Sponsorship image and value creation in E-sports

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ABSTRACT

E-sports games can drive the sports industry forward and sponsorship is the best way to engage consumers of this new sport. The purpose of this study is to examine the effect of sponsorship image and consumer participation in co-creation consumption activities on fans' sponsorship response (represented by the variables interest, purchase intention and word of mouth) in e-sports. Four antecedent variables build sponsorship image (i.e., ubiquity of sport, sincerity of sponsor, attitude to sponsor and team identification). A quantitative approach is used for the purposes of this study. Some 445 questionnaires were filled in by fans who watch e-sports in Spain; these are analyzed using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). The outcomes show that sponsor antecedents are crucial factors if a sponsor wants to change their sponsorship image and influence sponsorship response, and that it is also possible to use participation to improve responses.

1. Introduction

The evolution of e-sports shows that this sector has been growing exponentially during recent years (Cristòfol et al., 2020; García & Murillo, 2020; Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017), to the extent that e-sports have become a global phenomenon today, with tournaments boasting million-dollar prizes and sponsors, online and television shows, and many different kinds of competitive e-sports having come into existence (Cristòfol et al., 2020). The literature about e-sports is scarcer than on traditional sports or videogames, which have been examined in great detail (Cristòfol et al., 2020; Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017). Indeed, there are some discrepancies among experts regarding the definition of terms in this sphere. One of the meanings of e-sports found in the theory encompasses all those activities in which people hone their mental and physical skills using information and communication technologies (Wagner, 2006). But this definition is not deemed sufficiently clear by some authors, who consider that Wagner (2006) does not establish the limits between e-sports and traditional sports (García & Murillo, 2020; Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017; Witkowski, 2012). According to Witkowski (2012), the key feature of e-sports is that they involve physical activities that players develop together with non-human actions and things, whereas Hamari and Sjöblom (2017) focus on the electronic support in their definition. Meanwhile, García and Murillo (2020) identify interest and participation as the main differences between traditional sports and e-sports.

The fact that e-sports are consumed through the internet via live streaming makes a difference to the kind of spectator who watches them. Technology enthusiasts consider that their participation in sport affects the way sport is conducted (Ratten, 2017). E-sports spectators can participate in the game through social interaction (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017), co-creating value that improves the experience (Seo, 2013). Nevertheless, there is no significant difference in spectator motivation between traditional sports and e-sports (Pizzo et al., 2018).

As mentioned before, this industry is experiencing strong growth, and data collected from secondary sources corroborates this increase. The global audience for e-sports has increased by around 12% annually during the last three years (Newzoo, 2020). Revenue data are also very positive: while the industry only generated US$ 700 m in 2013, in 2020 this figure rose to US$ 1.1 bn (Cristòfol et al., 2020). It is also noteworthy that of this US$ 1.1 bn e-sports revenues in 2020, some 57.9% (US$ 636.9 m) came from sponsorship. And the other 42.1% (USD$ 463.1 m) is accounted for by media rights (USD$ 185.4 m), publisher fees (USD$ 121.7 m), merchandising and tickets (USD$ 116.3 m), digital (USD$ 21.5 m) and streaming (USD$ 18.2 m) (Newzoo, 2020). These numbers make e-sports a very attractive business, evoking an increasing interest in this sector among sponsors.

In recent decades, many sport organizations and sporting events have become involved in sport sponsorship to promote their core businesses (Kim, Lee, & Kim, 2019; Plewa et al., 2016). Sponsorship strategy started to be used in sports as of the early 1970 s in the United Kingdom. But it was in the early 1990 s when this tool was further exploited, experiencing a real boom (Chebli & Gharbi, 2014). There are several

significant aspects of this sponsorship and a range of studies have been published on this topic over the last 30 years (Hino & Takeda, 2020), taking into account that the increase in sponsorship has been especially evident in the last decade (International Event Group, 2018).

Sponsorship has been defined as financial investment in a person, an event or an activity to obtain access to a potential message or image associated with that person, event or activity (Chebli & Gharbi, 2014). From this point of view, there are many different reasons for considering engaging in sponsorship strategy. Gwinner and Eaton (1999) compile the most common purposes for which this tool is employed: to increase brand awareness, and to establish, strengthen, or change image (Cornwell & Maignan, 1998; Meenaghan, 1991). In this respect, sponsorship uses communication to achieve a commercial return for the sponsor (Harris et al., 2005). In the same line, sponsorship technique creates an event or a source of independent funding that is disseminated through the media to achieve marketing goals (Derbaix et al., 1994).

There are three main roles that participate in sponsorship: the sponsor, the sponsored person or organization, and the consumer. The sponsor provides financial funding, instruments and/or knowledge. The sponsored person or organization will contribute to image, providing a space for the sponsor. Consumers' only role in this respect is to perceive the association between the positive image of the event and the sponsoring firm (Chebli & Gharbi, 2014; Koronios et al., 2020). In e-sports, identification with a gamer frequently has a significant effect on identification with the sponsor, leading consumers to increase their purchase intentions and making for positive word of mouth (Suh et al., 2008).

Currently, 55% of the brands that support the gaming and e-sports sector are not endemic (directly related to gaming) and, furthermore, 94% of the companies that have signed agreements to sponsor events, teams, players or competitions are not companies related to the gaming sector (Table 1). In Spain, companies dedicated to beverages or food are leaders in sponsorship, mainly in sponsor leagues, teams and events. The most watched e-sports in Spain are multiplayer online battle arenas, shooting, racing, sports simulation and real-time strategy (Table 1). For their part, the top four professional Spanish teams by earnings would be Movistar Riders, G2 Esports, Mad Lion and Vodafone Giants. These data

Table 1
Main sponsor, e-sports and e-sports teams[1].

Main sponsors	Main e-sports games	Main Spanish e-sports teams		
		E-sports Teams	E-sports	Sponsors
Spain	*Spain*	Movistar Riders	Counter Strike, League of Legends, Fortnite, Rainbox Six and Valorant	Movistar Omen
Mahou	Counter Strike: G.O.			Mahou
Telepizza	League of Legends			Alain Afflelou
Cacaolat				Kappa
Aldi				
Coca Cola	Rainbow Six: Siege Call of Duty	G2 Esports	League of Legends, Counter Strike, Call of Duty, Rocket League, Vainglory and iRacing	BMW Logitech Red Bull Adidas
World				
Levís		Mad Lion	League of Legends and Counter Strike	Seat Imagin EPOS
BMW Getty Images				
Duracell		Vodafone Giants	League of Legends, Counter-Strike: Global Offensive, Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six: Siege, Fortnite and FIFA	Vodafone Nike KitKat
		Heretics	Fortnite, Valorant, Counter-Strike: Global Offensive o Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six and Rocket League	Legio San Miguel

[1]ELS & Movistar (2019). III Audience research.

and the knowledge of the sponsors will help us to determine the efficacy of sponsoring because this efficacy depends on the fit between sponsors and the sponsored brand (Zdravkovic et al., 2010).

Considering all the above, it is necessary to better understand the role of sponsorship in e-sports from an academic and managerial point of view. While the background of sponsorship and response to sponsorship perception have been studied to a moderate level, little research has been conducted on e-sports, and analysis of an overall model has been scant. There are not enough studies that analyse the factors that influence response to e-sports sponsorship. Moreover, these aspects are treated in a partial manner, without proposing a model that includes the determinants of sponsorship image and participation of fans in the creation of value in e-sports. Thus, the objective of this study is to try to determine the relevance of participation and sponsorship image in sponsorship response. This will be done taking into account the multidimensional nature of image sponsorship to better understand the aspects that should be developed to improve e-sport sponsorship. The value of this approach is that it supplies knowledge on the relationships of these variables in the case of e-sports, allowing the creation a model that can be used to improve the effectiveness of sponsorship in these new sports from a practical point of view.

This study is structured into four parts: first, the hypotheses on the antecedents of and responses to sponsorship image are proposed. Second, the data-collection and measurement validation processes are explained. Third, the results of the model research are presented. And finally, the discussions and conclusions are set out, along with their theoretical and managerial implications, ending with a description of the limitations of the study and future lines of research.

2. Conceptual framework and hypotheses

The model proposed for the present study modifies various models in several ways, as will be demonstrated below. The conceptual framework is based on numerous studies focusing on the sponsorship relationship (with antecedents and response) in the field of sports. The idea of this survey is to take the traditional body of knowledge on sport sponsorship and apply it to e-sports. To build the model, three different types of academic paper were analysed. The first set of these understands that the most important concept is consumer perception of sponsorship (usually sponsorship image) and that, working from this concept, it is possible to discover relevant relationships for further investigation around the figure of the sponsor (Eddy & Cork, 2018; Ko & Kim, 2014; Tsiotsou & Alexandris, 2009). The second group analyses the importance of sponsorship antecedents as future management tools for improving results (Speed & Thomson, 2000; Demirel et al. 2018; Eddy & Cork 2018). Finally, the last group of papers focus on consumer response or sponsorship effectiveness (Alay, 2010; Dees et al., 2008; Hedlund, 2014).

The research model showing the study constructs and the hypothesized links between them is summarized in Fig. 1. The model can be divided into three parts. The first part of the model centres on sponsorship image antecedents. Sponsorship image is affected positively by a set of variables related to the sponsor known as sponsor factors (ubiquity of sponsor, sincerity of sponsor and attitudes to sponsor) (Petrovici et al., 2015; Speed & Thompson, 2000). Sponsorship image is also affected by team identification, which refers to the team or the player sponsored (Kim & Kim, 2009; Suh et al., 2008; Swanson et al., 2003). The second part of the model establishes the links between sponsorship image and sponsorship response. Sponsorship response is assumed to encompass interest, purchase intention and word of mouth (Biscaia et al., 2013; Cornwell et al., 2016; Speed & Thompson, 2000; Tsiotsou & Alexandris, 2009). Finally, the last part of the model is concerned with participation, which in an isolated way influences sponsorship response. The relationships of the model developed and the associated hypotheses are presented in detail below.
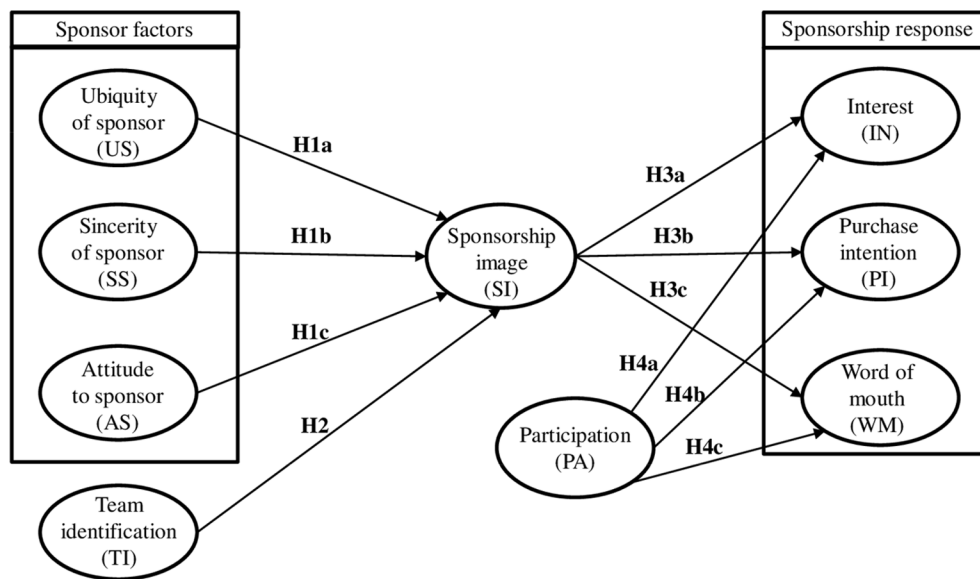
Fig. 1. Research model.

2.1. Sponsor factors and sponsorship image

Sponsor factors are a set of constructors that includes ubiquity, sincerity and attitude to sponsor (Alay, 2010; Human et al. 2018; Petrovici et al., 2015; Speed & Thompson, 2000).

Ubiquity has been considered a critical component that determines how the sponsor is perceived (Speed & Thompson, 2000). Other authors have continued to argue for this idea when proposing a sponsorship perception model (Alay, 2010; Ko & Kim, 2014). Speed and Thompson (2000) propose a definition of the concept related to a two-factor concept that links the frequency and selectivity of a firm's sponsorship activity. If this concept has to be measured, consumer perception is the way to establish the ubiquity of the sponsor through their affective and conative reactions to sponsorship activities.

Regarding the direction of the perception of ubiquity, the results of previous studies differ. In the first studies, the existence of numerous sponsors is perceived as less committed behaviour (Speed & Thompson, 2000), denoting lower credibility or insincerity as a sponsor (Smith, 2004). In this way, ubiquity has a negative association with sponsorship (Biscaia et al., 2013; Petrovici et al., 2015; Speed & Thompson, 2000). Despite this situation, Smith (2004) recognizes that multiple sponsorships are common but that there are different "compositions" of a sponsorship arrangement in which complex situations (a large number of major and minor sponsors sponsoring individuals, groups and events) are more likely to create consumer confusion (a negative effect on both sponsor recall and sponsor recognition). In any case, the results of these previous studies were not conclusive (Ko & Kim, 2014).

Nevertheless, a second set of studies finds a positive relation between ubiquity of sponsor and sponsorship image (Alay, 2010; Ko, Chang, Park, & Herbst, 2017; Ko & Kim, 2014; Woisetschläger et al., 2010). The reasons are multiple and diverse, as it is important to understand sectors, events, players, team sponsored or consumer affective reactions. Some of these reasons have been examined in a range of studies (Baker, 1999; Ko et al., 2017; Shimp, 2013). For example, Shimp (2013) suggests that consumers may interpret ubiquity of sponsor as evidence of the success and the financial soundness of a company, which may be related to this perception of a positive image. Meanwhile, Baker (1999) found that the repetition of stimulus can increase the likelihood of successful recall and recognition, attracting the consumer's attention. Finally, some models identify ubiquity of sponsor as having an indirect role in sponsorship response but through a positive influence on attitudes or perceptions toward the sponsor (Biscaia et al., 2013; Madrigal, 2001). This approach

lends support to a hypothesis focus on a positive relationship between ubiquity and sponsorship image.

Considering these ideas, the following hypothesis is proposed:.

H1a: Ubiquity of sponsor has a positive effect on sponsorship image.

Sponsors that are perceived by the consumer to be sincere and motivated by philanthropical reasons will achieve a better sponsorship response – especially compared to those motivated by commercial purposes (D'Astous et al., 2020; Speed & Thompson, 2000). Therefore, sincerity of sponsor is a factor that the sponsorship firm can use to facilitate the development of the sponsored activity (Human et al., 2018; Rifon et al., 2004).

Sincerity can also be understood to create goodwill, a positive attitude on the part of the sporting consumer resulting from the support of a sponsor for a particular team, player, event or any other activity about which they are enthusiastic (Dees et al., 2008; Meenaghan, 2001).

Some authors argue that perceived sincerity of sponsor is greater when they are strongly identified with the team or player (Demirel, 2020; Kim, Ko, & James, 2011); and when the consumer does not perceive inconsistencies in the relationship between the sponsor and the sponsor object (Scheinbaum & Lacey, 2017).

Various authors explain how sincerity affects the sponsorship image (Demirel & Erdogmus, 2016; Eddy & Cork, 2018; Gwinner & Bennett, 2008; Scheinbaum & Lacey, 2017; Speed & Thompson, 2000; Stipp & Schiavone, 1996). It has been demonstrated that a concentration on social activities is linked to generating a positive sponsorship image (Sung & Lee, 2016). In this line, according to Scheinbaum & Lacey (2017) sincerity of sponsor has special relevance in the sphere of corporate social responsibility, demonstrating that sincerity influences sponsorship. In the cultural framework, the connection between sincerity and sponsorship image has also been confirmed (Olson, 2010). Finally, in the sports sector there are several studies that confirm this relationship. Stipp and Schiavone (1996) researched sincerity in the context of the 1992 Olympic Games, finding a significant impact on sponsorship image; in their study about Turkish football games, Demirel and Erdogmus (2016) found that perceived sincerity has a positive effect on attitudes toward the sponsorship; and Eddy and Cork (2018) use the term goodwill, demonstrating that it influences sponsorship image, which leads to purchase intention.

Consequently, the following hypothesis is stated:.

H1b: Sincerity of sponsor has a positive effect on sponsorship image.

An attitude is defined as psychological inclination expressed through the consumer's overall evaluation of an entity (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993;

Keller, 2003). This attitude is formed from direct experiences with the object or from exposure to communications (Albarracin et al., 2014; Human et al. 2018).

Sports consumers usually have positive attitudes toward sponsors when they think the sponsorship is important to the team (Biscaia et al., 2013; Madrigal, 2001). For this reason, a manager that wishes to create a favourable image should consider the feelings evoked by sponsors and their brand (Boronczyk & Breuer, 2020). Managing consumers' attitudes to sponsors has the ultimate purpose of impacting on sponsorship effectiveness (Stipp & Schiavone, 1996) and sponsorship response (Ajzen, 2001).

Mazodier and Quester (2014) analyse attitudes toward sponsorship in different sporting events, finding an influence on the attachment to the entity. Boronczyk and Breuer (2020) and Ertz et al. (2020), also link entity attitude to the feelings evoked by the sponsored event.

After compiling these findings, the following hypothesis is proposed:.

H1c: Attitude to sponsor has a positive effect on sponsorship image.

2.2. Perception of sponsored issue and sponsorship image

In the literature, it is possible to find authors that develop and test a measurement model to capture consumers' perceptions of sponsors and the perceived congruence between the sponsor and sponsored issue, an important variable of the sponsorship effectiveness. This is not the only model that uses perception of sponsored variables (Ko et. Al., 2017). In this case, this variable is team identification.

Sports fans are usually characterized by a strong loyalty to their favourite team or player (Dalakas & Melancon, 2012), and identifying with them to a certain extent (Tsordia et al., 2018). Team identification as a constructor has been extensively reviewed in sponsorship theory (Demirel, 2020; Gwinner et al., 2009; Lianopoulos & Theodorakis, 2020; Madrigal, 1995).

Identification is the orientation of the individual regarding a person or a group that leads to a feeling of close attachment (Trail et al., 2000). In particular, team identification is the spectators' perceptions of their connection to a team, and the spectators' sense that the team's failings and achievements are their own (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003). This concept implies psychological benefits for the fans deriving from an increase in the social connection among fans (both local fans and those from further away) (Lianopoulos & Theodorakis, 2020; Wann, 2006).

When a company decides to sponsor a particular team, player or event, they expect to induce in the consumer the same feeling toward sponsors as they have toward their team or player (Shaw & McDonald, 2006). In addition, more highly identified fans consider themselves to be members of the group, experiencing positive attitudes toward other members (Lee & Ferreira, 2011). In this sense, sponsors could be accepted as members of the group due to their financial support of the team (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003), which could generate fan loyalty to the sponsor (Levin, Beasley, & Gambley, 2004).

Gwinner and Swanson (2003) determined that the more a fan identifies due to higher exposure, the more aware of the sponsor they become (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003). In subsequent studies, they found a positive relation between team identification and sponsorship image (Gwinner et al., 2009). Additionally, Kim and Kim (2009) created a model where team identification mediates between sponsor identification and image transfer. This linkage between team identification and sponsorship is reaffirmed, even in the e-sports field (Suh et al., 2008).

Reflecting these ideas, the following hypothesis is proposed:.

H2: Team identification has a positive effect on sponsorship image.

2.3. Sponsorship image and sponsorship response

The following lines conceptualize the sponsorship image constructor and its main effects: interest, purchase intention, and word of mouth, known as sponsorship response (Biscaia et al., 2013; Cornwell et al., 2016; Speed & Thompson, 2000; Tsordia et al., 2018). One of the

positive benefits of investing in a sponsorship is image reinforcement (Cornwell & Coote, 2005; Koronios et al., 2016). Sponsorship image is the positive disposition toward the sponsor and all that it represents (Meenaghan, 2001). According to Eddy and Cork (2018), sponsorship image is a measure of favourable attitudes toward sponsorship brand, similar to liking or attachment.

Sponsorship is an indirect way of communicating quality aims regarding image (Derbaix et al., 1994). This means that sponsorship produces benefits for both sides of the business (Harrison & O'Reilly, 2005). The sponsored team or event and the sponsor have a symbiotic relationship in which there is a transference of value toward the sponsor entity. The goal of the sponsor firm is to ensure that a clear association is made with the celebrity and that, where necessary, this ties the activity's values in with those of the firm (Meenaghan, 1999).

Interest is an improvement of the costumer perception and in the field of sponsorship it is concerned with concepts such as paying attention, noticing and remembering (Deitz et al., 2012). When consumers have an interest in a particular product or brand, they feel motivated to pay attention to it or even search for more information regarding the object of interest (Lacey et al., 2010).

Different authors have analysed the interest constructor as one of the main factors of sponsorship response. It has been demonstrated that sponsorship image motivates consumer interest (Mason, 2005). Sponsorship image influences all types of consumer perceptions – affective, cognitive and conative – including the interest constructor (Chavanat et al., 2009). Lacey et al. (2010) also demonstrated that as an event's attendees get to know the image of a sponsor their perceptions or their interest toward the sponsor improve.

Considering these ideas, the following hypothesis is proposed:.

H3a: Sponsorship image has a positive effect on interest.

One of the main objectives of sponsorship is to drive the consumer to buy products, increasing purchase intention. Purchase intention has been defined as the reflection of the consumer when they endeavour to buy a brand that has implemented a particular communications strategy, looking to the near future (MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989; Koronios et al., 2021). This constructor is also considered as a conscious consumer plan to make the effort of buying a product from a particular brand (Spears & Singh, 2004; Tsordia et al., 2018). Understanding how this constructor works provides an idea of the strength of consumer motivation to engage in a specific purchasing behaviour (Dees et al., 2008).

In the marketing theory, many studies have analysed the link between sponsorship image and purchase intention (Cornwell & Coote, 2005; Koronios et al., 2016; Nigel, 2000; Trivedi, 2020). Dos Santos et al. (2020) propose that when the sponsorship image is strong, it generates a stronger intention to buy; and Koronios et al (2016) demonstrate that a positive sponsorship image produces an increase in purchase intention among football fans; also in the field of sports, Eddy and Cork (2018) confirm that sponsorship image has a significant impact on purchase intention – even in smaller events at the regional or local level.

Deriving from the previous ideas, the following hypothesis is posed:.

H3b: Sponsorship image has a positive effect on purchase intention.

Word of mouth or recommendation is considered another of the most important marketing strategies (Bansal & Voyer, 2000). In fact, word of mouth is widely recognized as a one of the most effective communication tools since consumers perceive it as more approachable, trustworthy, and less biased (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003; Koronios et al., 2015). In addition, word of mouth eliminates the risk associated with first-time consumption of a product or service (Alexandris et al., 2007). All of these advantages make recommendation a highly desirable sponsorship outcome (Laczniak et al., 2001).

Word of mouth is the transmission of opinions and ideas between people, related to a service or good on which is the focus of the communication (Laczniak et al., 2001). Another definition of word of mouth concentrates on the positive aspect of the communications – since these can be positive or negative (Hedlund, 2014; Westbrook, 1987).

Along with purchase intention, word of mouth is one of the outcomes of sponsorship (Tsiotsou & Alexandris, 2009). The literature provides many examples of studies that examine the relationship between sponsorship image and word of mouth or recommendations (Ertz, Viola, Cordes, & Buettgen, 2020; Koronios et al., 2015; Tsiotsou & Alexandris, 2009). Koronios et al. (2015) affirm that a sponsor's image in the form of specific corporate and product images influences word of mouth. Tsiotsou and Alexandris (2009) confirm this relationship between sponsorship image and word of mouth in Greek basketball teams. The same has been proven in the case of fashion brands: sponsorship image influences word of mouth (Ismail & Spinelli, 2012).

After these considerations, the following hypothesis is proposed:.

H3c: Sponsorship image has a positive effect on word of mouth.

2.4. Participation and sponsorship response

From a point of view of co-creation, participation can be understood as the actions (usually unconscious actions) of different actors that contribute to the wellbeing of people involved (Vargo & Lusch, 2016). In service firms, the provider is not the only party involved in the game that creates value: many different actors participate in creating value in a particular context (Chandler & Vargo, 2011; Horbel et al., 2016).

Participation is a self-reinforcing cycle variable. When fans feel that they are members of a sport group, it is easier for these fans to learn a lot of information about the team and other fans, team history, traditions and rituals (Dionísio et al., 2008). At the same time, in the case of fans that usually participate in all the activities connected to the team (like rituals and traditions), there is reinforcement of feelings of membership and increased collaboration and integration in the group (Dionísio et al., 2008; Hedlund, 2014).

In traditional sports, spectators help to create or co-produce an attractive atmosphere at the event venue (Uhrich & Benkenstein, 2012). There is some research in the literature about consumer participation in the event or the game, which is also termed co-creation. These studies measure the relationship between participation and the difference variables of sponsorship outcomes: interest (Morgan, 2019; Popp & Woratschek, 2016; Thomas, 2018), purchase intention (Dionísio et al., 2008; Uhrich & Benkenstein, 2012) and word of mouth (Hedlund, 2014; Holt, 1995; Uhrich & Benkenstein, 2012).

Social media is one of the main sectors where consumer participation produces an increase in interest in the organization (Popp & Woratschek, 2016). In the context of women's sports, it has also been demonstrated that interest in a company increases when there is consumer participation (Morgan, 2019). Regarding purchase intention, participation increases a consumer's preference for goods and services used by the sponsored team or player. In other words, purchase intention is greater when there is co-creation. Finally, Uhrich and Benkenstein, (2012) also found that participation is positively related to word of mouth.

Based on all these findings, this set of hypotheses is proposed:.

H4a: Participation has a positive effect on interest.

H4b: Participation has a positive effect on purchase intention.

H4c: Participation has a positive effect on word of mouth.

3. Methods

3.1. Survey design

A quantitative approach was used for the purposes of the study and questionnaires were collected from Spanish internet users who watch e-sports tournaments, users who watched the online events using different platforms and claimed to be at least occasional viewers. A distinction is often made between these users and e-sports enthusiasts. Both types of users were included in this survey. The survey was carried out online, developed and administered on an online platform. The survey was completed by individuals who definitely watch e-sport tournaments. To

overcome the difficulty of reaching these users to respond to surveys, the questionnaire was launched through players, who collaborated by placing the link in their games. It was also disseminated through active e-sports fan groups. All questions were obligatory, so a question had to be answered before access to the following question would be given. Those who participated did not receive incentives. The total number of valid questionnaires collected was 445, implying a sampling error of +/- 4.74% (with a 95.5% confidence interval and p = q = 0.5). Thus, this research is based on a cross-sectional descriptive study using primary data from a questionnaire answered by a representative sample of people in Spain aged 13 to 40 who watched e-sports during the month of June 2020.

The initial selection of the different items for the nine constructs of the questionnaire was based on an exhaustive review of the existing literature. The questionnaire included multiple-item measurement scales adapted from the review of the literature, which helped to ensure the validity of measurement scales for all constructs: three items for sponsorship image (Eddy & Cork, 2018; Tsiotsou & Alexandris, 2009), three for ubiquity of sponsor (Alay, 2010; Demirel et al., 2018; Speed & Thompson, 2000), four for sincerity of sponsor (Dees et al., 2008; Demirel et al., 2018), three for attitude to sponsor (Dees et al., 2008), four for team identification (Dees et al., 2008; Tsordia et al., 2018), three for interest (Alay, 2010), three for purchase intention (Dees et al., 2008; Hedlund, 2014), three for word of mouth (Hedlund, 2014) and four for participation (Hedlund, 2014; Horbel et al., 2016; Uhrich & Benkenstein, 2012). It was necessary to modify some of the original scales. The original scale of the attitude to sponsor dimension (Dees et al., 2008) included four items. This latent variable was modified because one of the items of the variable attempted to measure the impact of sponsoring professional and non-professional events in the same sport and, in this case, this was not applicable. Interest is another scale that was modified. Alay (2010) includes four items in his scale. One of them was eliminated here because of its high collinearity with another item, instead selecting the item that contributed most to the latent variable. The elimination of this variable did not entail changes to the model proposed. Finally, Tsordia et al. (2018) developed seven items (team identification scale), but this scale was modified here by removing items that were not well suited to e-sports. There are stark differences between team identification in traditional sports and e-sports. In e-sports, fans follow several players and teams, although they may switch teams if one of their favourite players does the same. In addition, there is usually no aversion towards other players or teams that are not their favourite.

Once the items had been selected, and before sending out the questionnaire, prior qualitative research was carried out through a focus group. This focus group was comprised of three professors from different Spanish universities with expertise in sponsorship, three professionals who work in different companies in the e-sports sector and three people who regularly watch e-sports. This qualitative research resulted in the final questionnaire consisting of nine constructors with a total of 30 items (see Table 2).

The scale used for these 30 items was a five-point Likert-type response format, which respondents could rate from 1 ("completely disagree") to 5 ("completely agree"). The questionnaire also included

Table 2
Items by construct.

Construct	Number of items
Sponsorship image (SI)	3
Ubiquity of sponsor (US)	3
Sincerity to sponsor (SS)	4
Attitude to sponsor (AS)	3
Team identification (TI)	4
Interest (IN)	3
Purchase intention (PI)	3
Word of mouth (WM)	3
Participation (PA)	4

questions on a series of general classification variables (gender and age) and others specific to the use of e-sports (hours spent playing videogames per day, hours spent watching e-sports per day, platform used to watch e-sports, and money spent on watching e-sports per month).

A pre-test was carried out with a representative sample who watch e-sports in Spain, made up of 25 people between 13 and 40 years of age. Each respondent was instructed to answer the questionnaire thinking of the sponsors of their favourite player or team in their favourite e-sport. The aim of this pre-test was to determine whether the scales were well constructed and to ensure that the survey target perfectly understood each of the questions in the questionnaire. After this process, some typos were corrected and all questions were validated. Once the questionnaire had been refined, it was launched online through a discretionary non-probabilistic sampling by quotas with the aim of achieving a distribution of sexes and ages as similar as possible to that of the population that watches e-sports in Spain. The questionnaire was distributed via the main social networks in June 2020, with a set of reminders to motivate potential respondents to respond. To avoid problems with erroneous questionnaires, the principal component method was used to detect outliers. The result was that a representative sample of the population aged 13 to 40 years of age in Spain has been surveyed, with a total of 445 valid questionnaires completed.

3.2. Sample size and composition

The total sample size was 445 individuals who faithfully represent the population who watch e-sports in Spain. The composition of the sample was 87% male and 13% female. By age group, 14% were 13–17 years old, 44% were 18–24 years old, 33% were 25–34 years old and 9% were 35–40 years old. To now look at the number hours responders spend playing videogames per day, 20% of the sample said they played for less than 1 h, 21% played for 1–2 h, 19% played for 2–3 h, 15% played for 3–4 h, and 24% played for more than 4 h. By hours spent watching e-sports per day, 37% said that they watched less than 1 h, 28% watched 1–2 h, 16% watched 2–3 h, 10% watched 3–4 h, and 8% watched more than 4 h. The principal platforms used to watch e-sports were Twitch (74%) followed by YouTube (61%). In terms of money spent on watching e-sports per month, 84% of the sample said they did not pay anything to watch e-sports, 9% paid less than 5 euros, and only 7% paid 5 euros or more. Therefore, most of the respondents are men (87%) between 18 and 24 years old (44%), who play videogames for between 1 and 2 h per day (21%), watch e-sports for less than 1 h per day (37%), use the platform Twitch (74%), and do not pay anything to watch e-sports (84%). Table 3 provides descriptive statistics for the sample. Studies on e-sports attempt to provide a snapshot of e-sports viewers. The analysis of these studies shows a distribution by gender, age, platform used to watch e-sports and main games that are very close to those in the sample. In this way, it has been possible to establish an approximation with a sample that is representative of the population.

It is possible to calculate the sample size required for this study using an SEM, given the number of observed and latent variables in the model, the anticipated effect size, and the desired probability and statistical power levels (Bentler & Mooijaart, 1989; Bollen, 1989). For this case, the minimum sample size for model structure is 156 individuals and the minimum sample size to detect effect is 184 individuals. These minimum numbers are far exceeded.

3.3. Statistical analysis

The theoretical framework was analysed using SmartPLS version 3 (Ringle et al., 2015) because partial least squares (PLS), a structural equation modelling tool, was used to perform the model. SEM enables researchers to simultaneously examine the structural component (path model) and measurement component (factor model) using a single model. PLS was used for the estimation procedure because it is especially useful when researchers have to work with a moderate non-

Table 3
Sample information and demographic e-sports consumers in Spain.

Gender	% Spain[1]		%	Total 445
Male	91.0		87.0	387
Female	9.0		13.0	58
Age	**% Spain[1]**		**%**	**Total 445**
13–17	15.3		14.3	64
18–24	39.2		44.0	196
25–34	37.3		32.6	145
35–40	8.2		9.1	40
Hours you play e-sports per day			**%**	**Total 445**
Less than 1			20.4	91
1–2			21.3	95
2–3			19.1	85
3–4			15.1	67
More than 4			24.1	105
Hours you watch e-sports per day			**%**	**Total 445**
Less than 1			36.9	164
1–2			28.3	126
2–3			16.2	72
3–4			10.3	46
More than 4			8.3	37
Platform you use to watch e-sports (multiple choice question)			**%**	**Total 445**
Twitch			73.9	329
YouTube			60.7	270
Other			14.1	63
Most popular e-sport games (multiple choice question)			**%**	**Total 445**
League of Legends			37.9	169
Counter-Strike Global Offensive			21.3	95
FIFA			19.1	85
Call of Duty			16.4	73
Rainbow Six Siege			9.4	42
Money you pay to watch e-sports per month (€)			**%**	**Total 445**
0			84.0	373
Less than 5			9.1	40
5 or more			6.9	32

[1]ELS & Movistar (2019). III Audience research.

normal distribution and avoid transformations of variables that could produce problems in the interpretation of the model. This tool is more flexible than other options when the phenomenon under research is relatively new (Roldán & Sánchez-Franco, 2012), as is the case with the antecedents of and response to sponsorship image in an e-sports context. All the latent variables are established as reflective constructs following analysis of the theoretical concepts. The selection of this option also took into consideration different criteria that help to decide between a formative or reflective construct, such as, in this case, where changes in the constructs affect the underlying measures, if an item is eliminated this does not affect the content validity and the items are correlated.

4. Results

4.1. Measurement model: Reliability and validity

The data was analysed to check the reliability and validity of the measures. First, the initial factor structure was corroborated and analysis performed of how each item relates to latent constructs (see Table 4). Falk and Miller, (1992) propose retaining manifest variables with loadings that exceed 0.55, but Henseler, Ringle, and Sinkovics (2009) recommend a benchmark of 0.7, i.e. 50% of the variance of the manifest variable is related to the component. All of the loadings exceed 0.74 for these items and load more highly on their respective construct than on others. To test the significance of model estimates, the t-statistics were computed using 5,000 bootstrap re-samples (Hair et al., 2011). In addition, the internal consistency was assessed using three measures: Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability (CR) and the average variance extracted (AVE). Nunnally and Bernstein (1994) suggest a high internal consistency when Cronbach's alpha is higher than 0.7. The value that is recommended for CR is higher than 0.65 (Steenkamp & Geyskens, 2006), and a value at least equal to 0.5 is recommended for AVE (Fornell

Table 4
Constructs, items, factor loading, reliability, and validity.

Factor loadings		Sources of Adoption
Ubiquity of sponsor (US) RVM: Cronbach's alpha: 0.81, AVE: 0.72, Composite reliability: 0.89		
This company sponsors many different players/teams.	0.79	Alay, 2010
I expect this company to sponsor more players/teams in the future	0.89	Demirel et al., 2018
This company is very selective in what players/teams it sponsors	0.87	Speed & Thomson, 2000
Sincerity of sponsor (SS) RVM: Cronbach's alpha: 0.85, AVE: 0.70, Composite reliability: 0.90		
This player/team sponsors are involved with e-sports.	0.81	
This Player/team will benefit from this sponsorship at the grassroots level	0.81	Dees et al., 2008
The main reason sponsor sponsors this player/team is because sponsor believes they deserve it	0.87	Demirel et al., 2018
Sponsor likely has the best interests of this player/team at heart	0.84	
Attitude to sponsor (AS) RVM: Cronbach's alpha: 0.89, AVE: 0.82, Composite reliability: 0.93		
I think favorably of companies that sponsor this this player/team	0.89	Dees et al., 2008
Companies that sponsor this player/team are successful	0.90	
Companies who sponsor this player/team provide quality products/services	0.92	
Team identification (TI) RVM: Cronbach's alpha: 0.84, AVE: 0.67, Composite reliability: 0.89		
It is very important to me that my favorite player/team wins	0.74	Dees et al., 2008 Tsordia et al., 2018
I am very much a fan of my favorite player/team	0.89	
My friends see me as very much a fan of my favorite player/team	0.80	
During the season, I follow my favorite player/team almost every week (in person, television, radio, television news, newspaper)	0.84	
Sponsorship image (SI) RVM: Cronbach's alpha: 0.88, AVE: 0.80, Composite reliability: 0.92		
The player/team sponsorship with improves my perceptions about the sponsors and their products	0.90	Eddy & Cork, 2018
I have a positive attitude toward player/team sponsors and their products due to this sponsorship	0.91	Tsiotsou & Alexandris, 2009
Due to this particular sponsorship, I like the products of the sponsors more	0.87	
Participation (PA) RVM: Cronbach's alpha: 0.80, AVE: 0.63, Composite reliability: 0.87		
I engage in social media opinions with fans of this player/team	0.83	Hedlund, 2014
I engage in activities with fans of this player/team	0.84	Horbel et al., 2016
I liked the comments and actions of the player/team fans	0.84	Uhrich & Benkenstein, 2012
The fans were backing the player/team during the tournaments	0.74	
Interest (IN) RVM: Cronbach's alpha: 0.89, AVE: 0.83, Composite reliability: 0.93		
This sponsorship would increase my interest in the sponsor's advertising	0.89	
This sponsorship would make me more likely to remember the sponsor's promotion	0.93	Alay, 2010
This sponsorship would make me more likely to notice the sponsor's name on other occasions	0.90	
Purchase intention (PI) RVM: Cronbach's alpha: 0.90, AVE: 0.83, Composite reliability: 0.94		
I would consider purchasing products/services from the sponsors of this player/team	0.92	Dees et al., 2008
I would try a new product/service if I saw it at this player/team games	0.88	Hedlund, 2014
Due to this particular sponsorship, I like the products of the sponsors more	0.93	
Word of mouth (WM) RVM: Cronbach's alpha: 0.96, AVE: 0.92, Composite reliability: 0.97		
It is likely I will recommend the player/team games to friends	0.95	
I expect to recommend this player/team to friends	0.97	Hedlund, 2014
I will recommend this player/team to friends	0.96	

*Note: RVM = Reliability and Validity Measures.

& Larcker, 1981). As shown in Table 4, all the coefficients of the reflective measures in the study exceed these minimum recommended values.

Model results also suggest that the dimensions explain a large amount of variance in interest, purchase intention, word of mouth (sponsorship response) and sponsorship image, with R^2 values of 0.67, 0.71, 0.48 and 0.66, respectively.

Discriminant validity was assessed, checking that the value of the square root of the AVE was greater than the shared variance among constructs (correlations), i.e. the off-diagonal elements in Table 5. The diagonal elements should be greater than the off-diagonal elements (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) and all constructs satisfy this criterion. These statistics suggest that each construct relates more strongly to its respective measures than to the measures of other constructs. All the results presented above support the discriminant validity and reliability of the measures.

4.2. Structural model: Goodness of fit statistics

Absolute fit indices indicate how well an a priori model fits the data (McDonald & Ho, 2002). The Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) was used to assess model fit in PLS-SEM analyses and is defined as the standardized difference between the observed and the predicted correlation (Henseler, 2018; Henseler et al., 2016). In a conservative version, a value less than 0.08 is considered to indicate a good fit to data (Hu & Bentler, 1998). In this case, SRMR is 0.075 and this model seems to be well-fitting. In order to control method variance (CMV), several procedural remedies were applied, such as collecting data from a different source, creating a psychological separation of measurements, protecting the anonymity of the respondents and improving scale items through their careful construction (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Following this procedure, the model structure was tested by consistent PLS-SEM (PLSc). These PLSc estimates of common factor models were designed to mimic CB-SEM (Dijkstra & Henseler, 2015). After a comparison of the results of PLSc and PLS-SEM, the differences between the constructs of the two model coefficients are less than 0.1.

In terms of explained variance, the proposed model presents substantial levels of R2 for dependent variables. The dimensions explain a large amount of variance in sponsorship image, interest, purchase intention and word of mouth, with R2 values of 0.80, 0.84, 0.89 and 0.60 respectively. Then, the proposed model presents substantial levels of R2 for all of the dependent variables, given that Cohen (1988) recommends values above 0.26. The Stone–Geisser (Q2) results for sponsorship image, interest, purchase intention and word of mouth are 0.52, 0.57, 0.59 and 0.44, respectively, where values larger than zero indicate the model's predictive relevance for the dimensions.

4.3. Results of SEM

The conceptual model results (see Fig. 2) show how each of the antecedents are related to the concept of sponsorship image. With a significant positive coefficient (β) of 0.33 (p < .01), the results suggest that ubiquity of sponsor influences sponsorship image. This is followed by significant positive coefficients for sincerity of sponsor (β = 0.27, p < .01) and attitude to sponsor (β = 0.22, p < .01).

Team identification represents the property congruence of sponsor and it is the last antecedent of sponsorship image. This variable presents a significant positive influence on sponsorship image (β = 0.13, p < .01). Therefore, H2 is not rejected.

For the hypothesis that aims to determine the relationship between sponsorship image and the sponsorship response variables, it is very clear that the relationships with interest and purchase intention are positive (β = 0.77, p < .01 and β = 0.76, p < .01, respectively). The other

Table 5
Correlations and Square Root of the AVE of the First-Order Latent Construct.

Latent variables	AS	IN	PA	PI	SS	SI	TI	US	WM
Attitude to sponsor (AS)	0.907								
Interest (IN)	0.615	0.909							
Participation (PA)	0.526	0.488	0.791						
Purchase intention (PI)	0.724	0.803	0.541	0.911					
Sincerity of sponsor (SS)	0.770	0.656	0.561	0.708	0.835				
Sponsorship image (SI)	0.728	0.816	0.528	0.836	0.732	0.895			
Team Identification (TI)	0.476	0.451	0.664	0.498	0.454	0.497	0.822		
Ubiquity of sponsor (US)	0.735	0.669	0.487	0.688	0.719	0.739	0.437	0.850	
Word of mouth (WM)	0.577	0.474	0.666	0.542	0.605	0.523	0.620	0.507	0.962
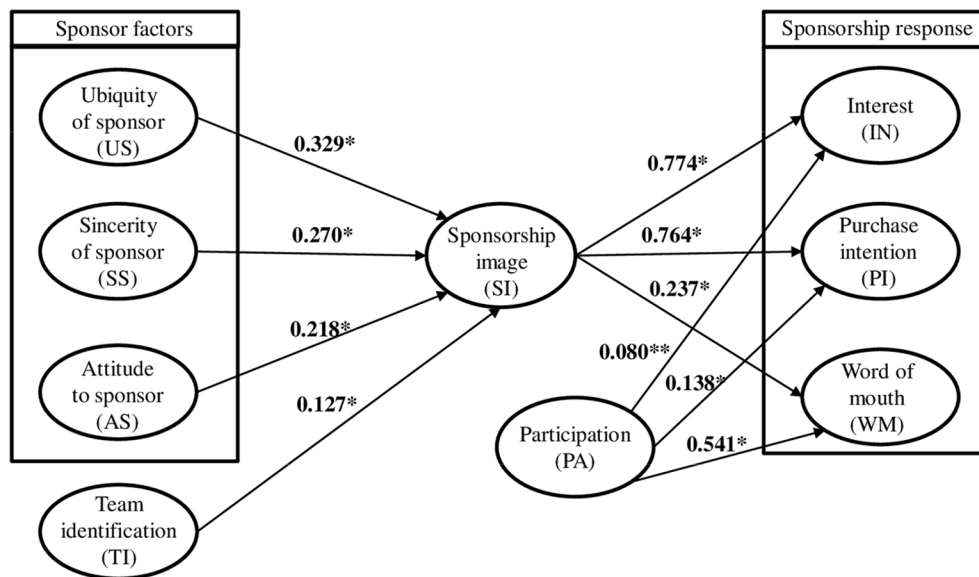
Fig. 2. Results. Note: *p less than 0.01 **p less than 0.05.

sponsorship response variable in the model that could be influenced is word of mouth. In this case, the coefficient value is positive and significant (β = 0.24, p < .01). Therefore, none of the hypotheses of H3 is rejected.

Finally, participation hypothesis propounds the influence on the same variables as sponsorship image, interest (β = 0.08, p < .05), purchase intention (β = 0.14, p < .01 and word of mouth ((β = 0.54, p < .01). All coefficients are significant and positive. Therefore, H4a, H4b and H4c are not rejected. Table 6 shows the summary of hypothesis verification.

Table 6
Summary of hypothesis verification.

Hypothesis	Content	Verification
H1a	Ubiquity of sponsor has a positive effect on sponsorship image	Supported
H1b	Sincerity of sponsor has a positive effect on sponsorship image	Supported
H1c	Attitude to sponsor has positive effect on sponsorship image	Supported
H2	Team identification has a positive effect on sponsorship image	Supported
H3a	Sponsorship image has a positive effect on interest	Supported
H3b	Sponsorship image has a positive effect on purchase intention	Supported
H3c	Sponsorship image has a positive effect on word of mouth	Supported
H4a	Participation has a positive effect on interest	Supported
H4b	Participation has a positive effect on purchase intention	Supported
H4c	Participation has a positive effect on word of mouth	Supported

The PLS-SEM analyses provide information on the relative importance of constructs where the direct and indirect influence on dependent variables (total effects) is measured. There is also space for information on the scores for latent variables (and it is possible to use the mean) and both results are particularly important for prioritizing managerial actions (see Table 7). The results shown here reflect a relatively low mean value for the variables that influence response (sponsorship image and word of mouth). Therefore, there is considerable scope for improvement in their average perception values. These results help to confirm that higher coefficients on the relationship between these variables will have effective results.

5. Discussion

5.1. Theoretical implications

Sports sponsorship constitutes a long-term investment in developing

Table 7
Latent variables—mean scores and total effects.

Latent variables	Mean	Total effects			
		SI	IN	PI	WM
Ubiquity of sponsor (US)	3.11	0.329	0.255	0.251	0.078
Sincerity of sponsor (SpS)	3.09	0.270	0.209	0.206	0.064
Attitude to sponsor (AS)	3.43	0.218	0.169	0.166	0.052
Team Identification (TI)	2.53	0.127	0.098	0.097	0.003
Sponsorship image (SI)	2.99	–	0.774	0.764	0.237
Participation (PA)	2.66	–	0.080	0.138	0.541

relationships between brands and buyers. The increasing importance of sports sponsorship within corporate communications and the exponential increase of the e-sports audience makes it possible to gain the trust of buyers and, ultimately, to gain sufficient confidence of companies for them to offer their brands up for interaction. The variety of platforms used to broadcast tournaments and their digital characteristics allow access to a huge number of potential consumers on a universal scale. These new consumers can be connected with to convey a brand message and enhance relationships with buyers. The wide availability of e-sports content multiplies the opportunities to maximize sports sponsorship performance. The objective of this study is to provide a conceptual framework for improving the effectiveness of sports sponsorship in the context of e-sports. In this way, it contributes to the existing literature that develops empirical evidence for predicting the response to sponsorship. This study explains the inclusion of constructs with a consistent conceptual framework and justifies the relationship between them, developing an empirical model. A key contribution of this study is the identification and measurement of conceptual constructs that contribute to creating a consistent model of their influences on sponsorship response in e-sports, such as antecedent of sponsorship image.

Following research on antecedents of sponsorship image, the hypotheses suggest that sponsorship image is influenced by sponsor factors and team identification. Of these four hypotheses, all received at least partial support but to different levels. The other two parts of the framework establish the influences of sponsorship image and participation (such as co-creation in the field of e-sports sponsorship) on sponsorship response (in this study, interest, purchase intention and word of mouth). Then, six hypotheses were presented and only one was rejected (the relationship between participation and interest). The other five hypotheses show positive influences with different intensity. Overall, the findings support the viability of this framework in the area of e-sport sponsorship.

The finding is that sponsor factors have moderate and positive influences on sponsorship image, but not team identification, which shows a weak and positive influence on the same variable. The specific results of this research show that ubiquity of sponsor and sincerity of sponsor are key factors that add value to sponsorship image in the context of e-sports and provide the most important contribution to both the literature and professionals in the sector.

Firstly, ubiquity of sponsor has a relatively strong and positive influence on sponsorship image in e-sport, as found in other studies focusing on sport teams (Demirel et al., 2018). Secondly, sincerity of sponsor also has a moderate and positive influence on the same variable. There are no studies comparing results in e-sport, but in the sports field the influence has been shown to be very strong (Eddy & Cork, 2018; Olson, 2010). Likewise, both constructs have a moderate, indirect and positive influence on sponsorship response. The last sponsor factor – attitude to sponsor – has a weak influence on sponsorship image; again, this differs from the strong influence found in literature (Biscaia et al., 2013; Madrigal, 2001). After these results, sponsor factors are the most important variable in e-sport for developing growth on sponsorship image. Some authors, including Speed and Thompson (2000) or Koronios et al. (2015) support the same findings in other sports. Finally, team identification presents a weak influence on sponsorship image. This situation can also be found in other studies (Dees et al., 2008; Demirel et al., 2018; Tsordia et al., 2018). Therefore, this is a variable that usually is included in research on sponsorship and shows an influence, but it is usually very weak in sports such as in e-sports.

The fact that sponsor factors have an important and positive effect on sponsorship image – which implies that awareness measures are used to indicate the level of involvement consumers have with a particular sponsor and their image transfer – serves to strengthen the sponsorship response relationship in e-sports. In addition, the most decisive antecedent of sponsorship image focuses on the sponsor, and their decisions are going to determine whether a sponsor has successful image in this new sporting discipline.

5.2. Managerial implications

As for managerial implications in sponsorship, this contribution involves generating valuable sponsors by designing communications that offer consumers commitment and sincerity beyond current success or product quality. Many aspects – such as whether a sponsor is involved, believes in teams or players, or is committed to sponsoring e-sports – are going to be decisive to improving sponsorship image in this sport.

On the other side of the model, sponsorship image has a relationship with the sponsorship response. The variables included in this outcome are interest, purchase intention and word of mouth. For e-sports, there are two very strong and positive influences on interest and purchase intention. This situation replicates the findings in sport for these variables, for both interest (Cornwell & Coote, 2005; Koronios et al., 2016) and purchase intention (Dos Santos et al., 2020; Eddy & Cork, 2018). The results are not so impressive if the analysis focuses on the influence on word of mouth. This relationship is weak in e-sports, although it should be noted that the same occurs in other sports too (Koronios et al., 2015; Tsiotsou & Alexandris, 2009).

The findings when the relationships are between participation (co-creation) and sponsorship response are in opposition. There is an important and positive influence on word of mouth when the co-creation is developed in a sponsored e-sport, but this strong relation does not occur in other sports where the influence is more moderate (Hedlund, 2014; Uhrich & Benkenstein, 2012). There is no relationship with interest in this case and the positive influence on purchase intention is very weak. In both variables, these relations do not behave like traditional sports when interest (Morgan, 2019; Popp & Woratschek, 2016; Thomas, 2018) or purchase intentions (Dionísio et al., 2008; Uhrich & Benkenstein, 2012) are analysed.

Consequently, the findings show that, in sponsorship response, sponsorship image and participation are complementary when the idea is to develop interest, purchase intention or word of mouth. In a sponsored e-sport, participation shows a better result when the variables are focused on sharing and not on intentions or attitudes (word of mouth). Sponsorship image is going to be more effective in its application in commercial issues if it focuses on purchase intention or advertising interest. This situation differs from results in traditional sports, suggesting that it is necessary to apply other strategies when working with e-sports sponsors.

Specifically for professionals, sponsor factors have been recognized as the best way to improve sponsorship image. Additionally, in an indirect influence, sponsor factors provide tools for influencing interest and purchase intention. Sponsorship image is mainly emotional, and it is advisable to maintain a positive perception and try to avoid negative influences on image. If the consumer is interested in word of mouth, then social network participation, special player or team events and live chat must be the company's main activities when it comes to managing sponsorship in e-sports. In practice, the analysis of sponsoring organizations, there seem to be three types of behaviours. Endemic companies are present in all types of sponsorships (events, teams and players) because when selling products directly related to e-sports they are mainly seeking a return on their investment in any type of competition, regardless of the video game. There are a number of adjacent companies which seek to link their image to e-sports and behave like the above-mentioned sponsors (some types of beverages). On the other hand, non-endemic sponsors are associated with e-sports, targeting young audiences, and these sponsors follow some notable trends, such as automotive companies in League of Legend e-sports competitions, betting houses and cryptocurrency companies in Counter Strike competitions, since this type of sponsorship is not allowed in all games and here, they can find an audience with lower risk aversion.

5.3. Limitations and future research

Nevertheless, this research suffers from certain limitations that offer

potential for further research. First, the sample was limited to followers in Spain, age distribution and size. Moreover, it is difficult to generalize the findings. The e-sports sector is growing very rapidly, and data on different age groups, gender and behaviour must be treated with caution. The changes are continuous and it would be desirable to have more extensive, ongoing and specific studies on e-sports audiences in Spain. One of the data that seems to be changing is the number of women who watch e-sports, although this number is still low in Spain. The reason may be the lack of female players in e-sports, meaning that women do not feel identified in this sport. Female players and teams also receive a lot of criticism from the audience, which seems inappropriate but nevertheless this does not encourage the emergence of female players. Second, the survey was focused on different e-sports and the results could be improved by including a distinction between games where teams are competing and tournaments for individual players. In any case, the most viewed games are League of Legends, Counter-Strike, Call of Duty and Rainbow Six Siege. Third, it is very difficult to achieve respondent interest because of the sheer number of international and national events. Future studies could therefore explore different e-sport competitions and attempt to more clearly identify the consumers' motivations. Additionally, future research could attempt to obtain results for level of monitoring the competitions. Integrating classification variables could be interesting to enrich the proposed model and reveal the differences between groups. Alternatively, a study of sponsor factor antecedents (Biscaia et al., 2013; Ko & Kim, 2014; Koronios et al., 2015; Wakefield & Bennett, 2010) or mediator variables (Ko et al., 2017) could also offer a potential path for future research.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Pedro Cuesta-Valiño: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Supervision, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Pablo Gutiérrez-Rodríguez:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Supervision, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Cristina Loranca-Valle:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Supervision, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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