its decision to consider electronic sports (eSports) as sports. The global eSports market was valued at nearly 493 million U.S. dollars in 2016, with 80% of the revenues coming from sponsorship. Sponsorship has become an important matter for organizations, since it can be a powerful tool to establish or change a company’s brand image; indeed, more than 600 sponsorship agreements were signed in 2016 in the eSport industry. This paper aims at finding out how do sport and eSport enthusiasts differ in their perception of the brand image of a sponsoring brand.

The study was conducted by using combined research methods. First, we used a qualitative approach with semi-structured interviews, in order to get a better understanding of the general context. Then a questionnaire was used to fully understand the differences and similarities between sport and eSport enthusiasts, and to identify the variables that impact the sponsorship response (measured by favour, interest, and use). The variables studied were event image, perceived fit, attitudes towards the brand as a sponsor, brand personality, brand associations, self-concepts and brand identification. The results show that sport enthusiasts are more impacted by factors such as brand identification and self-concepts, while brand associations matter for both groups.

Keywords: Sport, eSport, sponsorship, brand image, brand associations, brand identification, brand personality, event image, perceived fit, sponsorship response
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1. Introduction

1.1 Problem discussion

September 13th, 2017, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) announced that the city of Paris would host the 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games. A month before, Tony Estanguet, a canoe slalom triple Olympic champion and co-president of the Paris Olympic bid committee, was asked by the Associated Press News: “Do you think eSports will feature in Paris?” To this question, Estanguet answered that it was a possibility; discussions would be held with the IOC and eSport representatives, to see if gaming could be part of the 2024 program.

Electronic sports, or eSports, “commonly refer to competitive (pro and amateur) video gaming [...] where players customarily belong to teams or other ‘sporting’ organizations which are sponsored by various business organizations (Hamari and Sjöblom, 2017, p.211)” According to Karhulahti (2017), eSports are socio-cultural practices of exercise and contests on commercial play products that are administered by official proprietors, which are companies that develop, distribute and maintain the products (i.e. games).

Over the past years, eSports became one of the most quickly developing types of new media, driven by the developing provenance of web-based games and broadcasting technologies (Hamari and Sjöblom, 2017). To confirm that, in 2017 the eSports audience size worldwide reached 385 million viewers. Likewise, the global eSports market was valued at nearly 493 million U.S. dollars in 2016, with 80% of the revenues coming from sponsorship and advertising, and the rest from betting, prize pools and tournaments, merchandise and ticket sales (Statista, 2018). According to the forecasts, the market is expected to generate close to 1.5 billion U.S. dollars in revenue by 2020, with a 40% year-on-year growth (Statista, 2018).

With the decision of the International Olympic Committee, rendered official in October 2017, to consider eSports as sports (DOT Sports, 2017), the border between these two activities and their environment becomes more blurred. They share similarities that might make them interesting to actors yet external to this market. Indeed, as the eSports market grows, more sponsors and investors become involved in this industry, which creates a booming opportunity for all the players involved.
Sponsorship has become increasingly popular as a marketing tool, used as a communication tool more successful than advertising and sales (Ukman, 2015). The use of event sponsorship or other types of sponsorship helps to establish, enhance, or change the brand image of the sponsoring company. Indeed it has become a general objective for organizations to engage in sponsorship programs (Novais and Arcodia, 2013): global sponsorship accounted for 62.7 billion U.S. dollars in 2017 (Statista, 2018).

From the vast forms of sponsorship, some brands choose to associate with eSports teams while others are more interested in aligning with events and tournaments as well as broadcast platforms. In fact, according to the Nielsen market intelligence (2017), more than 600 sponsorships agreements have been signed since 2016. Moreover, nowadays among the most relevant sponsors we can find well-known companies from different business sectors such as Intel, Coca-Cola, Red bull, Audi and T-Mobile. Nevertheless, according to the Nielsen Esports Playbook (2017), eSports supporters prefer endemic brands as sponsors, meaning brands directly related to this industry, which implies that among the eSports supporters there is a sort of resistance to marketing activities done by non-endemic brands. However, brands that belong to the technology sector, as well as the ones involved in energy drinks and food snacks are most accepted as potential eSports sponsors, likely because they are so ingrained in the eSports experience (Nielsen Sports, 2017). Since each target segment has its own prior brand associations and attitudes towards each brand and event (Novais and Arcodia, 2013), it becomes relevant to identify whether there exist commonalities or differences in the perception of the brand as a sponsor of the specific sport or eSport event (Keller, 1993).

The purpose of the current study is to find out how do sport and eSport enthusiasts differ in their perception of the brand image of a sponsoring brand.

1.2 Research question

How do sport and eSport enthusiasts differ in their perception of the brand image of a brand in the context of sponsorship?
2. Contextual Background

This section will give an overview of the eSports environment: first, the authors name the industry’s key actors and explain their roles. Then a selection of the most famous and successful eSports games and game categories will be presented.

2.1 Key actors

As explained by Rémy Chanson (2017), a number of actors contributed to the development of eSports for the past years, and they can be divided into three categories: game publishers, players, and those who support the promotion of the activities such as the sponsors, eSports and/or sports clubs, broadcast platforms, events organizer.

Figure 1: eSports actors
ESport starts with the game publishers since they are the ones creating, developing and maintaining the video games that are the origin of the whole phenomenon. Some of the central actors of the eSport scene are Riot Games (League of Legends), Blizzard Entertainment (StarCraft), and Valve Corporation (Counter-Strike).

Karhulahti (2017) highlights some of the differences existing between sport and eSport environments, one of them being that the game publishers are totally in control of the rules of the game. Sports activities such as swimming or soccer do not experience any radical changes in their rules or in the way they are practiced, while eSports video games are entirely dependent on the publisher, as “the executive owner literally (re)writes the rules of its game, supplies the essential technology, and ultimately decides on the existence of the sport as a whole (Karhulahti, 2017, p.46)”.

Also, sport organizations such as the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) have a very different role compared to the game development companies. Karhulahti (2017) refers to the game publishers as ‘executive owners’, organizations aiming at making profit, while most of the leading sports organizations can be identified as non-profit organizations. All in all, game development companies play a central role in the eSport environment, because their decisions in terms of gameplay adjustments, management of the professional circuit, as well as their direct interactions with the games’ communities have a direct impact on a game’s success and longevity, and on all the market players. Indeed, it may change the way players train, the teams’ strategic approach towards a specific situation or competition, the media’s reception or responses towards a game or some of its new feature. Finally, a game’s success and potential longevity influence sponsors to invest or not in this activity.

Players are key actors of eSport: they are the ones analysing the games, they train to master them and to become the best. They compete against one another, bring and increase the public’s attention towards the game. The players can be divided into three categories:

- Professional players, or pro gamers;
- Semi-professionals;
- Non-professionals or amateurs.

Professional players usually are members of an organization or a club. Their revenues come from the cash prizes earned during competitions, their monthly salary paid by the club, and by streaming online game sessions.
Careers as professional gamers are usually quite short, as the players need to constantly keep a very high skill level, while also being dependant on the game’s popularity to keep attracting sponsors. They act as brand ambassadors for the game they play, and some rivalries between specific players or clubs attract thousands of viewers for some matches.

Among the gaming community, the amateurs represent more than one billion people playing video games. They are not all interested in eSports, but hundreds of millions of people are considered as ‘eSport enthusiasts’, playing eSport games, or watching them (Chanson, 2017). The non-professional players are the real target of advertisers, as they are the ones determining the popularity, and thus the success of a game (Chanson, 2017). Amateurs are also the principal actors financing the ecosystem by buying games, goodies, and tickets to attend events such as competitions or conventions. They also constitute the major part of the audience: for example, Riot Games reported 43 million viewers for the grand finals of the 2016 League of Legends World Championship (ESPN, 2016).

Different types of organization also support the promotion of eSports activities: the clubs take care of the professional and semi-professional players, of their training and well-being, and also of the logistics to allow the players to take part in championships and competitions. Event and competition organizers manage competitions’ logistics and mediatisation (sometimes this role is fulfilled by the game publisher, sometimes by a third-party organization, depending on the company’s policy on that matter). Media and broadcasting platforms such as Twitch or YouTube, for example, are the main channels relaying information and fostering interaction between all the different actors. The sponsors are among the main actors that allow eSport to develop; by investing in this industry, they finance the participation of players to competitions and sometimes their gains, while also gaining more visibility for their own brand, and trying to reach a new consumer segment.
2.2 Main eSports games

One of the main ingredients for a game to qualify as an eSport game can be referred to as the now famous ‘easy to learn, hard to master’, as explained by Samy Ouerfelli, general manager of Turtle Entertainment France (ESL) (Chanson, 2017). Some of the most important criteria include the chances equality (all players must have the same chances to win, whatever be the amount of money they invest in the game), or the game’s potential to be spectacular, as eSports represent real shows followed by millions of viewers and spectators, be it online or by physically attending competitions.

As revealed by the Nielsen eSport playbook (2017), game preferences vary among the regions: the USA and Europe are more interested in FPS - First Person Shooter games (such as Counter-Strike or Call of Duty), while Japan prefers fighting games (for example Tekken or Super Smash Bros), and Korea has been historically fond of RTS - Real Time Strategy games (StarCraft 2 being the most popular). Figure 2 presents a small recap of the main gaming categories found in eSport, and some of the most famous and successful games.

Figure 2: main video game categories found in eSport
A. MOBA

In a MOBA (Multiplayer Online Battle Arena), two teams compete against each other, with the objective of destroying the opposing team’s main structure. Some of the most famous MOBAs are League of Legends (Riot Games), Dota 2 (Valve Corporation), and Heroes of the Storm (Blizzard Entertainment).

B. RTS

In this type of game, the participants position and manoeuvre units and structures under their control to secure areas of the map and/or destroy their opponents' assets. Real-time strategy games usually focus on the management of units and resources. On the eSport scene, the most successful RTS is StarCraft 2 (Blizzard Entertainment).

C. FPS

First-person shooter (FPS) is a type of video game centred on gun and other weapon-based combat in a first-person perspective, which means that the player experiences the action through the eyes of the player character. Half-Life and the Counter-Strike series (Valve Corporation), as well as Call of Duty (Activision), are examples of eSport FPS.

D. Sports Games

Sports games simulate the practice of sports, such as soccer with FIFA (Electronic Arts) or PES (Konami). It can be divided in a number of sub-genres, going from arcade to management type of games. Some eSport games are considered as sport games even though it is not obvious at first sight, as it is the case for Rocket League (Psyonix) or Just Dance (Ubisoft).

E. CCG

A Collectible Card Game (CCG), or Trading Card Game (TCG), is a type of strategy card game. Games are usually played between two players, who use a set of playing cards they assembled. Some examples of successful card games are Magic: The Gathering, or Pokémon. Nowadays, we can also find digital collectible card games, played on computers or mobile phones, such as Hearthstone (Blizzard Entertainment) or Clash Royale (Supercell).
F. Fighting Games

Fighting games are a type of action game where two on-screen characters fight against each other. The matches typically take place in an arena and are played in several rounds. Among well-known fighting games, one can find Street Fighter (Capcom), Super Smash Bros. (Nintendo), Tekken and Soul Calibur (Namco).
3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Brand image

The brand image is one of the vital aspects of the brand and it has been defined by Aaker (1996) as “how customers and others perceive the brand (p.96)”, and further developed by Keller (1998) as a multidimensional construct formed by a set of brand associations that may refer to beliefs, ideas or feelings that consumers hold. Those associations represent pieces of information about a particular brand. Some examples are product-related and non-product-related attributes; functional, symbolic and experiential benefits; and brand attitudes (Keller, 1993). The main objective of sponsorship is to improve the brand image by focusing on these dimensions.

3.2 Brand associations

According to Keller (1993) brand knowledge is formed by brand image and brand awareness. Through the Associative Network Memory Model, Anderson (1983) explains that memory can be seen as a set of nodes and interconnecting links. Nodes represent stored information, and links are the strength of associations between the different information. These nodes can be activated by other nodes and by new information. Following this model, brand knowledge consists of a brand node stored in memory with a variety of associations linked to it. The strength of these associations depends on the two components of brand knowledge, the brand awareness and the brand image (Keller, 1993). The procedure whereby one group of nodes (e.g. memories around an event like the Olympics) triggers thinking about other connected nodes (e.g. Procter and Gamble, the brand sponsoring the event) is known as 'spreading activation' - thinking about one idea initiates thinking about another one (Anderson 1983). All of those nodes are interconnected among them and together form ideas and, more generally, a knowledge structure. Following this theory, the brand develops a strong relationship with its product category, the product attributes and the mind of the consumer by creating stronger associations (Roy and Cornwell, 2004).
3.2.1 Associations dimensions

Keller (1993) differentiates these associations according to three dimensions: favourability, strength and uniqueness. Associations can vary according to how favourably they are assessed, as a function of the extent to which consumers believe the brand has an overall positive attitude that satisfies their needs. However, the evaluation of brand associations is quite subjective and context-dependent; therefore, associations with a high level of favourability do not always increase brand image and purchase intentions.

The strength of the connection to the brand node is the second dimension to classify brand associations. This parameter depends on the way the information enters in the memory of the consumer and how this is kept and maintained as a part of the brand image. In other words, the strength depends on the process through which the information is received by the consumer and how it is stored in their memory. Thus, the strength of the association increases if the consumer actively elaborates and thinks about the product information meaning. However, the evaluation of this dimension is also context-dependent and subjective.

The uniqueness of the connection to the brand node is the third dimension to classify brand associations. The key to brand’s success and superiority over other brands is represented by strongly held associations, which are favourably evaluated and uniquely formed for a specific brand. When associations are not shared with other competing brands they can be defined as unique, and they represent a sustainable competitive advantage (Keller, 1993).

Similar to brands, sports and eSports events share specific associations and characteristics. According to Keller’s definition of brand image (1993), the image of an event is represented by the consumers’ perceptions of this event, reflected by their associations towards the event. In this context the classical conditioning theory is predominantly used to explain how event image influences sponsor image (Grohs and Reisinger, 2014). Using classical conditioning research in advertising, Speed and Thompson (2000) suggest that pairing a sponsor with an event results in event associations becoming attached to the brand in the consumer's memory.
3.2.2 Brand association categories

Brand associations can have various forms. According to Keller (1993), one option is to categorize them according to their level of abstraction, which means how much data and information are contained within the association. Brand associations can be divided into three major categories: attributes, benefits, and attitudes.

Attributes define what a consumer thinks about a product or a service and what is involved in its consumption. Usually they can be divided into product-related attributes, which means related to a physical characteristic of the product, and non-product-related attributes, which are external aspects and characteristics of the product. Attributes derive directly from a consumer’s own experience with the brand or its marketing activities. According to Keller (1993), brand attributes may influence brand personality characteristics because attributes may affect the emotions and feelings evoked by the brand.

Benefits define what consumers think that the product can produce for them, and represent the value that consumers attach to product characteristics. Benefits, according to the motivations to which they relate, can be divided into three categories: functional benefits, experiential benefits and symbolic benefits. Functional benefits are the objective advantages derived from the consumption of a product, linked to psychological and safety needs. Experiential benefits refer to the feelings that derive from using the product and aim to satisfy experiential needs, like sensory pleasure and cognitive satisfaction. Symbolic benefits are the extrinsic advantages derived from the consumption of a product. They usually satisfy underlying needs such as social approval and self-esteem.

Attitudes are the consumer’s overall evaluations and opinions about the brand (Keller, 1993). According to different authors, brand attitudes are influenced by the associated brand attributes and brand benefits. For example, Zeithaml (1988) relates brand attitudes to consumers’ beliefs about product-related attributes and functional and experiential benefits. Rossiter and Percy (1987) relate brand attitudes to consumers’ beliefs about non-product-related attributes and symbolic benefits.

Professional sports and eSports sponsorship strengthen brand image by providing links to specific brand benefits and attributes. Through the emotions and feelings triggered by the event, sponsorship helps communicating a desired brand image (Grohs and Reisinger, 2014).
Brand image has been defined by Dichter (1985) as the sum of impressions that consumers receive from many sources. Together these impressions form the brand personality.

3.3 Brand personality

Brand personality is a set of human characteristics that consumers associate with a specific brand. Personality traits of the people associated with the brand are transferred directly to the brand, but also indirectly through product-related attributes, symbols, and brand names (Aaker, 1997). Brand personality is considered as a factor that influences the brand image, together with brand associations. Aaker (1997) identified five dimensions of brand personality perceived by consumers: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication and ruggedness. Those dimensions operate and influence the consumers in different ways. For example, competence, excitement and sincerity focus on an innate part of human personality, while ruggedness and sophistication tap a dimension that humans desire, but not necessarily have. The brand personality is strongly influenced by brand associations and attributes. These associations are based on the consumers’ impressions of the brand, represented by subjective perceptions about the brand, and not based on singular traits of the product (Dichter, 1985).

3.4 Image of the sponsoring brand

In the context of sport sponsorship the factors that influence brand perception are highly related with self-concepts. In other words, consumers tend to prefer a product that corresponds with their image and expresses their personality, matches their values and reflects their lifestyle (Jung and Kim, 2015). The formation of self-identification increases when the consumers highly perceive the quality level of the brand and when they have increasing trust and friendliness for the brand (Jung and Kim, 2015). In this regard, it is important to say that consumers have the desires to strengthen their self-image through high quality brands, and the perceived quality of brands acts as an important factor in brand identification and in driving consumers’ decisions.

Studies conducted by different authors (e.g. Bennett, 1999; Madrigal, 2000), show that sport sponsorship activities are used by companies for a variety of purposes: for example, to enhance their brand image and brand awareness, or also to create perceptions of widespread use of sponsoring firms' products among the supporters. Through sport sponsorship a
company can link itself and its products to the same feelings the consumer-supporter has towards the sponsored event/athlete/team. Those associations help the mechanism of transfer of brand image that has the potential to provide a firm with a sustainable competitive advantage.

Consumers hold brand associations as well as associations with sport properties, such as events, athletes and teams (Grohs and Reisinger 2014). With sport sponsorship both these kinds of associations become linked in consumers’ memory with the sponsor brand. These connections enable the direct transfer of the image of the specific sponsored sport property to the sponsor brand. This mechanism results in a change of the image of the sponsoring brand. Usually this change in terms of brand image is positive and represents a benefit for the sponsoring brand. However, there is also the possibility of harming brand image, if the event image is not aligned with the sponsoring brand image (Henseler et al., 2009). Both perceived fit and quality act as moderators in the process of brand image transfer.

### 3.5 Perceived fit

According to Smith (2004) consumers are able to judge the fit between the two entities, the event and the sponsoring brand. The perception of congruence or fit between the sponsoring brand and the event sponsored has a direct impact on consumers’ responses. There are various bases on which fit can be established, for example according to the functional characteristics, or the symbolic characteristics. As an example, functional fit is high if a product of the sponsoring brand is used during the event (e.g., a tire manufacturer sponsors a car race). Also, perceived fit is high if attributes associated with the event overlap with attributes associated with the brand sponsor (e.g., a prestigious car manufacturer sponsors a high-class golf tournament) (Grohs and Reisinger, 2014).

Previous research shows that supporters are more inclined to transfer the associations they hold for the event/team/athlete to the sponsoring brand, when they consider that their favourite team/athlete matches well with its sponsor (Becker-Olsen and Hill, 2006). Similarly, it is expected that supporters would be more willing to engage with the sponsoring brand when they perceive the parts of the sponsorship deal as congruent. There is also evidence supporting that the higher the perceived fit between the sponsoring brand and the event, the better the spectators’ perceptions toward the sponsor’s quality (Papadimitriou et al., 2016).
3.6 Model and variables

The majority of the sport sponsorship literature refers to Keller’s fundamental work on brand image formation (1993). He identified different types of associations that form and influence the brand image of a company. This classification can be applied to the context of sponsorship, and in this research the focus will be on the consumer perspective. Hence, this study proposes three main contexts: brand and product, brand and event, brand and consumer.

In the Brand and Product context, there are the categories of brand associations: attributes, benefits and attitudes, with a focus on product-related attributes, the perceived quality of the product and the characteristics of the brand personality that consumers associate to the brand.

The Brand and Event context revolves around the event image and the perceived fit of the sponsoring brand at the event. This focuses on the perceived feelings and attitudes of the consumers towards the sponsoring activity and the brand.

In the Brand and Consumer context, we consider brand identification, correlated with the consumers’ perceptions of self-concepts such as match with lifestyle and values.

All of those variables impact the sponsorship response. Speed and Thompson (2000) argue that attitudes toward the event are important to determine a favourable response to sponsorship. Warm feelings about an advertisement positively affect the brand image and evaluation of the advertised brand. Respondents’ attitudes and intentions represent the sponsorship response at three different levels of effects: interest, favour and use. The interest represents the extent to which respondents believe that the sponsorship of a specific event by a specific brand will influence their attention to the brand. The favour is the favourability of the consumers towards the brand. The use is the willingness to try and use the brand’s products.
Figure 3 – Proposed model for the study
4. Methodology

_This chapter explains how the research was designed and conducted. We will first go through the qualitative study, and then through the quantitative study._

4.1 Overview of research design

The purpose of the current study is to find out how sport and eSport enthusiasts differ in their perception of the brand image of a brand, in the context of sponsorship. In order to increase the validity and reliability of the study, combined research methods were used: first qualitative and then quantitative.

The qualitative approach was based on semi-structured interviews, in order to get a better understanding of the general context. We aimed at identifying if there were differences in the way sport and eSport enthusiasts perceive a brand image, and to understand if being a gamer or a sport enthusiast was influencing this phenomenon.

The results of the qualitative study combined with theories related to brand image, brand associations and brand personality allowed us to construct a questionnaire. The questionnaire was used in our study to collect more data to fully understand the extent of the differences and similarities between sport and eSport enthusiasts. This mixed approach allowed us to build the internal validity of the study, by providing good conditions to determine the degree to which being part of the sport or eSport groups affects brand image perception towards a sponsoring brand. Also, in order to increase the generalization of the study’s results to a larger part of the population, we did not make any distinction of age, gender, income or nationality, for example. The questionnaire was widely spread among sport and eSport enthusiasts, and studying this difference was the main focus of our research.
4.2 Qualitative research

For this study, the sponsorship of sport and eSport events (such as competitions) by certain brands was used as a context to lead the interviewees to recall and to voice their thoughts and feelings concerning these brands. Through the interviews, we aimed at finding if, in the context of events sponsorship, there were any differences between how sport enthusiasts and eSport enthusiasts relate to a brand, and to identify these differences.

An interview guide was developed based on the theoretical framework. The variables studied were divided into three main categories: brand and event, brand and product, brand and consumers, and finally the response to sponsoring, as seen in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Variable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brand and Event</td>
<td>Event Image</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perceived Fit</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Attitudes towards the brand as a sponsor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brand and Product</td>
<td>Brand Personality</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Attributes</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Attitudes</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Benefits</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brand and Consumer</td>
<td>Brand Identification</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Self-concept</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Values</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Lifestyle</td>
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<tr>
<td>Response to Sponsoring</td>
<td>Favour</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Use</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1 – Variables studied*

The aim was to understand which criteria were the most influential to consumers when it comes to the brand associations: are sport enthusiasts mostly influenced by benefits, attitudes, or attributes? Is it different for gamers? How important is the image of the event, and does it affect the outcome of sponsorship?
We conducted twelve semi-structured interviews with active supporters and players, six with sports athletes/supporters and the other six with gamers. After five interviews with sport enthusiasts, we realized that the respondents were having similar reasoning and behaviours. They had a certain interest for the subject, and for the most part, answered the questions with ease. On the other hand, we observed different behaviours from eSport enthusiasts: from the first three interviews, two respondents showed a complete disinterest for brands and sponsoring, while another expressed that even though they were not living through the brands they used, they still appreciated the fact that brands were sponsoring eSport events. This translated into an increased favour and interest towards the named brand. Therefore, we conducted three more interviews with eSport enthusiasts to see if we could dig deeper in the subject, and it turned out that the more people we interviewed, the more they showed similar reasoning and behaviours, so we stopped. We chose to conduct one more interview with an athlete, so we could respect male-female parity by interviewing six males and six females, three gamers and three athletes in both cases. This allowed us to observe if there were any differences or similarities in their opinions.

### 4.2.1 Sampling

We used purposive sampling to select the interviewees, targeted as knowledgeable respondents that had an opinion and were prone to share it. The idea was to ensure a variety of profiles, with some key attributes varying from one participant to another, as can be seen in the Table 2 describing the profiles we were looking for.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sports person profile</th>
<th>Gamer profile</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Practice at least 5 hours a week</td>
<td>Play at least 5 hours a week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amateur level</td>
<td>Amateur level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 - 35 years old</td>
<td>18 - 35 years old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males and Females</td>
<td>Males and Females</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest in/follow/watch competitions or sports events</td>
<td>Interest in/follow/watch eSport competitions/events/ LANs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 2 - Interviewees' Profiles*
4.2.2 Data collection

Each researcher conducted the same number of interviews, as we tried to even out and leverage the biases each interviewer could have, instead of having only one person conducting all the interviews. By doing so, we tried to reduce the possible errors. The interviews lasted for between thirty and fifty minutes, and we took the time to ask all of our questions. No technical difficulties occurred. After the interviews, we transcribed the recording within three days in order to keep the thoughts and impressions from the interviews.

Three of the interviews were conducted face-to-face and the rest were conducted by phone or Skype. Bryman and Bell (2015) state that there are benefits and obstacles for both face-to-face and phone interviews. Face-to-face interviewing allows the interviewer to observe body language, but in some cases physical/personal traits in the interviewer can affect the answers of the interviewee. On the other hand, the use of phone interviews can be beneficial since it is more cost-effective and saves time. We found that the body language that we observed during our face-to-face interviews did not affect any answer or our interpretation.

We made sure to provide a calm and silent enough environment to conduct the interviews. At the beginning of each interview we asked if the interviewee agreed on being recorded. Recording allowed the interviewers to be more attentive to the interviewee’s answers (Bryman and Bell, 2015). It has to be considered that when conducting interviews, there is a possibility that the respondents’ answers may be biased; we then talk about response bias or reflexivity - i.e. interviewee giving the answer they think the interviewer wants and those interviews can seldom produce generalization (Bryman and Bell, 2015). In order to reduce these risks to a minimum, the researchers clearly insisted during the introduction part that there was no right or wrong answer, and that all opinions were valuable and contributing to the research. The introduction part was planned to be around ten minutes long, and was purposefully filled with general questions to set the stage and put the interviewee in good dispositions. The interviewers were also extremely careful to stay neutral to not influence the respondents in any way. Also, we purposefully interviewed knowledgeable respondents (gamers and athletes that are active supporters of competitions), who already had an opinion and thus were less likely to be affected by these biases.
Every interview was conducted in English, in order to avoid mistranslation errors from one language to another, but also to allow each researcher the opportunity to code every interview alone at first, and then to compare the coding altogether. This enabled us to establish inter-reliability on our observations, by verifying if we were interpreting the respondents’ answers in the same way or not.

Some new questions, not initially included in the interview guide, were asked during the interviews. According to Bryman and Bell (2015), questions that are not included in the guide might be asked as the interviewer gets new information from the interviewees. In some cases, we were asking for more details about the interviewees’ consumption habits when talking about sponsoring brands, or encouraged them to tell us more about their experience with different products they use. In any case, every question was asked and a homogeneous wording has been used in all of the interviews.

4.2.3 Interview guide

A first interview guide was developed according to our theoretical framework, and over a first phase, we conducted one interview to test the interview guide and to see if we were getting relevant answers; it did not work as intended. We realized that we had to make adjustments to some questions, but also major changes into the profiles we were looking for. For example, our first interviewee was practicing sports, and used to run a certain amount of hours per week. However, he was not interested in following any kind of competitions. The context of sponsorship was not applicable to him, because he was not knowledgeable about it. As this was the main realization, we modified the profiles and decided to interview people with an interest in following, watching or taking part into competitions, as they would be exposed to sponsorship and therefore more able to give us relevant answers.

The interview guide (presented in the Appendix 1) was divided into four different sections: introduction questions, brand and event, brand and product, and brand and consumer. This allowed us to ask different questions related to the variables we wanted to study (see Table 1), revolving around brand personality, brand associations, brand identification and the attitudes towards a brand as a sponsor, among others.
4.3 Quantitative research

For the second part of our research we created a questionnaire, based both on the results of our qualitative study and on the theories as mentioned before. We aimed at collecting data from a larger sample of the population. The questionnaire was designed and shared on the Google Forms platform, accessible on the Internet from most countries.

In the questionnaire we asked the respondents to select an event among a list of different competitions. We designed this list according to the answers we received in the interviews, which concerned mainly basketball, swimming and running for the sports part, and video games such as League of Legends, Counter Strike and StarCraft II for eSport, for example.

4.3.1 Sampling

For the quantitative research we used non-probability sampling, which means that certain units in the population were more likely to be selected for our sample (Bryman and Bell, 2015). The type of non-probability sampling that we chose was the snowball sampling. We used this method because we found that it was the most efficient way to gather as many responses as possible under the time constraints affecting our research. In a first phase, we sent the questionnaire to some of our friends and acquaintances we knew were practicing sport/eSport activities. Then, to enlarge the sample size, we asked for their help to share the hyperlink of the questionnaire to other sport and eSport enthusiasts.

Active supporters and players of sports and eSports activities were the respondents selected for answering, according to the profiles seen in Table 2. To ensure a meaningful comparison between sport and eSport enthusiasts, we were looking for polar extremes. Therefore, we purposefully asked the respondents to choose their preferred activity: were they practicing sports, or playing video games? They could choose only one, in order to avoid as much as possible to get answers from people practicing both, that could have attenuated the differences we were trying to observe.
Considering limitations of time and resources, we also shared the questionnaire online on social platforms and specialized forums or blogs where we were present. The decision of using forums and groups on common social media channels is due to the fact that these platforms are often used by users that are more interested into the argument and committed to the subject. Sharing the questionnaire online avoids the risk of influencing the respondents while answering the questions, since they are most likely in a quiet and comfortable space for example home, an office or university when responding.

4.3.2 Questionnaire structure

We created a questionnaire formed by five different sections, with a total of forty-four questions. The same questions were asked to sport and eSport enthusiasts, with small adjustments made to fit each category, in order to allow a meaningful comparison of the results. The three main sections according to what was presented in the theory were: brand and product, brand and event, brand and customer.

Each of these sections contained a set of variables that we also analysed through the qualitative study. We had eight identified variables, with some sub-variables, as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3 – Proposed model for the study.
We used closed questions because as stated by Bryman and Bell (2015) they are easier to analyse and make it simpler to understand the relationships between the variables considered and moreover are quick and easy to complete for respondents. For the majority of the questions the respondents were asked to make a judgment as to the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the proposed statement through a five-point Likert-type scale.

The initial idea was to have three questions for each variable and sub-variable, however we realized that the questionnaire would have been too long, and probably a smaller amount of people would have answered. Therefore, using the results of our interviews we identified which were the most relevant variables for both activities, and we only kept three questions for the most meaningful ones to our study. For example, for the variable event image we understood that the interviewees did not have a clear idea of the image of the event and the answers were often vague.

The first part of the questionnaire included personal factual questions, such as gender and age, followed by three screening questions regarding the practicing of sport or eSport, the amount of hours spent every week on the activity and the interest of the respondent in following or participating in competitions.

The second part aimed at understanding the attitudes of the respondents towards a specific event in which they participated as competitor or supporter. At the beginning of this section we asked the respondent to choose one event from a list that we created according to the competitions that came out from the interviews. The main topics were: event image, personal liking of the event, attitudes towards the brand as a sponsor and perceived fit between the event and the sponsoring brand.
| Event image | EIMG1 | I feel that the team/event has a positive symbolic meaning. |
|            | EIMG2 | The image of the team/event and the image of the sponsor are similar. |
|            | EIMG3 | I am a strong supporter of this event. |
|            | EIMG4 | This event is important to me. |

| Attitude brand as sponsor | ATTBS1 | I like this brand as a sponsor of the team/event: like-dislike |
| ATTBS2 | I have a favourable attitude towards this brand as a sponsor of the team/event: favourable-unfavourable |

| Perceived fit | PFIT1 | There is a logical connection between the team/event and the sponsor. |
| PFIT2 | The sponsor and the team/event fit well together. |
| PFIT3 | The company and the team/event / defend the same values / stand for similar things. |

*Questionnaire source: Speed and Thompson, 2000.*

The third part was focused on brand and product. After choosing the event, we asked the respondents to cite a brand that was sponsoring this event or a team/athlete present at the event. The questions that followed regarded product benefits and attributes, brand attitudes and brand personality. Since from the qualitative study we understood that our target respondents were inclined to consider the product-related attributes as more relevant, we decided to avoid questions regarding non-product-related attributes. In regard to the three categories of benefits defined by Keller (1993): functional, experiential and symbolic, in this section we included only functional and experiential. Again, from the interviews we captured that symbolic benefits were not relevant as such, but were connected to self-expression concepts, such as brand self-similarity, that we placed in the next section. For the questions on the brand personality, we chose the possible characteristics to describe the brand directly from the adjectives and characteristics mentioned by the interviewees, before grouping them according to the five dimensions of the brand personality identified by Aaker (1997).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefits</th>
<th>BEN1</th>
<th>The functions provided by this brand meet my needs.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BEN2</td>
<td>This brand is important in my daily life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BEN3</td>
<td>I feel proud using this product.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BEN4</td>
<td>I like to visit the product’s Web site.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product Attributes</td>
<td>PATTR1</td>
<td>The likely quality of the product is extremely high.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PATTR2</td>
<td>The likelihood that the product would be functional is very high.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PATTR3</td>
<td>The likelihood that the product would be reliable is very high.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand Attitudes</td>
<td>BATTI1</td>
<td>I like this brand.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BATTI2</td>
<td>I have a favourable attitude towards this brand.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand Personality</td>
<td>BPERS1</td>
<td>Characteristics that best describe the brand.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Questionnaire source: Speed and Thompson, 2000; Huang et al., 2015.*

The fourth part was about the brand and the consumer, focused on understanding how respondents identified themselves with the chosen brand and if their values and lifestyle matched with the brand.

In the section of the brand self-similarities we used the same adjectives and characteristics used to describe the brand personality, in order to see if there were similarities and therefore identify the degree of brand self-identification. The section of the self-expressive benefits represents the symbolic benefits that the respondents felt about the brand.

| Brand identification | BIDEN1 | I feel a strong sense of belonging to brand X. |
|                      | BIDEN2 | I identify strongly with brand X.             |
|                      | BIDEN3 | This brand and I share the same values.       |
|                      | BIDEN4 | I think this brand fits well with my lifestyle. |
|                      | BIDEN5 | I use this brand because it makes a statement about me. |
|                      | BIDEN6 | I feel like this brand and I stand for similar things. |
| Brand self-similarities | BSSIM1 | Characteristics that describe better the brand. |
|                         | BSSIM2 | Characteristics that describe better me        |
| Self-expressive benefits | SEBEN1 | Having branded gear matters to me.             |
|                           | SEBEN2 | By using this brand, I show other people who I am. |
|                           | SEBEN3 | I am proud to have others know that I use this brand. |

*Questionnaire source: Sen et al., 2012.*
The fifth and last part was composed of concluding questions on the overall sponsorship response. The respondents were asked to express their opinion according to the attitudes towards the brand in terms of favour, interest, and use of the brand and the products. Those three intentions were identified as the dependent variable of the study, since those factors are influenced by all the other variables present in the other sections. Those questions were designed to understand the effect of the other variables on these three dimensions of attitudes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Favour</th>
<th>FAVOR1</th>
<th>This sponsorship makes me feel more favourable towards the sponsor.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>FAVOR2</td>
<td>This sponsorship would make me like the sponsor more.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest</td>
<td>INTER1</td>
<td>This sponsorship would make me more likely to notice the sponsor’s name on other occasions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>INTER2</td>
<td>This sponsorship would make me more likely to pay attention to the sponsor’s advertising.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>INTER3</td>
<td>This sponsorship would make me more likely to remember the sponsor’s promotion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use</td>
<td>USE1</td>
<td>This sponsorship would make me more likely to use the sponsor’s product.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>USE2</td>
<td>This sponsorship would make me more likely to consider this company’s products the next time I buy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>USE3</td>
<td>I would be more likely to buy from the sponsor as a result of this sponsorship.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Questionnaire source: Speed and Thompson, 2000.

4.3.3 Data collection

We decided to have the questionnaire only in English, mainly due to time limitations and to make the analysis that followed more reliable and clear. The initial questionnaire was tested through a pilot study on a group of three gamers and three sport enthusiast, to make sure that it was well structured and clear for the respondents.

The questionnaire was available online for five days, from May 10th to May 15th 2018.
5. Results

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first one will present the results of the qualitative study, and the second one will provide an overview of the results of the quantitative study.

5.1 Results of the qualitative study

This section introduces the results of the semi-structured interviews, and presents the differences that have been observed between sport and eSport enthusiasts’ behaviours. Twelve interviews have been conducted, gathering thoughts, feelings and opinions from sport and eSport enthusiasts. We present the results according to our variables, with each section starting with the results for sport, and then for eSport.

Our six respondents for sports were all emotionally and physically engaged in the activity, either by being supporters (all of them) or by being athletes themselves (four respondents out of six). The most often mentioned sports were swimming and basketball (two respondents out of six for each sport), and then cycling and skiing. The gamers interviewed were all eSport enthusiasts, considering gaming as an important part of their daily life. The respondents were all familiar with eSport games, mostly playing MOBAs and FPS such as League of Legends (four respondents out of six) or Counter Strike (two respondents out of six). Four of six interviewees stated that they watch eSport competitions online to learn from the professional players and improve their own skills at a game.
Brand and Event

Event Image

The six sport enthusiasts interviewed were interested in sports competitions. Two respondents out of six mentioned NBA as the main event of their interest, three out of six considered the Olympic Games as their favourite event, and the last one talked about the Tour de France. All the respondents had a positive image of the event in their mind, defining it as exciting and competitive, and they were especially attached to one specific athlete/team present at the event.

“I feel emotionally attached to the Golden State Warriors. Since I live in a different time zone, for me the match they played was in the middle of the night. That night I was awake until 6am, knowing that at 8 am I should have gone to work. But it was the best night of my life”. The attachment to a specific event showed by four of our respondents was mainly due to their past or present practice of that sport: “I feel that when I watch a swimming race, I am like... part of it. I know exactly the feelings that they have, and the efforts they made to be there competing”.

The gamers interviewed were interested in following eSport events, and five of them were or are still part of a gaming team, and had already been taking part into competitions. The most cited event was the League of Legends World Championship (four times out of six), followed by a Counter Strike tournament and the PGSeries, a multi-gaming championship. Those events benefit from a positive and engaging image: the interviewees all associated eSport events with adrenaline, excitement, interest and competitiveness. The growing international influence is also an attractive quality of these events: “About the League of Legends World Championship, there is a real evolution concerning the visibility. When you consider that in Season 1 (the first year Worlds were organized for this game) it was only on an European level, now it’s completely international with American, European, Chinese, Korean leagues and more”. Although gamers can have different reasons why they follow some eSport events and competitions, they usually revolve around the will to improve at the game, learn from the professional players’ strategies, but also the will to watch a particular team or player’s performance at top-level. “It helps me understand the game mechanics and see what the pro gamers are doing, what type of strategy is effective... I watch them to improve my skills”.

30
Perceived fit

In the sports field, the respondents came up with different sponsors for the chosen disciplines: Arena was mentioned twice, followed by Under Armour, Nike, Shimano and Craft. They all appreciated the fact that the brand is present at the event, and also described that during the event there are brand logos and advertisements everywhere, which makes it easy to remember them. In fact, the interviewees did not have any difficulties to provide several brand names when asked. “I remember sponsors because there are brands logos everywhere. When an athlete is interviewed after a match for example, you can see it perfectly”. The interviewees also considered that there was a good fit between the sponsor and the event. Often sponsors produce gear used during the events and it makes sense for them to be present as sponsors to reach new customers. One respondent said that the brand and the team it sponsored share the same values. Another important aspect is the benefits sponsors can bring to the event: “It is good to have Arena as a sponsor, because when the brand is at the event they invest more money, so it is good for the event. It also depends on the restrictions that come with it: if they don’t affect too much the proceeding of the event or the sporting values such as fairness, it is fine”.

Out of the six interviews conducted with eSport enthusiasts, five respondents came up with endemic brands (meaning they are directly related to the gaming industry) such as Samsung, Intel, Razer, Hyper X, and one cited Coca-Cola. It can be noted that the answers were not always accurate, in the sense that the respondents were sometimes mentioning a brand as a sponsor of an event they recalled, while it actually was not a sponsor of said event. Three of the six interviewees admitted it was somewhat difficult to recall a sponsor, as they were not particularly paying attention to it: “I’d say Coca-Cola, but honestly, I have no idea. I know Coca was sponsoring the event [League of Legends World Championship] for a few years, but I can’t recall if they were here this year or not…”.

All in all, when asked if it made sense to them that brand X (referring to the brand the respondents mentioned) was sponsoring event Y (the event the interviewees chose to talk about), the six respondents affirmed it made sense. The main reason was that they consider the brand’s business is in relation and in line with eSport: the brand produces gaming gear, or provides relevant equipment or support to the team or event sponsored. “Intel is a computer brand that has a big influence in its field and the premises of eSport competitions were played
on personal computers... So it is normal for a company such as Intel to sponsor this type of activity”.

Attitudes towards the brand as a sponsor

All the sports respondents were aware about the brands sponsoring the events, and were able to recall several of them during the interviews. In four out of six cases we found that the presence of the sponsor was seen as a positive and beneficial for all the parties involved: brand, event, athletes and supporters.

“Having Arena sponsoring that race was good for everyone! The brand had advertisements, the event received money, the athletes got free samples and gears and outside the race area there were many Arena stands with products in sales and free to try!” The same respondent even mentioned that when she knows that this specific brand is sponsoring that event, she is even more willing to go physically to see the event, to have the possibility to buy branded gear from previous season on sales.

On the eSport side, all of the six interviewees recognized that the event and the brand they mentioned fit well together. We did not detect any hostility towards sponsors: five of the six respondents did not care or pay attention to the sponsoring of a team or of an event. They had more of a neutral, uninterested attitude towards the brands, not being overly excited or showing more interest because it was sponsoring one of their favourite team or event. This shows that, for the gamers interviewed, a brand’s status as sponsor has little influence on the opinion and interest they show in it. Sponsorship may influence the consumers to check brand X first when they are looking to buy something, as mentioned by some interviewees, but not enough to strongly impact their choice: “I won’t go and see what they are doing until I need new stuff. But maybe it would push me to have a look at what they do first, before I have a look at other brands”.
Brand and Product

Attitudes, attributes, and benefits

The sport enthusiasts sounded satisfied overall with the products of the brands mentioned as sponsors. The most important factors driving them to use products from those brands were, together with one brand’s presence at the event as a sponsor, good quality, fit and the large variety of product lines that the brands propose: “I really like and trust the quality of their products. So I buy from this brand mainly for the characteristics, the quality and the innovation of the fabric that they use for the competition swimsuits”. Having branded gears was another important aspect for the respondents: “If I have to buy a new pair of running shoes, I always go for Nike. I know that the quality is excellent, and the brand has a personal meaning to me”.

While for gamers recalling the sponsor of an event could be difficult sometimes, the interviews showed that even though they do not necessarily care about what others are using, they do pay attention to their own equipment. According to the interviews, the most important characteristic eSport enthusiasts are looking for is functionality. Some of the keywords that appear in all of the six interviews are performance, quality and reliability. Also, it seems that gamers tend to not consider the name of the brand as such: “I didn’t choose my computer because of the brand, but rather because I was looking for specific characteristics and good performance in general”. Gamers will sometimes refer to some professional players when not knowing where to start looking for new equipment: “I bought a new headset recently, that I chose because I saw a lot of pro players and streamers using it. I think that if the pros use it, then it must be good quality”.
Brand personality

Since the respondents mentioned different brands, the descriptions of the brand personalities that they provided us with were different. However, there were some similarities in the adjectives used to describe the brands. Common keywords for sport were: competitive, ambitious, good quality, adrenaline and complete (in the sense that the brands provide a wide range of product for training outfits). It seems that athletes prefer to have a complete outfit with products from the same brand (using for example Nike shoes, t-shirt and shorts). “If I have to think about the human characteristics that I would associate with Nike, the first adjectives that come to my mind are competitive, outstanding and of course good quality!”

On the other side, eSport enthusiasts used words such as reliable, smart, competitive, sophisticated, audacious, and solution-driven. Overall, the keywords revolved around competition, reliability and trust, and masculinity. Four out of six interviewees pictured the brand as a man with different characteristics, while two others described an elegant and sophisticated woman. “I would see a man, imposing, impressive, sporty... For the personality, I would see someone very competitive that would want to be always first. And determined.”

Brand and Consumer

Brand identification and self-expression

In five cases out of six the respondents showed a strong sense of belonging to the brand, defining it as ‘the only brand that is a must during my trainings’. One respondent associates to the brand similar characteristics that he would associate to himself. “Under Armour for me is competition, but also who is behind the armour. Behind it, there is a simple guy or a mum, just a common person like me”; “Simple. Because all the athletes that wear Under Armour, are common people like us, that train and try to do their best”. Five respondents mentioned using branded gear as much as possible, and one of the main reasons was because they feel like these brands share the same values as them, and best represent their lifestyle, especially during their practice of sport.

As for eSport, it came out very clearly during the interviews that the gamers were not at all interested by any kind of emotional or self-expressive benefits. They do not identify with the brands they mention, and when asked if they feel like brand X matches their lifestyle or the
values they defend, five out of six respondents answered with a clear no. The main reason being that they see their equipment solely as gaming equipment (their computer, their headset…), that they purchase for their own benefit, not to showcase it to others. They do not live through it; they simply use it. Therefore, they do not feel like it shows anything about their lifestyle, nor does it make any statement about them or their values. “They produce good stuff, that’s all. I’m not really thinking about whether it suits/corresponds me or not”.

Favour, interest, and use

All six of the sport respondents showed an increasing favourability, interest and overall willingness to use the brands and their products, after seeing them as sponsor of a sport event. “If there is a brand that I did not know before, after seeing that at the event, I would be curious to look at it and try much more”. Being present as sponsor of an event or of an athlete brings interest and trust in the consumers. One of the interviewees stated that since the athlete was using that brand during the race, it means that the quality was good and the performance increased, therefore she was ready to try it herself!

Out of six eSport respondents, three showed an interest in checking out a brand after seeing it as a sponsor. Although they would not go for it immediately, the interviewees explained that they would feel more comfortable and look at this specific brand’s products first if they need to buy something: “As long as I do not need to buy anything else, I will not go and check. But when the time comes and I need a new product, then probably I will be pushed towards this brand, and have a look at what they offer”. Another interviewee was much more enthusiastic and explained that brands belonging to the gaming industry sponsoring eSport events confirm that they are “the best in their business”, therefore increasing his willingness to try and use products from such brands. It can be perceived as the brands showing interest in eSport activities and supporting its growth, which is greatly appreciated by eSport fans.

Table 3 provides a summary of the findings, and presents the main similarities and differences observed between the two groups, sport and eSport enthusiasts.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Measurement item</th>
<th>Sport</th>
<th>eSport</th>
<th>Summary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Brand and Event</strong></td>
<td>Event image</td>
<td>Positive feelings; excitement, adrenaline, competition, emotional attachment to teams/athletes.</td>
<td>Positive feelings; excitement, interest, international, competition, self-improvement.</td>
<td>Similarities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived fit</td>
<td>Good perceived fit between the event and the sponsor.</td>
<td>Good perceived fit between the event/team/players and the sponsor.</td>
<td>Neutral, almost indifferent attitude. Brand recall not always accurate. Large preference showed for endemic brands (when the brand’s business is related to the gaming industry.)</td>
<td>Similarities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude towards the brand as a sponsor</td>
<td>Overall positive attitude towards sponsors. Enthusiasm. Sponsoring is seen as a good way to support an event or a team.</td>
<td>Overall positive attitude towards sponsors. Enthusiasm. Sponsoring is seen as a good way to support an event or a team.</td>
<td>Overall positive attitude towards sponsors. Enthusiasm. Sponsoring is seen as a good way to support an event or a team.</td>
<td>Differences. There is a difference in the way the two groups perceive sponsorship and its effects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Brand and Product</strong></td>
<td>Attitudes, attributes, benefits</td>
<td>Positive opinion towards the brands mentioned.</td>
<td>Drivers for using one brand/product are the quality, reliability and performance (functionality). Gamers do not consider the brand name as important, and do not buy because of a brand’s name. Will trust and sometimes refer to professional players for insight on what to buy when they have no idea where to start.</td>
<td>The two groups are similar in the sense that they will trust and refer to professional athletes and players for the gear they use, although it is truer for sport enthusiasts than gamers. There are differences in the characteristics they look for when buying/using a product or a brand.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Brand and Consumer</strong></td>
<td><strong>Brand personality</strong></td>
<td><strong>Keywords were</strong>: competitive, ambitious, good quality, adrenaline…</td>
<td><strong>Keywords revolved around competition, reliability and trust, and masculinity.</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Brand and Consumer</strong></td>
<td><strong>Brand identification and self-expression</strong></td>
<td><strong>Strong sense of belonging to the brand; the respondents associate similar characteristics of the brand to themselves.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Gamers did not show any kind of interest in emotional or self-expressive benefits.</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Feeling that the brands they use completely match and represent their values and lifestyle.</strong></td>
<td><strong>They do not identify themselves with the brands they use, nor do they think the brands make a statement about their values or lifestyle.</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sponsorship Response</strong></td>
<td><strong>Favour, interest and use</strong></td>
<td><strong>Increased favour, interest and overall willingness to use a brand’s products after seeing it as a sponsor of sport events.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Increased interest and willingness to check the brand’s products and to try them.</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>The sponsor status brings interest and trust in the consumers.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Sponsorship is perceived as the brand showing interest in eSport activities, which is greatly appreciated by eSport fans.</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Sponsorship favours positive feelings and perception towards the sponsoring brand, and seems to facilitate brand recall.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Similarities. Although athletes seem to show a greater enthusiasm towards sports sponsors, gamers still showed an interest in trying a sponsor’s products.</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 3 – Summary of the qualitative study*
5.2 Results of the quantitative study

This section presents the results of our quantitative study, collected through the analysis of the questionnaire. The sample consists of 105 participants. 79% of the respondents were between 19 and 31 years old, including 78 sport enthusiasts and 27 gamers. The different sizes of the two groups become relevant in the results of the Levene test and the T-test. The difference in size and the small size of the eSport sample may cause inequality of variance between groups and therefore affect the Levene test.

We present our results according to the different statistical tests that we conducted using the software IBM SPSS. At the beginning we screened and cleaned our data, and then we studied the normality, followed by a factor analysis, reliability test and concluding with T-test analysis.

Cleaning the data

In the first phase of this analysis we checked our data for outliers and missing data to avoid possible errors in the results of the quantitative study. There were neither outliers nor missing data. All the scores obtained for our variables were in the range of possible scores that we expected. This phase is important because scores that fall outside the possible range can distort the data and create errors in the statistical analysis.
Normality analysis

For the purposes of our data analysis, and in particular the exploratory factor analysis, we conducted a normality analysis as the second analysis on our data. According to Pallant (2016) to test the normality of the data we had to look at the skewness and kurtosis values of the measurement items. The skewness value gives indications of the symmetry of the distribution, while the kurtosis gives indications of the peakedness of the distribution.

As shown in the following Table 4, the highest skewness absolute value that we obtained was 1.234 and the highest kurtosis absolute value was 1.615. All the other values obtained were below 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Skewness</th>
<th>Kurtosis</th>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Skewness</th>
<th>Kurtosis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E/SPORT</td>
<td>1,127</td>
<td>-0.743</td>
<td></td>
<td>Brand Attitudes</td>
<td>BATTI1</td>
<td>-0.630</td>
<td>0.085</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Event Image</td>
<td>EIMG1</td>
<td>-1.234</td>
<td>1.615</td>
<td>BATTI2</td>
<td>-0.738</td>
<td>0.518</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>EIMG2</td>
<td>-0.176</td>
<td>-1.006</td>
<td>Brand Identification</td>
<td>BIDEN1</td>
<td>-0.159</td>
<td>-0.518</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>EIMG3</td>
<td>-0.917</td>
<td>0.424</td>
<td>BIDEN2</td>
<td>-0.046</td>
<td>-0.829</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>EIMG4</td>
<td>-0.535</td>
<td>-0.281</td>
<td>BIDEN3</td>
<td>-0.167</td>
<td>-0.306</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Fit</td>
<td>PFIT1</td>
<td>-0.757</td>
<td>-0.439</td>
<td>BIDEN4</td>
<td>-0.291</td>
<td>-0.708</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PFIT2</td>
<td>-0.685</td>
<td>-0.535</td>
<td>BIDEN5</td>
<td>0.423</td>
<td>-0.499</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PFIT3</td>
<td>-0.510</td>
<td>-0.775</td>
<td>BIDEN6</td>
<td>0.014</td>
<td>-0.597</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes sponsor</td>
<td>ATTBS1</td>
<td>-0.695</td>
<td>0.201</td>
<td>Self-expressive Benefits</td>
<td>SEBEN1</td>
<td>-0.233</td>
<td>-0.812</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ATTBS2</td>
<td>-0.494</td>
<td>0.093</td>
<td>SEBEN2</td>
<td>0.238</td>
<td>-0.680</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefits</td>
<td>BEN1</td>
<td>-0.611</td>
<td>-0.222</td>
<td>SEBEN3</td>
<td>0.238</td>
<td>-0.680</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BEN2</td>
<td>0.443</td>
<td>-0.591</td>
<td>Favour</td>
<td>FAVOR1</td>
<td>-0.410</td>
<td>0.037</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BEN3</td>
<td>-0.305</td>
<td>-0.597</td>
<td>FAVOR2</td>
<td>-0.445</td>
<td>0.363</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BEN4</td>
<td>0.040</td>
<td>-1.020</td>
<td>Interest</td>
<td>INTER1</td>
<td>-0.751</td>
<td>0.399</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product attributes</td>
<td>PATTR1</td>
<td>-0.989</td>
<td>0.903</td>
<td>INTER2</td>
<td>-0.531</td>
<td>-0.130</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PATTR2</td>
<td>-1.014</td>
<td>0.758</td>
<td>INTER3</td>
<td>-0.489</td>
<td>-0.031</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PATTR3</td>
<td>-1.171</td>
<td>1.033</td>
<td>Use</td>
<td>USE1</td>
<td>-0.505</td>
<td>-0.289</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>USE2</td>
<td>-0.406</td>
<td>-0.514</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>USE3</td>
<td>-0.513</td>
<td>-0.025</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 4 – Skewness and Kurtosis values*

With the results of this analysis, we can see that the measurement items are sufficiently normal for a factor analysis.
Factor analysis

Next we conducted a factor analysis. The factor analysis is usually used to reduce the large number of variables to a fewer number of factors that will be analysed in the T-test. For this study we used exploratory factor analysis and to use Varimax rotation. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy (KMO) that we obtained was 0.887. This indicates, according to Pallant (2016), that if the value is close to 0.6 the data is suitable for factor analysis. Moreover, the communalities are high enough which indicates the data is appropriate.

At first, we started with a factor analysis with a 12-factors solution. However, we observed that the software would have suggested us to consider 5 factors instead of the 12 factors we forced. Therefore, we ran several factor analyses with all possible combinations of variables, but to keep some structure to it we kept our dependent variables separated from the independent variables. Table 5 shows the results of the factor analysis of each variable and the reliability test associated.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Reliability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Event Image</td>
<td>EIMG1</td>
<td>0.747</td>
<td>0.851</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>EIMG3</td>
<td>0.964</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>EIMG4</td>
<td>0.730</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Fit</td>
<td>PFIT1</td>
<td>0.949</td>
<td>0.895</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PFIT2</td>
<td>0.815</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PFIT3</td>
<td>0.821</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes sponsor</td>
<td>ATTBS1</td>
<td>0.786</td>
<td>0.890</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ATTBS2</td>
<td>0.780</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefits</td>
<td>BEN2</td>
<td>0.624</td>
<td>0.788</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BEN3</td>
<td>0.903</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BEN4</td>
<td>0.717</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product attributes</td>
<td>PATTR1</td>
<td>0.870</td>
<td>0.924</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PATTR2</td>
<td>0.938</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PATTR3</td>
<td>0.880</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand Attitudes</td>
<td>BATTI1</td>
<td>0.731</td>
<td>0.895</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BATTI2</td>
<td>0.785</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The analysis explained the 85.706% of the variance from the results of the cumulative percentage. The factors loading results shown in Table 4 were large enough (all above 0.4) and the values of the reliability test were acceptable as well, because the value of the coefficient was above 0.7.

From the results we found that three factors (EIMG2, BEN1, USE1) were performing poorly, because they had low communalities, low loading and cross loading. After running the reliability analysis to double check those factors, it appeared that they were also performing poorly here. Therefore, we rejected these measurement items.

**T-test analysis**

In order to test if there was a difference in the perceptions of the sport and eSport enthusiasts towards the brand image of the sponsoring brand, we did an Independent Sample T-test analysis, following Pallant (2016). This test is used when there are only two groups and the aim of the research is to compare the Mean scores on some continuous variables for these two different groups.
According to Pallant (2016) before running a T-test we needed to determine our alpha level, which corresponds to the ‘significance level’. Usually the value of alpha is 0.05, however since the size of the group eSport was relatively small, we had to consider the value of alpha as 0.1.

Considering the values obtained from the Levene test, we created Table 6 with the results of the analysis. To find out if there was a significant difference between the two groups, we needed to have a look at the column Sig. (2-tailed) and the values needed to be below 0.1 to assume a significant difference.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean Sport</th>
<th>Mean Esport</th>
<th>t Sport</th>
<th>t Esport</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed) Sport</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed) Esport</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EIMG</td>
<td>2.929</td>
<td>2.666</td>
<td>1.724</td>
<td>1.730</td>
<td>0.088</td>
<td>0.090</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PFIT</td>
<td>3.572</td>
<td>3.802</td>
<td>-0.918</td>
<td>-0.979</td>
<td>0.361</td>
<td>0.332</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ATTBS</td>
<td>3.525</td>
<td>3.648</td>
<td>-0.566</td>
<td>-0.570</td>
<td>0.573</td>
<td>0.571</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BEN</td>
<td>2.910</td>
<td>2.938</td>
<td>-0.129</td>
<td>-0.135</td>
<td>0.898</td>
<td>0.893</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PATTR</td>
<td>3.812</td>
<td>3.740</td>
<td>0.318</td>
<td>0.315</td>
<td>0.751</td>
<td>0.754</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIDEN</td>
<td>3.006</td>
<td>2.549</td>
<td>2.161</td>
<td>1.829</td>
<td>0.033</td>
<td>0.076</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEBEN</td>
<td>2.794</td>
<td>2.506</td>
<td>1.266</td>
<td>1.105</td>
<td>0.208</td>
<td>0.277</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FAVOR</td>
<td>3.294</td>
<td>3.425</td>
<td>-0.646</td>
<td>-0.560</td>
<td>0.520</td>
<td>0.579</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTER</td>
<td>3.517</td>
<td>3.567</td>
<td>-0.254</td>
<td>-0.252</td>
<td>0.800</td>
<td>0.802</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USE</td>
<td>3.371</td>
<td>3.314</td>
<td>0.261</td>
<td>0.241</td>
<td>0.794</td>
<td>0.811</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6 - Independent Sample Test

The values of event image (EIMG) and brand identification (BIDEN) for both groups were below 0.1, therefore we were able to assume that there was a significant difference between the two groups for those variables. All the other values were higher than 0.1, which means that there is no significant difference in the answers from the sport and eSport respondents.
**Multiple Regression Test**

The multiple regression test was used to study the relationship between the dependent variable Sponsorship Response (SPSRESP), formed by favour, interest, and use and the independent variables Event Image (EIMG), Perceived Fit (PFIT), Attitudes of the brand sponsoring (ATTBS), Benefits (BEN), Product Attributes (PATTR), Brand Identification (BIDEN) and Self-expressive Benefits (SEBEN), and to test the significance and the impact of each variable.

Before conducting the multiple regression test we had to run a correlation matrix to show that there was a relationship between the dependent variable and the independent variables. In Table 7 below shows the values of the correlations between the dependent and the independent variables. Following Pallant (2016), the ideal values should be between 0,3 and 0,7.

The values are all included in the ideal interval. Therefore we could assume that there is a significant relationship between these variables.

Next, we ran every possible combination of simple regressions for sport and eSport. However, due to the small sample size of the eSport group, we had very low power, and as such, the results for eSport were inconclusive and with errors. We chose not to show any of them, considering them not valuable and meaningful for our study.

In conclusion, we were able to detect a difference in the response of sport and eSport respondents in terms of how the Event Image and the Brand Identification affect their perception of the brand image of the sponsoring brand. However due to the small sample size of the eSport group, we were not able to identify which variables impact their favour, interest, and use towards the sponsoring brand.
6. Discussion

In this section, we present the results of our study, and we will discuss them factor by factor.

Event image

In the context of sponsorship, the event image may affect the image of the brand sponsoring the event/team/athlete. According to Grohs and Reisinger (2014), the consumers’ perceptions of an event from the image of this event, are reflected by their associations towards the event. Speed and Thompson (2000) suggest that associating a sponsor with an event, results in the creation of event’s associations that become attached to the brand in the consumer's memory. We have seen during the interviews that all of the respondents were showing genuine interest for competitions; in the questionnaire, 84,6% expressed their interest in sports events. Sport enthusiasts are more likely to be emotionally attached to a favourite team or athlete, pushing them to watch the competitions their idols are taking part into. Therefore, they associate the positive feelings they have towards their favourite team/athlete and the event. On the other hand, eSport enthusiasts seem to show more interest for the competition as such, the clash between teams and players, or for a team or player’s performance at a specific event, rather than attending an event as a supporter of only one team or player.

When asked about a sponsor of the event they chose, sport enthusiasts have no difficulties recalling brands, while it can be a bit more difficult for gamers. As observed during the interviews, the respondents’ answers were not always as accurate, for example associating a brand with the wrong event. The qualitative study indicates that both groups show similarities in the way they perceive the events: the common keywords were excitement, competition, and adrenaline. While the questionnaire shows that most of the respondents from both groups attribute a ‘positive symbolic meaning’ to the event they chose, the statistical analysis reveals the two groups have a different perception of event image. But even though their perception differs, the associations people make between the event image and the sponsor’s brand image are not impacting significantly the effect of sponsorship, neither for sport nor eSport.
Perceived fit

According to Papadimitriou et al. (2016), the higher the perceived fit between the sponsoring brand and the event, the better the spectators’ perceptions towards the sponsor’s quality. Becker-Olsen et al. (2006) also mentioned that supporters are more willing to engage with the sponsoring brand when they perceive the parts of the sponsorship deal as congruent, and when they consider that their favourite team/athlete matches well with its sponsor. Through the qualitative study, we have seen that both groups, sport and eSport enthusiasts, present similarities in the way they assess the fit between an event and a sponsor. When sport enthusiasts think the brand and the event represent the same things and defend the same values; the fit perceived between the two is high. eSport enthusiasts showed that, even when they do not consider the brand and the event stand for similar things, as long as they find a logical connection between the two, the perceived fit is positive as well.

From the interviews, we can assume that both groups have the same reasoning: as long as they have a positive opinion about the team or the event and the sponsoring brand, and think they fit well together, the respondents show positive feelings and attitudes towards the sponsor. They showed increased favour and interest in using the brand’s products, therefore leading to a positive response to sponsorship.

Brand associations

Keller (1993) divided brand associations into three categories: attitudes, benefits and attributes. Consumers hold brand associations as well as associations with sport properties, such as events, athletes and team (Grohs and Reisinger, 2014). In the context of sponsorship, supporters develop associations in their minds between the brands present and the event, team or athlete sponsored. Those associations, formed by nodes in the consumers’ memories, are all connected, and thinking about one idea triggers the recall of another. Then, when consumers see the brand in store or online, they associate it immediately with the event/team/athlete; this has been proved to be true in the context of sport sponsorship, but the present study shows that the gamers’ reactions are, to a certain extent, different from those of sport enthusiasts.
ESport enthusiasts also create the aforementioned associations, but the way they react to those associations is different. We have seen from the interviews that sometimes gamers tend to associate different brands and events that are actually not related from a sponsorship perspective. However, they do associate the feelings they have towards events and competitions (adrenaline, excitement, interest…) with sponsoring brands, and have shown trust in professional players and streamers’ judgement when it comes to the gear they use. Almost all the brands mentioned by eSport enthusiasts were endemic brands such as Intel, Asus and LDLC. On the other side, sport enthusiasts mentioned both endemic and non-endemic brands (meaning that the sponsoring brand’s business is not particularly related to sport activities) such as Gatorade, Nike, Adidas or Red Bull. While both groups harbour positive feelings towards the brands mentioned, they are also similar in the way they trust and refer to professional athletes and players for the gear they use, although it is even truer for sport enthusiasts than gamers.

We have observed noteworthy differences between sport and eSport enthusiasts in the characteristics they look for when looking to buy a new product. Sport enthusiasts are driven by the perceived quality, fit and variety of products offered by a brand. Both the interviews and the questionnaire also showed that having branded gear matters a lot to them. This is, for example, not the case for eSport enthusiasts. Gamers do not consider the brand name as important, and do not buy because of a brand’s name. They are mainly looking for functional benefits, good quality and performance. But even though they are not looking for the same product attributes and benefits, our study shows that brand associations have a strong impact on both groups’ responses to sponsorship.

**Brand personality**

Brand personality is a set of human characteristics that consumers associate with a specific brand. Personality traits of the people associated with the brand are transferred directly to the brand, but also indirectly through product-related attributes, symbols, and brand names (Aaker, 1997).

According to the results of both qualitative and quantitative studies, common keywords for sport were: *competitive* and *ambitious*, and then *good quality*, *adrenaline* and *complete* (in the sense that the brands provide a wide range of product for training outfits). It seems that athletes prefer to have a complete outfit with products from the same brand (using for
example Nike shoes, t-shirt and shorts). For eSports, the keywords revolved around *competition*, *reliability* and *trust*, and *masculinity*. From those keywords, it seems that gamers are more focused on functionality, while sport enthusiasts choose characteristics highlighting the competitive side of sport in general.

We observed that sport enthusiasts tend to associate the same characteristics they think both fit the brand and best describe themselves, while eSports respondents seem to give more disparate answers, choosing different characteristics and dissociating the brand they chose from themselves.

**Brand identification**

In the context of sport sponsorship, consumers tend to prefer products that correspond to their image and express their personality, match their values and reflect their lifestyle. Jung and Kim (2015), explained that the formation of self-identification increases when the consumers perceive the quality level of the brand as high, and when they have increasing feelings of trust and friendliness towards the brand. We observed a significant difference in the way sport and eSports enthusiasts relate to the concepts of self and brand identification. From the interviews, we could already say that gamers have different behaviours towards brands, compared to athletes. As stated before, having branded gear is important for sport enthusiasts. This has been confirmed by the questionnaire, as the sport respondents affirm the brands they use and wear allow them to make statements about themselves, and give hints to others about their lifestyle and the values they stand for. Brands are completely integrated in the way sport enthusiasts live, while eSports enthusiasts show a complete opposite position: 81% of the questionnaire respondents express they do not feel any sense of belonging or identification with the brand they chose. Be it from the interviews or the questionnaire, gamers did not show any kind of interest in emotional or self-expressive benefits. The qualitative study allows us to understand that the main reason for this seeming indifference to brand names is that gamers seem to see their equipment solely as gaming equipment (computer, headset…). They purchase for their own benefit and not to showcase it to others. They do not live through it: they simply use it. The analysis of the questionnaire clearly shows that there is a significant difference between the two groups’ relationship to brand identification and self-expression concepts. Brand identification has a strong influence on sport enthusiasts’ response to sponsorship, while being almost insignificant for eSports enthusiasts.
Sponsorship response

Speed and Thompson (2000) argue that attitudes toward the event are important to determine a favourable response to sponsorship. Respondents’ attitudes and intentions represent the sponsorship response at three different levels of effects: interest, favour and use. The interest represents the extent to which respondents believe that the sponsorship of a specific event by a specific brand will influence their attention to the brand. The favour is the favourability of the consumers towards the brand. The use is the willingness to try and use the brand’s products (Speed and Thompson, 2000).

The interviews showed similar results. Although athletes seem to show a greater enthusiasm, gamers still showed an interest in trying a sponsor’s products. Sport respondents showed an increasing favourability, interest and overall willingness to use the brands and their products, after seeing them as sponsor of a sport event. Being present as sponsor of an event or of an athlete brings interest and trust in the consumers. eSport enthusiasts seem to demonstrate more appreciation towards brands showing interest in eSport activities and in supporting their development. The questionnaire results show that eSport sponsorship is more likely to increase brand recall, by increasing the likeliness of the consumers to notice the sponsor’s name on other occasions and to pay more attention to the sponsor’s promotion. 60% of the eSport respondents also expressed that sponsorship would make them more likely to use the sponsor’s products, and 51% would be more likely to buy products from the sponsor as a result of the sponsorship activity. On the other hand, 47% of the sport respondents would be more likely to buy from the sponsoring brand, and 51% would be more likely to pay more attention to the sponsor’s promotion.

The response to sponsorship seems similar for the two groups studied, but the factors influencing it are not the same. This study shows that sport enthusiasts are clearly more impacted by brand identification and self-concepts than eSport enthusiasts are. Brand associations matter and have a strong influence for both groups, even though we observed differences in the way said associations are formed by sport enthusiasts and by gamers.
7. Conclusions

7.1 Conclusions of the study

This research was conducted in order to find out how sport and eSport enthusiasts differ in their perception of the brand image of a brand in the context of sponsorship.

The statistical analysis shows us, through the t-tests, that there is a significant difference in the way sport and eSport enthusiasts relate to the concepts of event image and brand identification. By using linear regressions, we wanted to study this difference, understand how big it was and see how it impacts our dependent variable, sponsorship response, formed by favour, interest and use. However, we realized that the eSport sample was too small for conducting a regression analysis, and we were not able to test the significance and the impact of the independent variables (event image, perceived fit, functional, emotional and self-expressive benefits, attitudes towards the sponsoring brand, product attributes, and brand identification) on the response to sponsorship, our dependent variable. Anyhow the qualitative study confirms there is a difference in the perception of brand identification and brand associations (attributes, benefits and attitudes), and allows us to see the impact of those two items on the sponsorship response.

Sponsoring athletes, teams and events increases the favour, interest and use consumers have towards the sponsoring brand. Sport enthusiasts demonstrate a genuine interest in checking and trying a sponsor’s products, mainly because they see it as a token of quality and assurance of reliability, but also as a way to imitate their favourite athletes. ESport enthusiasts have not shown the same emotional attachment towards professional teams or players, or to a lesser extent. Therefore, even though they show some appreciation towards brands sponsoring and supporting the development of eSport activities, they seem to first have the need to buy a new product before getting seriously involved in the process of looking for brands and products, and being willing to try some of them. It seems being the sponsor of an eSport event is not enough to catch their interest and increase their favour towards the brand. But could it be that gamers are not as consciously aware of branding effects?
7.2 Managerial implications

ESport is still a developing discipline, and the brands have here an occasion to invest and increase brand awareness. The key for a better brand recall among eSport enthusiasts may be a continuous, large presence among the gaming community. From the interviews, we can assume that if a brand’s products are seen used by a large number of influencers (i.e. professional gamers and streamers), consumers are more likely to remember the brand and show curiosity and interest for it. Sponsoring an event occasionally may not be enough to stimulate the gamers’ interest and increase their brand recall. Another interesting option for brands could be to focus on one or more players, or invest in an eSport team. The interviews and the questionnaire showed that gamers tend to have a better recall of brands related to the gaming industry, but it is even better for brands clearly engaged with professional teams or players, such as Roccat and LDLC. It provides an opportunity for the brand to create storytelling, and maybe benefit from the same emotional investment sport enthusiasts show towards their favourite teams and athletes.

Also, we can see differences between sport sponsorship, and eSport sponsorship. Sport events are, most of the time, specific to one sport discipline. The Tour de France revolves around cycling, the FIFA World Cup is about football. So it makes sense for a brand such as Arena, which specializes in swimming apparel, to sponsor swimming competitions and not basketball competitions for example. Sport supporters can be interested in following several disciplines, but we can assume that football supporters will rarely show as much interest into other sports as football, for example. Therefore, sponsoring brands target the right discipline, and the right population.

The same cannot be said for eSport: in fact, supporters interested in following competitions of games such as League of Legends, are often familiar with other games from the same genre. Moreover, the profiles of the supporters can be similar for several game genres, and we have seen with this study that sponsorship has more impact on consumers when they are able to see a logical connection between the team/event and the sponsoring brand. With these information in mind, we can assume that one brand can sponsor eSport events and competitions for several different games and games genre without being affected by the relevance of its link with the game, while in the context of sport sponsorship, brands might be limited to the disciplines their business is related to.
This is why we would recommend brands interested to invest in eSport activities, to try to be present regularly as a sponsor, and at more than one event. To keep up the comparison with sport events, eSport is still a developing discipline, a developing industry. Some eSport events are not yet as well-established as the Olympics or the FIFA World Cup, for example. The League of Legends World Championship, which has been the most cited event in the interviews and questionnaire of this study, has been going on for seven years, but started getting popular after the third or fourth year. So it becomes evident that it is harder to be recalled as a sponsor of an event, if this event has only had one or two editions. Also, punctual events happening only once or twice a year may not be enough to increase the brand awareness of a sponsor. This is why it may be more interesting to be present at different kind of events and for different types of games. Another option could also be to invest in regular professional circuits, in which the competition takes place every week or every two weeks for several months, as it is the case for the League of Legends Championship Series (LCS) for example.
7.3 Suggestions for future research

This study has been conducted to understand if there were differences in the way sport and eSport enthusiasts perceive the brand image of a brand in the context of sponsorship. We did not explore how, or to what extent their perceptions differ from one another.

While conducting the literature review, we realised that almost no research studies have been conducted on the sponsorship of eSport events, teams, or athletes. All existing theories focus on the sector of sport. We know that today, sponsorship represents 80% of the revenues generated by the eSport industry, while also being a powerful tool for companies to manipulate their brand image. Therefore, it can be very interesting to dig deeper into the subject, as the present study shows that sport and eSport enthusiasts tend to share both similarities and differences. It seems that the theories concerning sport sponsorship cannot all be applied to the eSport industry, and it could be important for brands to get a better understanding of how to proceed with this consumer segment, in order to be more efficient in their approach.

Also, in the present research, the eSport enthusiasts sample for the quantitative study was relatively small compared to the sport sample. However, we were able to detect a difference among those two groups in their perception of the sponsoring brand. It would be very interesting to see if the impact of the different variables would be the same on the sponsorship response with a larger sample, and if these results would provide an opportunity to develop new theories more appropriate to the eSport industry.
References:


Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview Guides

A. SPORTS

INTRODUCTION

Please tell me about when your interest in sport first began.
1. Which type of sports do you practice? How often? Have you ever been part of sports team?
2. Are you interested in sport competition? What kind of sport competitions are you interested in?
3. Which team or athlete do you follow and support?
4. Why do you follow them?
5. Do you remember the last or main competition your favourite team/athlete have participated in?

BRAND and EVENT

6. Tell me more about the event that you followed as a supporter.
   a. Do you have any specific reason for attending to the event? (Personal liking of the event)
7. How do you feel about the event? (Event image)
8. Would you be able to recall some of the sponsors at that particular event you just mentioned? (The sponsor)
9. Do you pay attention to the team/athletes/players’ sponsors?
   1. Do you feel like you’re willing to use the same gear as the team/athletes you support? (Attitudes towards the brand as a sponsor)

BRAND and PRODUCT and CONSUMER

10. Choose one brand. How would you define this brand? (Brand attitude)
11. If the brand was a person, how do you think it would look like? And personality? (brand personality)
12. Do you use any of their products? (Why/Why not?)
13. Do you use it because of the characteristics? (Functional benefits)
14. Do you use it because of the brand name? (Symbolic benefits)
15. How do you feel when you use that? (Experiential benefits)
16. Which are the features that you consider when you buy that product? (Brand attributes product related)
   a. When you look for a product from this category, do you go directly for this brand? (Brand attitude)
17. Do you feel that this brand and you share the same values? (Self-concepts values)
18. Do you use this brand because it makes a statement about you? (Self-expression)
19. Do you use this brand because it helps you show others who you are? (*Self-expression*)
20. Do you feel that this brand embraces your lifestyle? (*Self-concepts lifestyle*)
21. How do you feel about this brand sponsoring this specific event/team? (*Attitudes towards the brand as a sponsor*)
22. Do you think it makes sense to have the brand sponsoring this event/team? (*Perceived fit*)
23. After having seen the brand at that event/the team has, would you have a better opinion about the brand? (*Favourability*)
24. After having seen the brand at that event/the team has, would you now be more interested in following the brand? (*Interest*)
25. After having seen the brand at that event/the team has, would you now be more willing to use the brand? (*Use*)
INTRODUCTION

Please tell me about when your interest in esports first began.

1. Which type of Esports do you practice? How often? Have you ever been part of sports team?
2. Are you interested in Esport competition? What kind of sport competitions are you interested in?
3. Which team or athlete do you follow and support?
4. Why do you follow them?
5. Do you remember the last or main competition your favourite team/athlete have participated in?

BRAND and EVENT

6. Tell me more about the event that you followed as a supporter.
   a. Do you have any specific reason for attending physically or virtually to the event? *Personal liking of the event*
7. How do you feel about the event? *Event image*
8. Would you be able to recall some of the sponsors at that particular event you just mentioned? *The sponsor*
9. Do you pay attention to the team/athletes/players’ sponsors?
   a. Do you feel like you’re willing to use the same gear as the team/athletes you support? *Attitudes towards the brand as a sponsor*

BRAND and PRODUCT and CONSUMER

10. Choose one brand. How would you define this brand? *Brand attitude*
11. If the brand was a person, how do you think it would look like? And personality? *brand personality*
12. Do you use any of their products? (Why/Why not?)
13. Do you use it because of the characteristics? *Functional benefits*
14. Do you use it because of the brand name? *Symbolic benefits*
15. How do you feel when you use that? *Experiential benefits*
16. Which are the features that you consider when you buy that product? *Brand attributes product related*
   a. When you look for a product from this category, do you go directly for this brand? *Brand attitude*
17. Do you feel that this brand and you share the same values? *Self-concepts values*
18. Do you use this brand because it makes a statement about you? *Self-expression*
19. Do you use this brand because it helps you show others who you are? *Self-expression*
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21. How do you feel about this brand sponsoring this specific event/team? *Attitudes towards the brand as a sponsor*
22. Do you think it makes sense to have the brand sponsoring this event/team? *(Perceived fit)*
23. After having seen the brand at that event/the team has, would you have a better opinion about the brand? *(Favourability)*
24. After having seen the brand at that event/the team has, would you now be more interested in following the brand? *(Interest)*
25. After having seen the brand at that event/the team has, would you now be more willing to use the brand? *(Use)*
Appendix 2: Questionnaire

Introduction

Personal details

1. Please select your gender:
   - Male
   - Female
   - Other

2. Please indicate your age:
   - 0-18
   - 19-30
   - 31-40
   - 41-50
   - 51-60
   - 60+

Screening question
3. What do you practice/play?
   a. Sports
   b. Video games
   c. Both
   d. Neither sports or video games

Sport questionnaire:

1. How many hours do you train per week? 4
   - 0-3 hours
   - 4-6 hours
   - 7-10 hours
   - More than 10 hours

2. Are you interested in sports events? (race, match, competition) 5
   - Yes, as an athlete
   - Yes, as a supporter
   - Yes, both as an athlete and supporter
   - Not at all
Choose one event among the following:
(We recommend to choose the event you’re the most familiar with):

- NBA (National Basketball Association)
- Olympic/Paralympic Games
- FIFA World Cup
- Tennis Open
- Tour the France
- Rugby World Cup
- FINA Swimming World Championship
- Other

Please write the name of one brand that was sponsoring this event:
[...........................]

Please answer the following questions while keeping in mind the brand you chose.

**Brand and Event**

**Sponsor-Event fit (perceived fit)**

- There is a logical connection between the team/event and the sponsor.
- The sponsor and the team/event fit well together.
- The company and the team/event / defend the same values / stand for similar things.

**Event image**

- I feel that the team/event has a positive symbolic meaning.
- The image of the team/event and the image of the sponsor are similar.

**Personal liking of the event (Event image)**

- I am a strong supporter of this event.
- This event is important to me.

**Attitude towards the brand as a sponsor**

- I like this brand as a sponsor of the team/event: like-dislike
- I have a favourable attitude towards this brand as a sponsor of the team/event: favourable-unfavourable
Brand and Product

Functional benefits

- The functions provided by this brand meet my needs.
- This brand is important in my daily life.

Experiential benefits

- I feel proud by using this product.
- I like to visit the product’s Web site.

Perceived quality (product related attributes)

- The likely quality of the product is extremely high.
- The likelihood that the product would be functional is very high.
- The likelihood that the product would be reliable is very high.

Brand attitudes

- I like this brand: like-dislike
- I have a favourable attitude towards this brand: favourable-unfavourable

Brand Personality

Which are the characteristics that better describe this brand? (tick 4 items)

- Imposing
- Outstanding
- Ambitious
- Competitive
- Chill
- Honest
- Reliable
- Sophisticated
- Upper class
- Simple
- Smart
- Up-to-date
- Successful
- Tough
Brand and Consumers

Brand identification

- I feel a strong sense of belonging to brand X
- I identify strongly with brand X

Brand-self similarity

I am..

- Imposing
- Outstanding
- Ambitious
- Competitive
- Chill
- Honest
- Reliable
- Sophisticated
- Upper class
- Simple
- Smart
- Up-to-date
- Successful
- Tough

Self-expressive benefits

- Having branded gear matters to me.
- By using this brand, I show other people who I am.
- I am proud to have others know that I use this brand.

Values:
- This brand and I share the same values

Lifestyle:
- I think this brand fits well with my lifestyle.
- I use this brand because it makes a statement about me.
Sponsorship response

Favourability

- This sponsorship makes me feel more favourable towards the sponsor.
- This sponsorship would make me like the sponsor more.

Interest

- This sponsorship would make me more likely to notice the sponsor’s name on other occasions.
- This sponsorship would make me more likely to pay attention to the sponsor’s advertising.
- This sponsorship would make me more likely to remember the sponsor’s promotion.

Use

- This sponsorship would make me more likely to use the sponsor’s product.
- This sponsorship would make me more likely to consider this company’s products the next time I buy.
- I would be more likely to buy from the sponsor as a result of this sponsorship.