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The social identity of esports fans and their behavioral intentions: a case study on Diogo Jota,
Diogo Jota Esports and Adidas.

Dissertação elaborada com vista à obtenção do Grau de Mestre em Gestão do Desporto

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Abstract

Electronic sports (esports) have become more popular throughout the years and have attracted more viewers than traditional sports, allowing new research about fans. This study aims to explore the fans' identity with Diogo Jota and his esports team, and its effect on their future behavioral intentions towards the sponsor brand. Data were collected among Diogo Jota's fans ($n = 412$) through an online questionnaire. Descriptive statistics were calculated using SPSS 26.0 and then the data were analyzed using AMOS 26.0. A Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was also conducted on the model proposed to ensure the measurement model's psychometric properties. Results revealed that fans' identity with Diogo Jota had a significant positive effect on their identity with the esports team, and team identity showed a positive and significant predictor of their behavioral intentions towards the sponsor brand. Findings also suggest that the effects of fans' identity with Diogo Jota on brand word-of-mouth and brand purchase intention are positive and significant in the presence of the mediating variable – team identity. Due to the lower score of team identity, managerial implications address the need to explore and reinforce the social role of the fan's identity with Diogo Jota's esports team.

Keywords: Esports; Social Identity Theory; Esports Fans; Behavioral Intentions; Word-Of-Mouth; Purchase Intention; Celebrity.

Resumo:

Os esports estão a ganhar popularidade e a atrair espectadores, permitindo assim novas investigações sobre os fãs. Este estudo tem como objetivo explorar a identidade social dos fãs com o Diogo Jota, a sua equipa de esports e o seu efeito nas suas intenções comportamentais futuras relativamente à marca patrocinadora. Os dados foram recolhidos entre os fãs do Diogo Jota ($n=412$) através de um questionário online. Realizou-se uma Análise Fatorial Confirmatória (AFC) ao modelo proposto para garantir as propriedades psicométricas do modelo de medida. Os resultados revelam que a identificação dos fãs com o Diogo Jota teve um efeito positivo significativo na sua identidade com a equipa de esports, e que a identificação com a equipa foi um preditor positivo e significativo das suas intenções comportamentais relativas à marca patrocinadora. Os resultados também sugerem que os efeitos da identidade dos fãs com o Diogo Jota na recomendação boca-a-boca e na intenção de compra da marca são positivos e significativos na presença da variável mediadora - identificação com a equipa. Devido à pontuação baixa da identificação com a equipa, as implicações práticas abordam a necessidade de explorar reforçar o papel social da identidade dos fãs com a equipa do Diogo Jota.

Palavras-chave: Esports; Teoria da Identidade Social; Fãs de Esports; Intenções Comportamentais; Recomendação Boca-a-Boca; Intenção de Compra; Celebridade.

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1. Introduction

Electronic sports, labeled as esports, have rapidly evolved into a worldwide sensation that enthralls millions of fans across the globe. Esports is defined as “competitive gaming at a professional level and in an organized format (a tournament or league) with a specific goal (i.e., winning a champion title or prize money) and a clear distinction between players and teams that are competing against each other” (Newzoo, 2022, p. 15).

Electronic sports have become more popular throughout the years and have managed to attract more viewers than traditional sports (Lynch, 2017). This allows new research about fans (Reitman et al., 2020). According to the data presented in the report published by Newzoo (2022), the number of people who watch esports content globally has reached 261 million people in 2022, with an expectancy to reach more than 318 million by 2025. The global esports audience, in 2022, reached 532 million, and it's expected to surpass 640 million in 2025 (Newzoo, 2022). Regarding the revenue, it is probable that esports will exceed 1.86 billion dollars by 2025, which evidences its value and encourages the study of this phenomenon.

This also translates into esports' exponential growth, which makes this industry appealing to companies and brands that are looking to capitalize on it. For instance, in 2016 alone, over 600 sponsorship deals were struck in the esports market (Shabir, 2017). Sponsorship has become a fundamental part of esports as they are considered big contributors to its growth. The biggest revenue in this market results from sponsorships: in 2022 it generated \$837.3 million, nearly 60% of the whole industry (Newzoo, 2022).

Another indicator of the rise of esports is the association of celebrities from traditional sports to esports teams. Many athletes like Diogo Jota (DJ), David Beckham, and Gareth Bale have created their own esports teams or linked themselves with existing teams (Duran, 2021; Finch et al., 2019; Lehnert, 2020). Many athletes and sports figures recognize the potential and popularity of esports, leading them to invest in various teams and organizations within the industry (Holden & Baker III, 2021). Case in point, Diogo Jota, a professional footballer who currently plays for Liverpool and the Portuguese national team, has shown his interest in esports and created his own team Diogo Jota Esports, focused on FIFA (FPF eFootball, n.d.). Gareth Bale, another prominent football player who has played for Real Madrid, has also announced his venture into the industry by launching and establishing his own esports organization called Ellevens Esports, based on FIFA and Valorant competitions (Duran, 2021). These sports celebrities recognize the potential of esports

as a growing industry and see the chance to get involved in a different kind of competitive environment. By investing in esports, these athletes not only offer financial support but also effectively contribute to elevating the reputation of esports and bridging the gap between traditional sports and gaming (Holden & Baker III, 2019). However, despite the current literature, there is still a lot to explore about this industry (Ströh, 2017), particularly regarding the effect of sports celebrities on esports teams.

The Social Identity Theory (SIT) is a useful framework to understand the identification of fans with sports celebrities and with esports teams. This theory was developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979) and it allows one to understand the sense of belonging and identification with a sport, a sports team, and a sport celebrity. There is a lack of discussion when it comes to celebrities' effects on fans' identification with a team (Sun, 2010), especially in the esports context. In fact, it is known that people who identify with a sports celebrity tend to identify with the team they are affiliated with (Carlson & Donovan, 2013). Because of their need to belong, they have a propensity to perceive the success of the team as the success of the athlete, and consequently being theirs as well (Wu et al., 2012). However, it is necessary to explore this structural relationship in the context of esports and in particular with celebrities who are associated with this emerging field. In addition, the involvement of sports celebrities in the esports industry can attract new sponsors and partnerships. Companies that traditionally associate with sports may see the value in aligning with esports through celebrity endorsements or team investments (Freitas et al., 2019; Huettermann et al., 2020). This can result in additional revenue streams for esports organizations and contribute to the overall growth and stability of the industry. As mentioned previously, sports celebrities contributed to the growth and rise of esports (Finch et al., 2019), and can help shape the trajectory and perception of teams and esports as a whole, so it's necessary to study their effect on fans' behavioral intentions, since, according to Felbert & Breuer (2020) sports celebrities are very effective in influencing consumer's purchase intention. This way, it's imperative to understand if this translates into esports. In past research focused on traditional sports, team identity is presented as a mediating variable between consumer transaction and consumer attitudinal loyalty (Bodet & Barnache-Assollant, 2011), inside sacrifice and perceived performance (López-Gajardo et al., 2021), as well as between spectators' pride and regional attachment (Ullah et al., 2021). With this study we are seeking distinctive insights on whether identification with a sports celebrity has a direct effect on fans' behavioral intentions (word-of-mouth and purchase intention), mediated by

esports team identification. This can be a considerable contribution to the esports and social identity theory literature since there is a gap regarding this subject (Sun, 2010).

This study is also innovative because it's set in the Portuguese context, studying the local public, and focusing on a sports celebrity (Diogo Jota) and an esports team (Diogo Jota Esports) from Portugal. This also contributes to reply to a literary gap because there is a need for more esports studies conducted in different countries, contexts, and realities (Abbasi et al., 2020; Ströh, 2017). Based on these concerns, the current research aims to a) explore how the esports fan's identity with a sports celebrity influences their identity with an esports team; b) understand how fan's identity with team influences their behavioral intentions toward the sponsor brand; and c) verify if there is a mediating effect between the fan's identity with a sports celebrity and their behavioral intentions, through the esports team identity. This study will have nine sections. The next section will approach the literature review, in which the theoretical base of this research is discussed, clarifying the social identity of fans in the esports context and their relationship with sports celebrities, esports teams, and behavioral intentions. Additionally, a brief section on brand sponsors has been included to assist in the findings' discussion. This will be followed by the development of hypotheses. Next, the conceptual model is presented with the dissertation's research questions. The method, which contains the contextual settings, measurement dimensions, data collection, sample, and data analysis is introduced in the following section. Results are presented in the fifth section, followed by the theoretical discussion of our findings and the presentation of the managerial implications for practitioners within the esports industry. Lastly, the study's limitations and suggestions for future research are shown, alongside the thesis conclusion, ending with the references.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Social identity theory

According to Tajfel and Turner (1979), the social identity theory suggests that individuals form their identities based on the social groups they're associated with, and in return these identities safeguard and strengthen their self-identity (Islam, 2014). Before delving into social identity, it's important to understand what identity entails. Identity refers to “people's concepts of who they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others” (Abrams & Hogg, 1988, p. 2). Meanwhile, social identity is “that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from

knowledge of membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value or emotional significance attached to that membership” (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 63). This theory reveals and anticipates the circumstances in which individuals perceive themselves either as independent individuals or as members of a collective. Furthermore, it acknowledges the influence of personal and social identities on an individual’s perceptions and behavior within groups (Islam, 2014).

Social identity constitutes how the social categorizations and the value attributed to particular groups, are portrayed in an individual’s self-concept. Tajfel and Turner (1979) often employ social status, a term associated with social identity, to refer to the outcome of social comparisons (Trepte & Loy, 2017). According to the social identity theory there are three mental processes individuals undergo to make in-group/out-group classifications. The mental processes are (i) social categorization, (ii) social identification, and (iii) social comparison (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Social categorization refers to the division of the social world into groups or different categories of people (i. e. Professional, economic, or cultural categories), and social comparison represents the need individuals feel to make social comparisons to obtain a positive social identity (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019; Trepte & Loy, 2017).

This positive spectrum of identity stems from the group’s positive distinction, i.e., when the group perception compared to other groups is positive, it can result in emotions of positive self-esteem. In turn, a negative social identity is considered a threat, and individuals look to improve the group's status or associate with a group that has a higher position (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This theory is relevant as social identity reflects how “people behave, feel, and cooperate” in various contexts (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019, p. 141). For instance, in an organizational environment, social identity can play a fundamental role in what concerns “the motivation, leadership effectiveness, and managing diversity” within the company (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019, p. 141). These authors mention that leadership in organizations can lead to the definition of a shared identity, by aiding the employees create and maintain a feeling of identification with the team. This can lead individuals to work towards a common goal (Ellemers et al., 2004; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019).

According to Trepte and Loy (2017), social identity theory can be explained from the following process: firstly, people categorize themselves as members of a social group. Secondly, the group has a relevance that will depend on the context. Thirdly, with social comparison, individuals evaluate the importance of their group internally, as well as the importance of other

groups externally. Next follows the group's positive (or negative) distinction resulting from the social comparison. Fifth, social identity is defined because of social categorization and social comparison. The sixth stage of this process corresponds to the individual's self-esteem. And finally, there are outcomes associated with this process such as individual mobility, social creativity, social competition, and the creation of stereotypes. Thus, it is possible to understand that individuals' social identity evolves and can undergo transformations depending on the context in which the group is inserted.

In this sense, it is possible to consider that “a social category (e.g., nationality, political affiliation, sports team) into which one falls, and to which one feels one belongs, provides a definition of who one is in terms of the defining characteristics of the category- a self-definition that is a part of the self-concept” (Hogg et al., 1995, p. 259). In other words, sports teams can be a social category where individuals obtain social identity advantages (Cialdini & Richardson, 1980). Case in point, an esports team, for instance, considered a social category, influences how its fans define themselves as individuals and as a group (Anderson-Coto et al., 2019).

This theory has been profusely applied to sports consumers as a conjuncture that contributes to the understanding of identity formation (Fisher & Wakefield, 1998). In addition, it is a useful lens to understand the social context in numerous fields of sports such as sports sponsorship, events, or marketing (Biscaia et al., 2018; Tsordia et al., 2021). For instance, a particular study in this matter shows that fans tend to “display in-group favoritism and out-group derogation” and these biases are mainly probable when individuals are threatened and are highly identified with the team (Wann & Grieve, 2005, p. 532).

Within this research stream, the social identity theory has been explored in sports and marketing studies examining various stages of fan identification with a particular sport (Gwinner & Bennett, 2008), a sports event (Deitz et al., 2012), and with a specific team (Fink, et al., 2002; Wann & Branscombe, 1993). Furthermore, recent research has been broaching into esports, focusing on the behavior of esports fans (Anderson-Coto et al., 2019), the identity processes that occur with the consumption practices of esports (Seo, 2015), the identity transformation and mental development of the professional players in the esports industry (Zhao & Zhu, 2020), and the relationship between motivation to watch esports and fan identity (Barney, 2021).

As a result, several theoretical gaps were identified, such as the need to study social identity within various sports contexts (Phua, 2010), and the lack of studies that take into consideration the

fact that fans have specific characteristics, which can result in different consumer behaviors (Ströh, 2017). As noted by Trail et al. (2017), the social identity theory has been wrongly explored, which means that, regarding esports, more studies are needed centering on social identity and focusing on the ingroup and outgroup environment (Trail et al., 2005). In addition, there is a necessity for more investigation conducted in different countries, taking into account various contexts and cultures (Abbasi et al., 2020; Ströh, 2017). At this point, so that esports research can become more robust, it should include a wider and more diverse demographic group, since most findings are about college students and young adults (Lee & Schoenstedt, 2011; Zhao & Zhu, 2020).

2.2. *Esports: conceptualization and definitions*

Electronic sports, commonly known as esports, refer to the competitive playing of video games facilitated by electronic systems. Just as traditional sports are played by athletes, esports is played by professional gamers - who are consensually also considered athletes (Martin-Niedecken & Schättin, 2020). The concept of electronic sports refers to professional video game competitions (Ströh, 2017) where skilled pro-players, compete for recognition, prizes, and money (Mooney, 2017). With the rise of this industry, it is not surprising that the competitive gaming scene has grown exponentially. Esports involve organized video game competitions among professional gamers, often in team-based formats as spectator sports (Cranmer et al., 2021). In addition, huge tournaments take place around the world in massive arenas with significant prize pools.

The definition of esports varies among researchers and enthusiasts. Jin (2010) characterizes esports as competitive computer games that are played in professional settings and watched by fans via the Internet or television. This definition places emphasis on key elements such as the game, players, translation, and viewers. Meanwhile, Wagner (2006) describes it as a category of sports activities that train players' mental and physical abilities using information and communication technologies, which means that esports is viewed as a profession that requires mental and physical training. This description focuses on the importance of skills development and action as features of professional esports players.

Hamari and Sjöblom (2017) identify the key difference between traditional and electronic sports as the location where the player's activities occur, whether in the real world or in a virtual one and presented esports as “a form of sports where the primary aspects of the sport are facilitated

by electronic systems; the input of players and teams, as well as the output of the esports system, are mediated by human-computer interfaces” (p. 211). Scholz (2019, p. 3) writes that esports is “an umbrella term for any video game that can be played competitively”, while Jenny et al. (2017) uses the terms “cybersport”, “virtual sport” and “competitive gaming” to describe esports as a video game competition within a framework of organized tournaments.

Due to all the existing characterizations of esports, Cranmer et al. (2021) presented an overview of definitions, as can be seen in Table 1 below:

Table. 1 - Overview of esports definitions

Author/source	Definition
Wagner (2006, p. 2)	“An area of sports activities in which people develop and train mental or physical abilities in the use of information and communication technologies”
Jonasson & Thiborg (2010, p. 288)	“Competitive gameplay which borrows forms from traditional sports”
Witkowski (2012, p. 350)	“Organised and competitive approach to playing computer games”
Jenny et al. (2017, p. 4)	“Organised video game competition.”
Funk et al. (2018, p. 9)	“Esport is a modern and highly structured activity that requires physical actions of the human body to decide a competitive outcome”
Hemphill (2005, p. 199)	“Alternative sport realities, that is, to electronically extended athletes in digitally represented sporting worlds”
Bányai et al. (2019, p. 352)	“Esports are alternate sports, and a special way of using video games and engaging in gameplay”
Weiss (2008, p. 572)	“Playing competitive games according to generally accepted rules of leagues and tournaments on the Internet”
Hamari & Sjöblom (2017, p. 1)	“a form of sports where the primary aspects of the sport are facilitated by electronic systems; the input of players and teams as well as the output of the esports system are mediated by humancomputer interfaces”
Seo (2013)	“Competitive Computer gaming”
Gawrysiak et al. (2020, p. 1)	“Esports refers to organised video game competitions that serve as a nontraditional model of sport that has established itself as a commercialised entertainment enterprise”
Karhulaht (2017, p. 50)	“ Institutionalized player-driven activity”
Parshakov & Zavertiaeva (2018)	“Competitive computer gaming”

Source: Cranmer et al., (2021)

Several scholars have engaged in discussions in academic literature about the difficulty of acknowledging esports as a sport and how to define it (Jenny et al., 2017; Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017). Currently, the main debate focuses on physical activity, which is an essential component of traditional sports and contributes to individuals' improvement (Council of Europe, 2001). Traditional sports are defined by seven key elements: recreational purposes, organization, competition, expertise, physicality, global dimension, and institutionalization (Jenny et al., 2017).

Moreover, despite the differences between esports and traditional sports, there are several reasons why esports can be considered a sport. Firstly, esports involves low motor functions, hand-eye coordination, speed of action, and strategy, which are adequate criteria to classify certain activities as sports, such as chess (Huk, 2019), and the players train for hours daily to improve in those aspects, just like athletes in traditional sports. Secondly, esports requires strategic thinking, quick decision-making, and teamwork, which are essential skills in traditional sports as well (Block & Haack, 2020). Thirdly, esports tournaments and championships draw large audiences, just like traditional sports events, and generate significant revenue for venues, sponsors, and players (Freitas et al., 2020). Furthermore, esports is highly competitive, just like traditional sports, and requires mental toughness and discipline to succeed. To this end, esports is physically demanding, though in a different way from traditional sports.

Despite the debate concerning esports and traditional sports, the fact is that esports' popularity has risen in recent years thanks to the increasing number of players, influencers, fans, and sponsors who have helped boost the industry's revenue (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017). Esports encompass a broad and extensive range of games, from low-tier virtual tournaments to high-tier competitions held in large arenas with passionate fans and are broadcasted to millions of viewers worldwide (Elasri-Eijaberi, et al., 2020; Freitas et al., 2020; Shabir, 2017). According to the data provided by Newzoo (2022), the audience figure for esports enthusiasts - those who watch esports content more than once a month - worldwide reached 261 million people in 2022, with a projection of more than 318 million by 2025. Regarding the global esports audience, in 2022, it reached 532 million individuals, with expectations to surpass 640 million in 2025 (Newzoo, 2022). Regarding the revenue, it is expected that esports will exceed 1.86 billion dollars by 2025. This shows that esports will only keep growing, attracting more fans, and generating more profit.

2.3. *Social identity in esports*

According to Brewer (1991), two motives generate social identity: the need to belong and the need to have an identity. People strive for a positive social identity, thus increasing and improving their self-esteem (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019). In this sense, esports and virtual games in general allow their users, spectators, professionals, and fans involved, to create relationships and friendships, and facilitate the creation of a sense of belonging in them. The social capital that comes from electronic games is high, especially for the younger population. They can obtain an identity that brings them satisfaction (Scholtes et al., 2016). The association with video games, either as a player or as a spectator, and the communication made concerning esports events brings players together, provides a sense of identity, and enables players to achieve self-esteem and self-worth (Sun, 2019), which are aligned with the social identity theory.

It should be mentioned that esports-related products (i.e., the games, the in-game packs, and the player set-up such as monitor, chair, and microphone) also contribute to the development of collective emotions, help boost the player's self-esteem and pride, as well as the creation of guilds (game groups) (Sun, 2019). In other words, products and services related to esports are strong factors that contribute to the creation of social identity within the realm of the industry of virtual sports. According to several authors (e.g., Abbasi et al., 2020; Scholtes et al., 2016; Sun, 2019), individuals by being immersed and inserted in esports, as participants and spectators at events or users of a game, will have a sense of identity and reuse the products associated with the context they have experienced in esports. An example of this occurs when fans or spectators purchase the same products that their favorite players use, such as keyboards, headphone sets, and computer mice, amongst other things (Sun, 2019).

It is further added that the identity of esports users – i.e., players/gamers – is not limited only to the leisure field, but also the competition side. For instance, with the entry of esports as a sport in international competitions (e.g., Asian Games and Olympic Esports Series), professional esports players start to represent the players, the games, the sport, and most importantly, their nation and country (International Olympic Committee, n.d.; Sun, 2019).

Moreover, it is central to emphasize the significance of virtual social communities, which are often mentioned as online communities or guilds. These groups comprise individuals who predominantly engage with each other through digital and electronic platforms, thereby fostering a sense of community amid their members (Blanchard, 2008). It refers to people who interact and

engage socially, with the lack of physical space, as they attempt to satisfy their own needs or perform special roles, with a collective commitment and objective that presents a justification for the community (Preece, 2000).

Social identity theory has been used to explain the relationship of certain constructs, in the context of esports, to existing social communities. Kordyaka and Hribersek (2019), focused on gamers' purchasing behavior and concluded that identification with the virtual group significantly predicts their virtual items purchase. In turn, Laato et al. (2020) suggest that social identity theory allows the explanation of the use of linguistic terms characteristic of virtual games since certain terms are associated with specific groups of active players. Case in point, new words have been introduced in online game communities such as "get rekt", "noob", "jym" and "guilds" (Blackburn & Kwak, 2014; Laato et al., 2020).

Aside from this, it has also been noted that a player's identity as a gamer can influence the perseverance to continue playing video games in the face of lacking reward (Neys et al., 2014). Results from Neys' et al. (2014) study indicated that people who identified as casual gamers (those who do not regard gaming as the foremost element of their identity) and heavy gamers (those who spend an enlarged amount of hours gaming) were motivated to continue playing because of their feelings of enjoyment and a sense of connectedness. Hardcore gamers (those who proudly convey the strongest identification with gaming and gamers) were more motivated because the enjoyment they felt increased their levels of persistence consequently (Neys et al., 2014). As a result, social identity has been studied in the context of esports, nevertheless, there are still so many aspects to broaden regarding this topic. One of those is related to gaming engagement (Neys et al., 2014), to users' psychological factors and how they impact on esports fans' social identity (Anderson-Coto et al., 2019).

2.4. Social identity of esports fans and teams

Intergroup relations can be understood through sports fans. A fan is the "person who thinks about, talks about, and is oriented toward sports even when [the fan] is not watching, reading, or listening to an account of a specific sporting event" (Spinrad, 1981, p. 354). Jones (1997) adds that fans are more intense and commit moments of their day to the team or the sport itself, unlike the spectator who just watches the sport and then forgets about the event. According to Wann et al. (2001), a sports fan is someone who's engrossed in and accompanies a "sport, a team, and/or an athlete" (p.

2). They seek to connect to social groups that are positively reflected in how they view themselves (Lock et al., 2012).

Another important concept for the development of this study is that of fandom, which refers to a group of individual fans who are similar, share the same opinion, have common interests, and acquire emotional support and values from the group (Hao, 2020). It can also be referred to as a subculture comprised of people who share an enthusiasm for a shared entity (Lee & Chou, 2021). Following the SIT, it can be gauged that fan identity can grant a sense of belonging to the individual, thus becoming advantageous to them (Phua, 2010). The benefit of fandom is that it lets people participate and feel included in the game without needing any skills (Branscombe & Wann, 1991). This means that an individual, to be a fan of a sport and be included in a fandom does not need to know how to practice or play that sport. In addition, fandom increases social prestige and self-esteem and contributes to the growth of feelings of camaraderie, togetherness, and community that are valuable to the individual and to the social context in which they find themselves (Zillmann et al., 1989).

In the esports context, players create and identify themselves with digital communities, bringing people together in virtual spaces (Hand & Moore, 2006). Fan groups create social structures where social circumstances and environments influence and form identity and impact the gaming experience (Anderson-Coto et al., 2019). In fact, individuals adopt and embrace multiple identities depending on the place and social context, and in video games, this occurs through cosplay (Hill, 2017), identification with in-game avatars, or the use of linguistic terms referring to games or groups (Williams et al., 2014; Laato, et al., 2020). Talent and knowledge are also believed to be significant to the formation of identity in esports, leading to a sense of gratification, satisfaction pleasure, reliability, and the creation of a social community (Taylor 2012).

Esports fans' identities are intricate, and they're impacted by the confluence presented by situational and social contexts. Fans use knowledge, often based on personal experience and skill, as community gatekeeping (Taylor, 2012). Furthermore, it is relevant to point out that these fans struggle to locate their position within the fandom considering that the "other group" might not be a rival or region, but rather, less skilled casual players. According to Anderson-Coto et al. (2019), there isn't a cohesive community or culture in esports, instead, sub-cultures formed between fans of the existing games can be found. Also, the nature of these digital subcultures permits esports to

transcend geographical boundaries and limitations (Anderson-Coto et al., 2019). In this sense, it can be inferred that, in esports case, there is also the creation of social identity through leagues, players, by the style of play, characters, teams, and game strategy (Anderson-Coto et al., 2019; Taylor, 2012).

2.5. Sports celebrities in esports industry

Celebrities are a vital part of marketing and the life of consumers. According to Masood (2011), a “celebrity is a person who is well known among the public and has a reputation based on professional knowledge in a selected area” (p. 7). Miller and Lacznia (2011) added that “celebrities are well-known individuals who receive significant attention from the media. They include actors, musicians, models, politicians and particularly athletes. They are created, supported, promoted, and sold to us via mass media” (p. 499). In other words, celebrities are people “who are identifiable and well known to a specific audience” (Olmedo, et al., 2020, p. 2).

In this sense, it can be acknowledged that a celebrity is someone who, due to communication through mass media, is generally known to the public or in a certain group of people (Voráček & Čáslavová, 2019). Looking into the sports industry, athletes used to be viewed as sports heroes, however, with the professionalization and the mediatization of sports, they have gained the status and reputation of celebrities (Voráček & Čáslavová, 2019). A sports hero is well-renowned and recognized because of their success, results and performance, a sports celebrity is transmitted as a product of media exhibition (Shuart, 2007; Voráček & Čáslavová, 2019), and as someone who is famous (Shuart, 2007).

In esports, there is a spectrum in what concerns celebrities. In this industry, a celebrity could refer to pro-players and gamers (i.e., people who are widely known for the videogames they play and the competitions they participate in), to streamers (i.e., those who are recognized for the live videos they post), and game developers (Abreu et al., 2021; Holden & Baker III, 2019; Newman et al., 2020; Śliwa & Krzos, 2020). Gamers are being portrayed as athletes and celebrities because esports and competitive play are becoming more common (Elmezeny & Wimmer, 2015). An example are the athlete visas that some pro-players are given in order to be able to participate in tournaments in the United States (Elmezeny & Wimmer, 2015). In fact, the mention of celebrities in sports, and specifically esports, is necessary because people who fall into this category are considered an asset. Celebrities are frequently used in marketing communication by brands, companies, and organizations to fulfill determined goals and induce diverse outcomes (Moraes et

al., 2019). They can contribute to attract the consumer's attention; to enhance memory cues of the brand name and the image of a product; to upsurge the honesty and reliability of a message; to build up the attractiveness of a product; and to augment the prospect of a purchase (Voráček & Čáslavová, 2019).

As noted by Bush et al. (2004), the use of sports celebrities has a positive influence on teens and adolescents' word-of-mouth communication and their loyalty to the brand. Dix et al. (2010), corroborated this point of view and added that there is an influence of changing brands or products reliant on the sports celebrity used. In events, celebrities are big contributors to attendance. In traditional sports, many spectators attend events because of famous players (Watanabe, 2012) and in esports, many spectators declared as their motive the interest they have in a specific gamer (Pizzo et al., 2018). Esports celebrities, as key influencers, play an important role by posting about the event in their official channels, and also boost interest and attendance of fans (Śliwa & Krzos, 2020). For instance, when CD Project RED occurred, a game developer widely known for their game "The Witcher", was used as a headline for an event (FantasyExpo), to attract more people to the event (Śliwa & Krzos, 2020).

As stated by Turner (2006), celebrities perform a significant role in the construction and management of an individual's identity. A person forms a social identity as a member of a group of fans who like the same celebrity (group identity), which gives them a sense of belonging and the ability to identify with fans who are similar to said person, and even allows them to differentiate themselves with other people who are not fans of the celebrity (Courbet & Fourquet-Courbet, 2014). The members of the in-group attain a feeling of self-esteem by differentiating themselves from people of an out-group (Angelini & Bradley, 2010; Um, 2016). Aside from this, a fan may want to distinguish themselves from the group by having a higher identification with the celebrity (personal identity) and by knowing detailed information about the personality (Courbet & Fourquet-Courbet, 2014). Also, someone with a weak identity is more susceptible to creating a "psychological absorption with a celebrity" to reinforce their identity and gain a sense of fulfillment (McCutcheon et al., 2016, p. 162).

In fact, there is an increasing presence of celebrities in the esports industry (Keane, 2022), which reinforces the social role of video games and encourages the development of new processes of social identification (Brocato et al., 2012). Currently, celebrities can be seen playing video games, investing in esports teams, or even founding their team. Celebrities like Jennifer Lopez,

Drake and Will Smith have made prominent investments in esports (Duran, 2021; Holden & Baker III, 2019). From traditional sports, celebrities Joe Montana, Kevin Durant, Odell Beckham Jr, Michael Jordan, Thibaut Courtois, and Stephen Curry are investors in the electronic games industry. In this current, some are founders of teams such as Diogo Jota with Diogo Jota Esports, Sergio Aguero with KRÜ Esports, César Azpilicueta with Falcons, Gareth Bale with Ellevens Esports, Antoine Griezmann with Grizi Esport and Jesse Lingard with JLINGZ esports (Duran, 2021; Holden & Baker III, 2019).

Given this, it becomes necessary to understand if the social identification fans have with these personalities can influence their social identity within esports. There still is a lack of studies centered mainly or mostly on the impact and effect celebrities in the esports setting have on fans' behavioral intentions. Celebrities are part of the esports ecosystem, and as such, they should be profusely studied (Śliwa & Krzos, 2020). The present study focuses on Diogo Jota who is a celebrity from the sports industry, owns an esports team, participates in esports competitions, and is a celebrity endorsement. This approach makes the current investigation distinctive in contextual setting and celebrity identity. By understanding how sports celebrities engage with esports, through endorsements, appearances, or collaborations, researchers can determine the extent to which these actions influence the preferences, behaviors, and attitudes of esports fans (Śliwa & Krzos, 2020). In addition, it can shed light on the potential to expand the esports audience (Voráček & Čáslavová, 2019).

2.6. Team identity in esports

Team identification connects fans who are inserted in the in-group, giving them feelings of belonging and camaraderie, and establishing an “us versus them” environment (Phua, 2010). Fans end up becoming a part of the sports team they support, feeling the same “glory of winning and agony of defeat” (Phua, 2010, p. 192). These fans present their associations with sports teams in different ways, such as using websites, forums, and social media to publicly extol their fandom (End, 2001; Phua, 2010); wearing team merchandise (Madrigal, 2001); and keeping up with games and matches religiously throughout the season. The results of the team end up influencing the fans' self-evaluations. According to End (2001), sports fans are more prone to celebrate and bask in reflected glory (BIRGing) when a team wins. When there is a loss, fans tend to cut off reflected failure (CORFing). Highly identified fans are also more expected to make in-group-favoring

attributions and comments about the team's performance. In addition, these fans often rate other in-group members more appreciatively than out-group members and overvalue their team's number of wins (Wann & Branscombe, 1993; Wann & Dolan, 1994). Highly identified fans also manipulate attributions when a loss occurs in hopes of protecting their social identity because they can't exchange loyalties easily (Wann & Branscombe, 1993).

Wann and Branscombe (1990, 1993) began researching how people create social links with sports teams. Spectators have the tendency to associate themselves with successful teams and disassociate from unsuccessful ones (Wann & Branscombe, 1990). Team identification is characterized as a strong psychological and emotional connection between a fan and a sports team (Wann & Branscombe, 1993). Social identity theory states that people categorize themselves, and others, into disparate social groups, which results in these individuals forming a social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

For most individuals, sports fandom is an important social identity component (Wann et al., 2000). Fans link their self-esteem and social identity with the performances of sports teams and athletes. So, when fans discuss sports results, they often refer to the team by using words like "we" and "my" (Sanderson, 2013). In addition, when teams and athletes have success, fans tend to explicitly transmit and express their "identification with winners", whereas they invoke distance when athletes and teams are unsuccessful" (Partridge, Wann, & Elison, 2010, cit. in Sanderson, 2013, p. 489).

Considering these issues, and looking at the esports industry, the fans' social identity can be manifested through their identification with the team (Anderson-Coto et al., 2019). Over the years, few studies tried to understand the phenomenon behind team identification within the esports context. According to Cardoso and Almeida (2022), the identification of a fan with a soccer club positively influences the identification a fan has with the club's esports team, yet the opposite wasn't observed. In Canada, a survey revealed that 39% of esports fans stated they strongly identified with their team (Gough, 2020). However, there is still more room for discussion, especially regarding how esports fans identify with a specific team, which is one of the topics the current research will focus on.

2.7. Fan's behavioral intentions in esports

In the context of traditional sports, brand sponsors play a crucial role in providing the necessary funding for teams, athletes, and events to operate, grow and thrive (Newzoo, 2022; Shabir, 2017). The sports entities can receive from a brand sponsor financial resources for investment in training, equipment, and infrastructure, as well as an opportunity to launch relationships with sponsors and develop solid and durable brand identities (Speed & Thompson, 2000). In exchange, sponsors can increase brand awareness, enhance brand image, create positive brand associations, improve customer loyalty, increase consumer perception and satisfaction regarding the brand, brand recognition, and social responsibility, amongst others (Cornwell, 1995). Sponsors often have their logos displayed on team jerseys, stadiums, and promotional materials which gives them high visibility and exposure to a wide audience (Freitas et al., 2020; Shabir, 2017). Furthermore, they may also get naming rights for stadiums or events (Freitas et al., 2020). In esports, brand sponsorship is similar, however, esports teams and events are heavily dependent on sponsors to cover costs, support player's salaries and organize tournaments (Newzoo, 2022; Shabir, 2017). A slight difference for brands sponsoring esports, when compared to traditional sports, is that in this context sponsors can target a highly engaged and tech-savvy audience (Freitas et al., 2020; Newzoo, 2022; Shabir, 2017). The relationship between brand sponsors and traditional sports/esports is a mutually beneficial one, where sponsors contribute to the success of the sport/entity, and in return, obtain marketing advantages and brand association (Freitas et al., 2019). Previous research has proven that sports sponsorship can positively affect consumers' attitudes toward the sponsoring brand (Meenaghan, 1991). Consumers tend to perceive sponsoring brands as more favorable and trustworthy when compared to non-sponsoring ones (Kim & Choi, 2007), and those who are emotionally connected and attached to the sponsored sports event or team are more likely to have a positive attitude towards the brand (Koronios et al., 2016; Madrigal, 2001). Esports have become appealing due to a large and diverse audience and because of brands looking to enter this industry, mainly through sponsorships (Shabir, 2017). In this market, sponsorship is considered to be complex and dynamic and is evolving at a fast pace. This growth can be explained due to the increase in sponsorships in the industry and the financial resources it provides for tournaments, players, and teams (Shabir, 2017). It plays a fundamental role in the development and growth of esports. In 2022, sponsorship was the highest-grossing revenue stream, generating \$837.3 million in 2022, or nearly 60% of the entire market (Newzoo, 2022).

The esports tournaments and events rely on the investment that comes from sponsorship, and consequently, sponsors try to link themselves with esports teams, gamers, events, and leagues to insert themselves into the esports industry (Newzoo, 2022; Shabir, 2017). In addition, they seek to target specific demographics or market segments and reach a wide audience composed of mainly young and tech-savvy people (Freitas et al., 2020; Shabir, 2017). For instance, Monster Energy gave pro-players free cans of energy drinks throughout the tournaments (Li, 2016), Red Bull created the Red Bull Battle Grounds tournament (Härig, 2015), and built a facility for pro-players to train. During an Intel Extreme Masters tournament, Gillette offered grooming services to pro-players (Shabir, 2017).

In esports case, a brand's role is like in traditional sports. Companies, organizations, and brands link themselves with tournaments, specific teams, and leagues and even endorse pro-players. There is also content sponsorship, where a company pays to have its brand embedded into esports content, such as live streams and video highlights (Hayday, 2022). The brands associate with a property in part because the association has the potential to influence consumer behavior (Madrigal, 2001). Sponsorship effectiveness can be evaluated based on consumer's behavioral intentions towards the brand, including the likelihood of purchasing the brand's products and recommending them to others (Tsotsou & Alexandris, 2009; Yu et al., 2019). Additionally, sponsorships can generate positive word-of-mouth through social media and other channels (Chih-Hung et al., 2012).

Purchase intention refers to an individual's conscious plan to make an effort to purchase a brand (Li et al., 2022). It's the consumer's willingness to buy a product or service (Chih-Hung et al., 2012), and in the sports context, it has been defined as sports fans' willingness to support a sponsor by purchasing and using its products/brands (Lee et al., 1997). Word-of-mouth is the face-to-face communication about a brand, product, or service between people who do not have connections to a commercial property (Naylor, 2016). Currently, there's also electronic word-of-mouth where communication is done through the Internet (Naylor, 2016). Based on SIT, several studies have concluded that individuals who highly identify with a celebrity, are more prone to have a positive electronic word-of-mouth intention (Um, 2016) and purchase intention and decisions (Düsenberg et al., 2016; Felbert & Breuer, 2020; Hou, 2012). For example, the pro-players, seen as celebrities, can influence fans to like and consume brands more (Abreu et al., 2021). Kelman (1961) argues that identification happens when individuals accept the attitude or

behavior promoted and encouraged by celebrities and therefore, tend to behave like them. These two aspects of consumer behavior can have a significant impact on a company's marketing efforts. Therefore, it could be important to understand the factors that influence purchase intention and word-of-mouth to help companies apply effective marketing strategies that leverage the power of positive recommendations and brand purchases.

3. Hypothesized model, hypothesis, and research questions.

3.1.1. Hypothesis model.

The model proposed (Figure 1) translates the relationship between the constructs: fan identity with Diogo Jota (FI), fan identity with Diogo Jota Esports Team (FIET), brand word-of-mouth (BWOM) and brand purchase intention (BPUI).

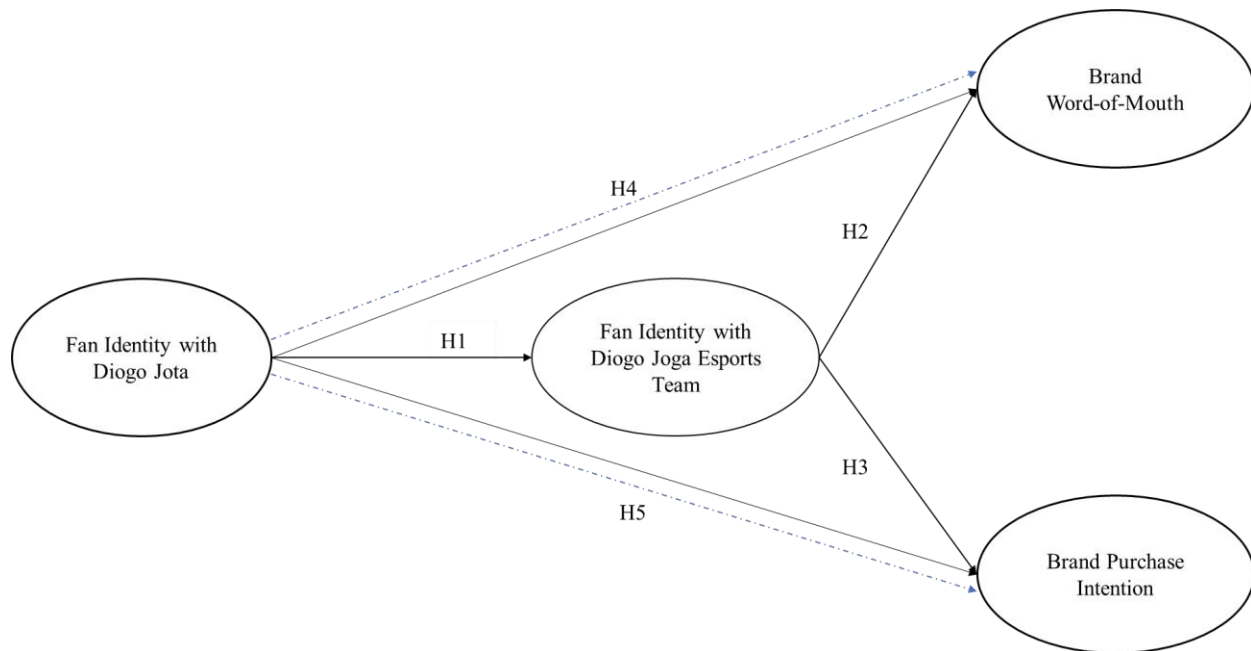


Figure 1. Hypothesised model.

Note: Solid lines indicate direct effects and dotted lines show indirect effects for these paths.

3.1.2. Hypothesis development

Previous literature has highlighted the impact sports celebrities have on fans' attitudes and behaviors. It is known that a celebrity can influence the consumer's purchase intentions and word-of-mouth, however not much is acknowledged when it comes to their effect on fans' identification with a team (Sun, 2010), and in particular in the esports context. The studies approaching this subject are limited, however, the ones that exist mention that people who identify with a famous athlete are more prone to identify with the team they are in or are affiliated with (Carlson & Donavan, 2013). This means that identification with an athlete or sports celebrity can influence positively the fans' identification with a team.

An individual develops an identification with a team due to the identification they have with a player, which can explain their support towards the team the athlete is associated with (Hasaan, et al., 2016, Wann et al., 1996). For instance, a lot of Asian fans started supporting Real Madrid upon David Beckham's arrival at the club (Yu, 2005), while some Barcelona fans started supporting Real Madrid when Ronaldo joined the team (Hasaan, et al., 2016). According to Sun (2010), there exists a relation between athlete identification and team identification, as those who identify with a sports team will most likely also be interested in the star players of that team. Moreover, those with an attachment to a specific sports celebrity ought to care for their team too. Wann et al. (1996) point out player identity as one of the main reasons why people become or continue to be attached to a team. Similarly, Hong et al., (2005) concluded fans' identification with a player positively influenced their identity with the team. Therefore, an individual who strongly identifies with a sports celebrity or athlete is likely to identify with the team it is associated with. Thus, the first hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Fan's identity with Diogo Jota positively influences their identity with DJ's esports team.

Previous studies have shown that team identity positively influences fan behavioral intentions such as word-of-mouth and purchase intention (Gray & Wert-Gray, 2012). When individuals strongly identify with a team, they actively engage in spreading positive recommendations and experiences about the team's sponsors. This way, fans' identification with esports teams can result in positive word-of-mouth about the sponsor brands, and consequently, influence their future purchase intention (Yu et al., 2019).

The level of team identification directly affects the intention to purchase a sponsor's products (Smith et al., 2008), since fans tend to buy products from their favorite team's sponsor when they show high levels of identification with the team (Madrigal, 2001). Highly identified fans have a tendency to offer their support to the team, but also to their sponsors (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003). Madrigal (2001) has highlighted that highly identified individuals have favorable purchase intentions toward a sponsor's products, despite the product being good or necessary. This means that highly identified fans will buy a "team sponsor's products simply because the purchase will be good for the team" (Roy & Pansari, 2014, p. 16). That is, fans are willing to buy the sponsor's products to show their support to their favorite team (Chih-Hung et al., 2012), and "maintain their ties to the group through their behaviors" (Fisher & Wakefield, 1998, p. 28). When the team and its sponsor are regarded as being in a fit relationship, the fan purchase intention of sponsor-brand products or services is positively influenced (Gwinner & Bennett, 2008). This means that individuals with high levels of identification have favorable attitudes towards sponsors and consequently a greater intention to purchase (Madrigal, 2001) and positive word-of-mouth (Um, 2016). As result, the sponsors are compensated for their aid towards the team (Kamath et al., 2021).

Considering the esports context, few studies have considered these sponsorship-related outcomes. For example, Huettermann et al. (2020) determined that esports fans might purchase the sponsors' products simply to support esports and not essentially because they display a positive attitude toward the sponsor's product or brand. Taking these issues into account, the following hypotheses are proposed to understand the behavioral intentions of esports fans:

H2: Fan's identity with the Diogo Jota esports team positively influences their word-of-mouth intention of the brand.

H3: Fan's identity with the Diogo Jota esports team positively influences their purchase intention of the brand's products.

As seen by previous research, celebrities can have an influencing role on consumer's behavioral intentions. Celebrities act as references and role models for consumers since they retain characteristic attributes and qualities that most people admire (Hou, 2012). People who highly identify with a celebrity or an athlete/player are more prone to have a positive electronic word-of-mouth intention (Um, 2016) and purchase intention (Felbert & Breuer, 2020; Hou, 2012). As stated by Park et al. (2019), athletes affect positively and directly behavioral intentions such as re-

purchase and word-of-mouth intentions. People are more enticed to buy sporting goods when they're used or recommended by reputable athletes/sports celebrities (Pransopon & Hoonsopon, 2019). This way, people tend to purchase products or acquire services promoted or used by celebrities to become associated with said personalities (Hou, 2012). In this sense, according to Harasta (2021) "highly identified fans will happily pay hundreds or thousands of dollars to mimic their favorite athlete" (p. 20).

In esports case, the pro-players and gamers can influence their fans to like and consume brands more (Abreu et al., 2021). Most tend to purchase products promoted or used by celebrities as a way to associate themselves with said "stars" (Hou, 2012). And as reported by Ngan (2011), teams with "a sport star" result in stronger purchase intention. However, despite this direct effect of identification with a celebrity on behavioral intentions, we felt the need to study this relationship through team identification, since none of these studies explored their mediating effects. In past research centered on traditional sports, scholars have relocated their focus towards team identity's mediating effect in order to understand how it could influence the relationship between constructs (Kim et al., 2022). Consequently, team identity has been introduced as a mediating variable between consumer transaction and consumer attitudinal loyalty (Bodet & Barnache-Assollant, 2011), inside sacrifice and perceived performance (López-Gajardo et al., 2021), as well as between spectators' pride and regional attachment (Ullah et al., 2021). For Kim and Manoli (2020), team identification fully mediated the relationship between corporate social responsibility (CSR) and brand equity, meaning that "sports fans' awareness of CSR would not result in brand equity without team identification" (p. 12). Madrigal and Chen (2008) used team identification as a mediating variable and concluded that it has a positive mediating effect on stability of basking in reflected glory (BIRGing) and on internal control of basking in reflected glory (BIRGing). And if team identity has a mediating influence, then "marketers know that they must focus on building team identification to increase BIRGing and decrease CORFing (cut off reflected failure)" (Trail et al., 2012, p. 346). Similarly, Soveini (2022) has showed that fan's team identity was a mediator in the relationship between the brand association and brand equity, and as such, team identification can fortify and ease the effect of brand association on brand equity of a football team. Another study has concluded that social media consumption can influence word-of-mouth intention and attendance intention, directly and indirectly, with team identity as mediator (Park & Dittmore, 2014). Also, Theodorakis et al. (2012) have indicated that team identification positively mediated

the relationship between affective commitment and the purchase intention of fans of successful teams” (p. 88).

In this sense, when a celebrity invests in an esports team, their involvement can influence and shape the team’s identity. The celebrity’s personal brand, reputation, and fan base can transfer in future behavioral intentions, through their emotional connection with team (Carlson & Donovan, 2013). By feeling a strong identity with the team, they can relate to the celebrity and share information about their successes as well as purchase its associated products. Thus, it is expected that identification with a sports celebrity can directly and indirectly influence the behavioral intentions of fans, through esports team identity. It could lead to important insights for practitioners and academics. As such, we present these hypotheses:

H4: There is a direct relationship between fans identity with Diogo Jota and their word-of-mouth intention of the brand, mediated by the esports team identity.

H5: There is a direct relationship between fans identity with Diogo Jota and their purchase intention of the brand, mediated by the esports team identity.

3.1.3. Research questions

Taking into consideration the theoretical background of this research, the literature review, and the model proposed, this study aims to answer the following general research question:

RQ1: Does the fan’s identity with a sports celebrity influence its identity with the celebrity’s esports team?

RQ2: Does the fan identity with an esports team influence their behavioral intentions towards the sponsor brand of that team?

RQ3: Is there a direct relationship between the fan’s identity with the sports celebrity and their behavioral intentions, through the esports team identity?

4. Method

This chapter provides an outline of the research methods conducted in this study. The first section presents the research setting, defining the esports context in which the research takes place. Then, the data collection and sample selection are presented. Subsequently, measures and data analysis are explained.

4.1. Contextual Settings

A case study approach was selected to explore the structural relationships between the constructs. This option is suited for investigating contemporary phenomenon, complementing the realist perspective, and attempting to understand how and why something happens (Yin, 2014). Our case study considered the athlete *Diogo Jota*, the esports team Diogo Jota Esports, and the brand Adidas in the esports context.

Diogo José Teixeira da Silva, mostly known as Diogo Jota, is a 26-year-old Portuguese football player, who is considered a sports celebrity. Diogo Jota embarked on his football journey at a young age, in the youth academies of Portuguese clubs such as Gondomar, Paços de Ferreira, and Porto, showcasing potential (Transfermarkt, n.d.). He made his professional debut for Paços de Ferreira's senior team in 2014 and continued to rise as he joined Atletico Madrid's B team, and then Atletico Madrid's first team for the 2016-2017 season (Soccerway, n.d.).

However, it was at Wolverhampton Wanderers, a club in the English Premier League, where he truly made his mark. Diogo Jota played a primordial role in Wolverhampton's promotion to the Premier League, contributing with goals and good performances that caught the attention of football fans (Wolverhampton Wanderers FC, 2018).

In 2020, Diogo Jota joined Liverpool Football Club, where he's still currently at, and in November 2021, he was elected the best player in the English league (Premier League) (Renascença, 2021). Diogo Jota's achievements extend beyond his club career, as he has also represented the Portuguese national team, participating in major international tournaments such as the UEFA Nations League and the UEFA European Championship (Soccerway, n.d.).

What makes Diogo Jota an interesting sports celebrity for the current study is his connection to the world of esports. Alongside his football career, he has developed a strong affinity for competitive gaming, particularly within the realm of FIFA, the popular football video game franchise. Aside from the fact that he founded an esports team - Diogo Jota Esports - he also stands

out as a player in the context of esports, insofar as, during the Weekend League, in 2021, he remained undefeated and finished in the world top 10 (Pinto, 2021). It was a FIFA 21 online competition, which took place over a weekend, and allowed players to be ranked according to the number of victories achieved in 30 matches. In the same year, he also won the ePremier League Invitational FIFA 20 (Pinto, 2021).

Diogo Jota has solidified his status as a celebrity within the esports realm and managed to blur the lines between esports and traditional sports. As a sports celebrity who created his own esports team – Diogo Jota Esports – he was selected for the present study. Regarding the Diogo Jota Esports team, it was founded on November 25, 2020, and currently has seven players (FPF eFootball, n.d.). The team's members are Ricardo Machado (D70Pablo), Rachuanic Amin (Rachuanic10), João Afonso Vasconcelos (Jafonsogv901), Júlio Lourenço (Marqzou); Daniel Fernandes (Dfernandes066), Gonçalo Pinto (Rastaartur), and Diogo Jota (Diogojota18). In 2022, they won the FIFA 22 National Championship, the E-Open Lisboa Betano, and the RIC Cup (Pereira, 2022a; Pereira, 2022b; Seixas, 2022). Diogo Jota Esports has a partnership with the football club Paços de Ferreira, and in June of 2023 they won the eLeague Portugal Supercup (Pereira, 2023). This team is mainly supported by the owner Diogo Jota and by the donations they receive through their Twitch channel, plus the tournament prizes they win from the competitions. Additional support comes from sponsorship. Diogo Jota Esports are sponsored by Adidas (Pinto, 2021), which translates into the insertion of brands in the esports industry (Fitch, 2018), namely in the Portuguese context.

Adidas has shown interest in the esports industry and has been looking to support gamers and esports. To showcase that commitment, Adidas is currently sponsoring gamers and streamers (e.g., Ninja, G2 Esports, 00Nation and Diogo Jota Esports), and collaborating with teams to create co-branded products (e.g., developed a range of apparel with Team Vitality, a French esports organization). It is also launching apparel specifically designed for esports athletes, tailored to the needs of pro-players (Daniels, 2022; Mccarthy Tétrault, 2019; Poole, 2021, Koutsafti, 2022). As mentioned above, Adidas often offers the manufacture of the player's jerseys for the tournaments season (Gardner, 2021) as the case for Diogo Jota Esports. This way, it's possible to see that Adidas have been entering this market in various ways.

4.2 Data Collection and Sample

This study was conducted with a convenience sample of *Diogo Jota's* fans ($n = 412$). An online questionnaire was used to collect data for 2 months (from the 15th of March to the 8th of May), and the following criteria were considered for participant selection: (i) individuals who consider themselves *Diogo Jota* fans, and (ii) individuals who recognize Adidas as *Diogo Jota* esports team-related brand. Individuals under the age of 16 or who do not follow *Diogo Jota* fans were excluded from the study.

The sampling strategy employed was based on the support provided by the *Diogo Jota Esports'* manager, who managed and recruited the participants through e-mail and social media adverts on Instagram (@diogojotaesports) and Twitter (@diogojotaegames). The URL link of the questionnaire was available, after permission from the *Diogo Jota Esports* manager, inviting fans to participate in the study. All participants joined the survey voluntarily and accepted the informed consent form. To ensure that each subject answered only once, the IP address was recorded in the server, preventing further access to the survey. A total of 448 surveys were returned and responses that were not fully completed or that did not meet the defined criteria were excluded from the study. After these data screening procedures, a total of 412 surveys were deemed usable for data analysis.

Table 2 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the study sample ($n=412$). The sample was skewed on the gender level with 335 (78%) men, 61(15%) females, 2 (1%) nonbinary and 23 (6%) prefer not to identify themselves in the total sample. Units were shown in different age categories and the 21–25 years old (oversampled) and 41 years old and over (under-sampled) age groups were consistent across the sampling. Specifically, 73% of the participants (global sample) reported their highest school level being college, almost 9% had a professional education, and 18% with a high school. Most of the respondents were Portuguese (99.6%) with only 0.4% being from other nationalities. Specifically, 47% of the participants reported living in Lisbon/Vale do Tejo zone, followed by the Center (18.2%) and North zones (17.9%). As for Diogo Jota followers, more than 80% of the participants frequently follow the team Diogo Jota Esports, while 17% follow them occasionally. All these details are shown below in Table 2, which contains the sample profile.

Table 2. Respondents' demographic characteristics

Variable	Item	Total Sample %
Gender	Male	78.9
	Female	15.0
	Non-binary	5.6
	Unidentified	0.6
Age	16-20	16.5
	21-25	43.2
	26-30	29.9
	31-35	5.8
	36-40	2.4
	41 or more	2.2
	M(SD)	25.1
Education	High School	18
	Professional School	8.7
	College Degree (Bachelor's)	73.2 (59.2)
	(Master's)	(13.3)
	(Phd's)	(0.7)
Nationality	Portuguese	99.6
	Other	0.4
Residence	North zone	17.9
	Center zone	18.2
	Lisbon/Vale do Tejo zone	47.3
	Alentejo zone	9.0
	Algarve zone	1.5
	Autonomous regions (islands)	1.7
	Outside the country	
Frequently follows Diogo Jota	Ever	82.5
	Occasionally	17.5

4.3. Measures

In the current study, a pool of 15 items were assessed. The first section of the survey collected sociodemographic information (e.g., age, gender, nationality, residence, education level, and the number of Diogo Jota followers), while the second part explored fans' identity psychometric measures (i.e., Diogo Jota's fan identity and fan identity with Diogo Jota esports team) and their

behavioral intentions (word-of-mouth and purchase intent). A guide question invited the respondents to assess the items according to their level of agreement and two initial filter questions were included related to the participant being (or not) a Diogo Jota fan and if s(he) recognized (or not) the sponsor brand of Diogo Jota team. Respondents who answered “no” to any of these filter questions were forwarded to the end of the survey. Then, all the participants were invited to assess the following dimensions:

- ***Fan Identity with Diogo Jota***: To evaluate the fan's identity with Diogo Jota, a 5-item scale was adapted from the Celebrity Identification Scale (Brown, 2007). Identification with celebrities occurs when fans accept the attitude or behavior promoted and encouraged by the public personalities and then tend to behave like them (Kelman, 1961),
- ***Fan Identity with DJ Esports Team***: This construct refers to the fan's identification with the team. Team identification is defined as spectators' perceived connectedness to a team and its performance (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003). We used the Sport Spectator Identification Scale, proposed by Wann and Branscombe (1993), with five items adapted to the esports context.
- ***Brand Word-of-Mouth***: This construct included a two-item scale adapted from Prayag and Grivel (2018) to assess fans' intention to share positive information about the sponsoring brand.
- ***Brand Intention to Purchase***: A three-item scale was adapted from Alexandris et al. (2012) to assess the intention to buy sponsoring brand's products.

All measurement items were translated into Portuguese and back-translated into English, to ensure precision between the original scales, the necessarily translated version, and the cultural context redaction accuracy (Banville et al., 2000). The content validity process (Pollit & Beck, 2006) was ensured by two scholars with experience in sports marketing and management. All researchers were instructed to raise any concerns while completing the scale and carrying out the content analysis of the items. After this step, suggestions for changing the wording of 7 items were made, aiming at greater clarity and comprehensiveness of each item. The items were formulated based on positive statements and they were jumbled within each section. The survey included

seven-point Likert scales (From 1 = “Strongly Disagree” to 7 = “Strongly Agree) and the survey items can be found in. The following table (Table 3) presents the back-translation process.

Table 3. Backtranslation process in the adopted scale

Dimension	Original Items	Portuguese Translation	Backtranslation	Final Item Wording
Fan identity with Diogo Jota	<i>(celebrity's name) and I share many of the same values.</i>	(nome da celebridade) e eu compartilhamos muitos dos mesmos valores	<i>Diogo Jota and I share many of the same values.</i>	O Diogo Jota e eu compartilhamos muito dos mesmos valores.
	<i>What is important to (celebrity's name) is important to me</i>	O que é importante para (nome da celebridade) é importante para mim	<i>What is important to Diogo Jota is important to me</i>	O que é importante para o Diogo Jota é importante para mim.
	<i>I try to model the behavior of (celebrity's name)</i>	Eu tento imitar o comportamento de (nome da celebridade)	<i>I try to imitate Diogo Jota's behavior</i>	Eu tento imitar o comportamento do Diogo Jota.
	<i>I support those who support (celebrity's name)</i>	Eu apoio quem apoia (nome da celebridade)	<i>I support those who support Diogo Jota.</i>	Eu apoio quem apoia o Diogo Jota.
	<i>When someone criticizes (celebrity's name), it feels like a personal insult</i>	Quando alguém critica o (nome da celebridade), parece um insulto pessoal	<i>When someone criticizes Diogo Jota, it feels like a personal insult</i>	Quando alguém critica o Diogo Jota, parece um insulto pessoal.
Fan Identity with DJ Esports Team	<i>It is important for me to see myself as a fan of _____.</i>	É importante para mim ser visto como um fã de _____.	<i>It is important for me to see myself as a fan of Diogo Jota Esports.</i>	É importante para mim ser visto como fã da equipa Diogo Jota Esports.
	<i>It is important for my friends to see me as a fan of _____.</i>	É importante que os meus amigos me vejam com um fã de _____	<i>It is important for my friends to see me as a fan of Diogo Jota Esports.</i>	É importante que os meus amigos me vejam como um fã da equipa Diogo Jota Esports.
	<i>Overall, my (state/university/college football team/city) is viewed positively by others.</i>	No geral, o meu (distrito, universidade/ equipa de futebol universitário/cidade) é visto positivamente pelos outros.	<i>Overall, my esports team (Diogo Jota Esports) is viewed positively by others.</i>	A equipa de esports do Diogo Jota é vista positivamente pelos outros.

	<i>When someone criticizes my (state/university/college football team/city), it feels like a personal insult.</i>	Quando alguém critica o meu (estado, universidade/ equipa de futebol universitário/cidade), parece um insulto pessoal.	<i>When someone criticizes Diogo Jota Esports, it feels like a personal insult.</i>	Quando alguém critica a equipa de esports do Diogo Jota, parece um insulto pessoal.
	<i>In general, being associated with my (state/university/college football team/city) is an important part of my self-image.</i>	Em geral, estar associado ao meu (estado/universidade/equipa de futebol universitário/cidade) é uma parte importante da minha autoimagem.	<i>Overall, being associated with Diogo Jota Esports is an important part of my self-image.</i>	Em geral, estar associado à equipa de esports do Diogo Jota é uma parte importante da minha autoimagem.
Brand Word-of-Mouth	<i>I will recommend _____ to friends and family.</i>	Eu vou recomendar _____ aos meus amigos e família	<i>I will recommend Adidas to friends and family.</i>	Eu vou recomendar a Adidas aos meus amigos e família
	<i>I recommend _____ to someone seeking my advice.</i>	Eu vou recomendar _____ a alguém que esteja à procura do meu conselho.	<i>I recommend Adidas to someone seeking my advice.</i>	Eu vou recomendar a Adidas a alguém que esteja à procura do meu conselho.
Brand Purchase Intention	<i>I consider buying _____ products in the future.</i>	Eu considero comprar produtos da _____ no futuro.	<i>I consider buying Adidas products in the future.</i>	Eu considero comprar produtos da Adidas no futuro.
	<i>It is likely that I will try to buy _____ products in the future.</i>	É provável que eu tente comprar produtos da _____ no futuro.	<i>It is likely that I will try to buy Adidas products in the future.</i>	É provável que eu tente comprar produtos da Adidas no futuro.
	<i>I intend to / will buy new _____ products in the future</i>	Eu pretendo / vou comprar novos produtos da _____ no futuro.	<i>I intend to / will buy new Adidas products in the future</i>	Eu pretendo comprar novos produtos da Adidas no futuro.

4.4. Data analysis

Descriptive statistics were calculated using SPSS 26.0 and then the data were analyzed using AMOS 26.0. Assumption tests associated with CFA and SEM were assessed that included normality, multicollinearity, and outliers. A Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted on the model proposed to ensure the measurement model's psychometric properties. The substantive hypotheses were then tested using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), which simultaneously uses a series of separate and independent multiple regression equations (Marôco, 2018). The appropriateness of the data for the measurement model was examined using the ratio of chi-square (χ^2) to its degrees of freedom, the fit indexes (TLI, CFI, and GFI), and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) (Hair et al., 2009). Convergent validity was assessed in terms of factor loadings through the average variance extracted (AVE), while discriminant validity was assessed by comparing squared correlations between constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Regarding internal consistency, Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability were measured to evaluate the reliability of the survey measures. The bootstrapping technique was also conducted to measure the indirect effects (Preacher & Hayes, 2008), through the team identity.

5. Results

In this chapter, the study results are exposed, and separated into three sub-chapters: descriptive statistics of factors, measure assessment, and hypotheses testing.

5.1. Descriptive statistics of factors

Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 4. All skewness (values smaller than -0.836) and kurtosis (values smaller than -1.319) indicated that data distribution, and consequently multicollinearity, was not an issue (Hair et al., 2011). Data were positively skewed with mean scores significantly above three (3.5) – i.e., above the mid-point of the 7-point Likert scale items, for fan identity with *Diogo Jota* and behavioral intentions. The mean scores for fan identity with *Diogo Jota* ($M_{diogo} = 4.09$) were higher than for its team identity ($M_{team} = 3.10$), revealing their strong identity with the athlete and associated products. The results also indicated that word-of-mouth recommendation of the sponsor's products had the highest mean score ($M = 5.09$, $SD = 1.49$), while fan identity with the esports team was the variable with the lowest mean perceived ($M =$

3.10, $SD = 1.82$), evidencing their identification level with the group. Furthermore, all variables were positively and significantly inter-correlated.

5.2. Assessment of the measures

The global fit indices indicate that the measurement model proposed provides an acceptable fit to the data [$\chi^2(82) = 238.77$ ($p < .01$), $\chi^2/gl = 2.91$, $CFI = .98$, $GFI = .92$, $NFI = .97$, $TLI = .98$, $SRMR = .03$, $RMSEA = .06$]. The CFI, NFI, and TLI values exceeded the recommended cut-off of 0.90, whereas the SRMR and RMSEA value was more favorable than the 0.08 threshold (Hair et al., 2009). In addition, Cronbach's alpha, and composite reliability values (α and CR) of all constructs exceeded the recommended threshold of .70 (all values higher than .94), providing support for the internal consistency of these constructs (Marôco, 2018). Table 4 shows all results obtained.

The construct measures yielded sound reliability and validity properties (Table 4). The AVE scores varied from .78 (fan identity with Diogo Jota) to .97 (word-of-mouth intention), exceeding the recommended threshold of .50 and providing evidence of convergent validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). In addition, evidence of discriminant validity was accepted given that the correlation coefficients were lower than the suggested criterion of .85 (Kline, 2005), and none of the squared correlations exceeded the AVE values for each associated construct (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The correlation matrix for the constructs and average variance extracted tests of discriminant validity are presented in Table 4. Subsequently, the structural model and indirect effects were examined.

Table 4 - Descriptive statistics, correlations, and summary results of the measurement model

Construct	M/ SD	Sk/Ku	Correlation matrix (n=412)				Factor loadings	CR	α	AVE
			1	2	3	4				
1. Fan Identity with Diogo Jota	4.09(1.66)	-.03/-1.16	1.00				.824 - .942	.95	.94	.78
2. Fan Identity with DJ Esports Team	3.10(1.82)	.30/-1.31	.35(.59)	1.00			.849 - .962	.97	.97	.86
3. Brand Word-of-Mouth	5.08(1.49)	-.83/.62	.26(.51)	.25(.50)	1.00		.966 - .988	.99	.98	.97
4. Brand Purchase Intention	4.96(1.53)	-.61/.12	.13(.36)	.17(.41)	.54(.73)	1.00	.981 - .992	.98	.98	.95

Notes: All correlation coefficients are statistically significant at the .01 significance level ($p < .01$); Parenthesis - Squared correlation; DJ – Diogo Jota.

M/SD - Mean/Standard Deviation; Sk/Ku - Skewness/Kurtosis CR = construct reliability; α = Cronbach's alpha; AVE = average variance extracted; n = 412.

5.3. Testing of the hypotheses

Analysis model. The overall assessment of the structural model, without the presence of mediating effects, demonstrated an acceptable fit to the data [$\chi^2(85) = 314.48$ ($p < .01$), $\chi^2/df = 3.70$, $CFI = .97$, $GFI = .90$, $NFI = .96$, $TLI = .97$, $SRMR = .07$, $RMSEA = .08$]. Our model explained a significant portion of the variance of fan identification with the esports team ($R^2 = 36\%$), of the word-of-mouth recommendation of the brand ($R^2 = 26\%$), and of brand purchase intention ($R^2 = 18\%$). The effect of fan identity with a celebrity on the esports team ($\beta_1 = .60$, $p < .001$), thus supporting H1. Similarly, fan identity with the esports team showed a significant positive effect on the brand word-of-mouth ($\beta_2 = .51$, $p < .001$) as well as on the brand purchase intention ($\beta_3 = .42$, $p < .001$), therefore H2 and H3 were also supported. The path coefficients for each model are illustrated in Figure 2, indicating that all hypotheses were supported.

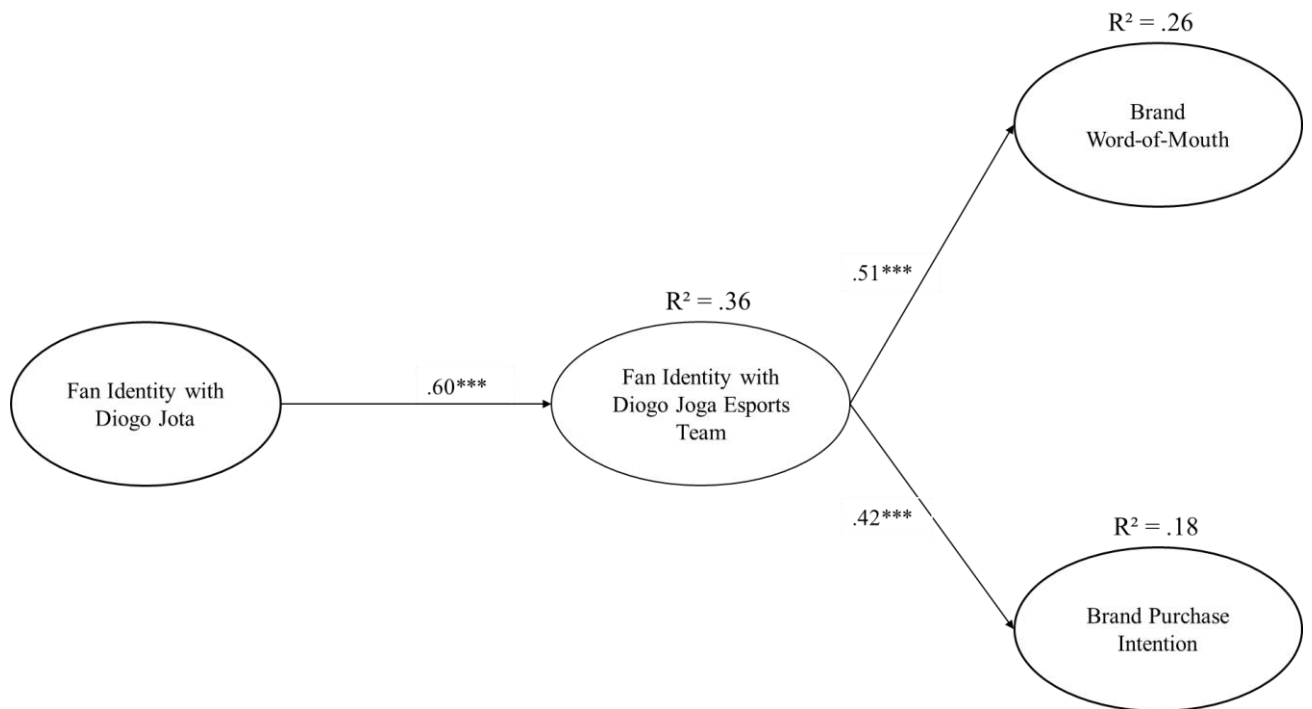


Figure 2 – Standardized estimates of the model

Note: *** $p < .001$

To measure the indirect effect through the team identity, we used a bootstrapping technique including 95% confidence intervals with 2,000 bootstrap samples (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). The fan identity with *Diogo Jota* showed a positive indirect effect on WOM intention ($r = .23, p < .001, 95\% CI = [0.17, 0.33]$) and on brand purchase intention ($r = .24, p < .001, 95\% CI = [0.16, 0.34]$) of fans. Team identity partially mediated the relationship between fan identity with *Diogo Jota* and WOM intention with 67% of the total effect, as well as brand purchase intention with 48%. These findings confirmed the assumption that fan identification with a sports athlete may foster behavioral intention towards a brand, through their identity with the esports team. Consequently, H4 and H5 were supported showing that team identity was a mediator variable that led to positive direct effects between fan identity and behavioral intentions towards the brand word-of-mouth and purchase intention. Table 5 depicts the direct and indirect effects.

Table 5 - Path coefficients, indicator weights, and structural model variances explained.

Hypothesis/Path	Fan Identity		
	Supported?	β	t-value
<i>Direct effects</i>			
FIDJ \rightarrow BWOM	Yes	.347***	6.30
FIDJ \rightarrow BPUI	Yes	.191***	3.24
	Supported?	r	[95% CI]
<i>Indirect effects</i>			
FIDJ \rightarrow FIET \rightarrow BWOM	-	.235***	[0.165-0.333]
FIDJ \rightarrow FIET \rightarrow BPUI	-	.241***	[0.158-0.338]

Notes: β = direct effect; *** $p < 0.001$; 95% CI = 95% Bias-corrected confidence intervals.

FIDJ – Fan Identity with Diogo Jota; BWOM – Brand Word-of-Mouth; BPUI – Brand Purchase Intention.

FIET – Fan Identity with Esports Team.

Mediator Analyses. The alternative mediated model also evidenced a good fit to the data [$\chi^2(84) = 278.18$ ($p < .01$), $\chi^2/df = 3.31$, $CFI = .91$, $GFI = .91$, $NFI = .97$, $TLI = .97$, $SRMR = .07$, $RMSEA = .07$]. Our results indicated that fan's identity with Diogo Jota had a significant direct effect toward WOM [FIDJ \rightarrow FIET \rightarrow BWOM, $\beta = .347$, 95% bootstrap CI (0.242 to 0.453), $p < 0.01$] and on purchase intention [FIDJ \rightarrow FIET \rightarrow BPUI, $\beta = .191$, 95% bootstrap CI (0.070 to 0.300), $p < 0.01$], via the esports team identity. Therefore, H4 and H5 were supported in the mediated model. The first path coefficient remains positive and significant (H1 $\rightarrow \beta_1 = .60$, $p < .01$), indicating fan identity with Diogo Jota was the significant predictor of team identity in both models, while the coefficient of the second and third paths revealed a decrease in the effect magnitude on brand WOM (H2 $\rightarrow \beta_2 = .31$, $p < .01$) and on purchase intention (H3 $\rightarrow \beta_2 = .30$, $p < .01$). The partial mediation model explained 33% ($R^2 = .33$) of the variance in WOM intention and 20% ($R^2 = .20$) of the purchase intention. The results of the mediated model are presented in Figure 3.

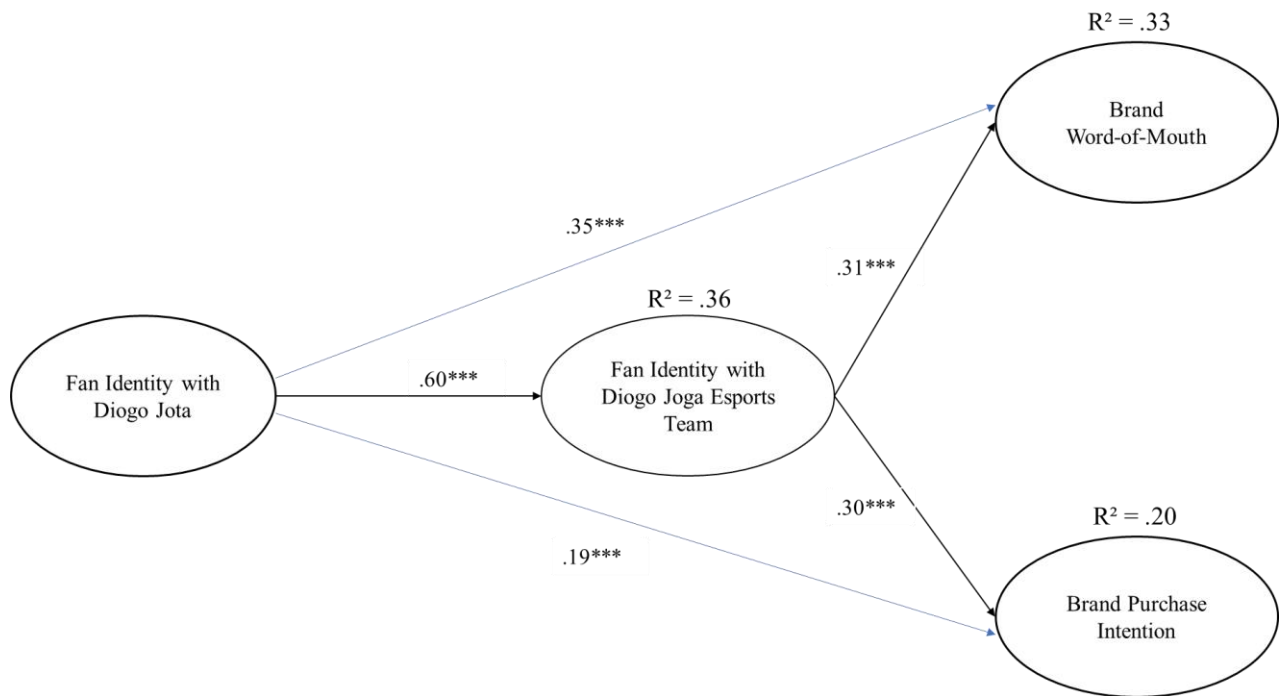


Figure 3 – Standardized estimates of the mediated model

Note: *** $p < .001$

6. Discussion

This chapter discusses the results gathered, divided into two sections – theoretical and managerial implications. The first section seeks to discuss the hypothesis and the initial research questions, focusing on the theoretical implications related to the research results. The second section will focus on the practical implications for esports managers, esports teams, and brand marketers.

6.1. Theoretical implications

This study aims to explore the fans' identity with Diogo Jota and his esports team, and its effect on their future behavioral intentions towards the sponsor brand. By doing this, it has provided empirical evidence and insights into the structural relationships between constructs such as identification with sports celebrities, esports team identity, and fans' behavioral intentions with sponsor-brand. This research on esports fans' identity can be considered a valuable contribution to the empirical framework, as well as to the esports industry.

The empirical findings revealed that fans' identity with sports celebrity Diogo Jota had a positive effect on their identity with the Diogo Jota esports team. This means that fans who highly identify with Diogo Jota are more likely to identify with his esports team, which has a theoretical relevance due to the lack of research focused on the topic at hand (Sun, 2010). Taking into account that celebrities have a great power of influence, it makes sense that individuals who identify with Diogo Jota also identify with his esports team. As consistent with the existing literature, the fans who identify themselves with an athlete are more likely to identify with their team (Carlson & Donovan, 2013), since these sports celebrities can lead people to the venues, to the stores and support the same things they do (Brown et al., 2013; Watanabe, 2012). This could also be explained because fans want to differentiate themselves from the group by having a higher identification with the celebrity (Courbet & Fourquet-Courbet, 2014) and they love everything the personality is associated with (Kelman, 1961). Based on the social identity theory, people tend to favor their in-group (Wann & Branscombe, 1993), and as the celebrity is considered part of that in-group, it is expected that fans support it and eventually form an identity with his/her team (Hasaan, et al., 2016). Also, this identification with a team can result from a need to attach oneself to another larger social group (the club's fan community) (Sun, 2010). In traditional sports, people become fans of a team and form an identity because of a player (Hong, et al., 2005). Facing the

results from this study, and taking into consideration past findings mentioned, it is possible to state that a celebrity from traditional sports can contribute to the development of a social identity with an esports team sponsored by him/her.

Results also show that fans' identification with Diogo Jota Esports was a positive and significant predictor of positive word-of-mouth recommendations about the sponsoring brand. This is corroborated by previous studies which state that the more identified an individual is with a team, the more they will talk positively about the sponsoring brand and recommend it to other people (Yu et al., 2019). When fans show high levels of identification with a team, they actively spread positive recommendations and experiences about the team's sponsors. The same is true of purchase intention, this is also positively influenced by the fans' identity with Diogo Jota Esports. The findings aren't surprising as the existing literature proves that there is a relation between team identification and the intention to buy the sponsor's products. The level of team identification directly affects the intention to purchase a sponsor's products (Smith et al., 2008). Therefore, these fans are more likely to buy products from their favorite team's sponsor due to the high levels of identification they have with the team (Madrigal, 2001). As mentioned before, strongly identified fans tend to support the club and its sponsors (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003; Kamath et al., 2021). And as confirmed by Nassis et al. (2012), team identification is an important contributor to predicting fans' willingness to buy a sponsor's products. Following our findings, it is possibly argued that highly identified fans have favorable purchase intentions toward an esports team sponsor's product. These individuals will buy a sponsor's product to support the team (Chih-Hung et al., 2012; Roy & Pansari, 2014), and to develop, preserve and reinforce their ties to the group (Fisher & Wakefield, 1998, p. 28). According to the social identity theory, highly identified fans, to maintain or increase self-esteem, tend to evaluate the in-group members more positively than the out-group members (Wann & Branscombe, 1993). A sponsor can be seen as part of the in-group by supporting something that the fans believe is important. That way, the favorable bias that strongly identified fans have towards other in-group members can extend to the sponsors that are supporting the favored team (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003).

That being said, fans' identity with esports team positively affects behavioral intentions. However, the explained variance of the word-of-mouth recommendation of the brand ($R^2 = 33\%$) has higher value than brand purchase intention ($R^2 = 20\%$) which could indicate that these fans aren't that likely to spend money to support the team, maybe due to the prices that could be

associated with the sponsor's products (Kwon et al., 2007), but would be more inclined to talk positively and recommend Adidas to friends, family or acquaintances. This is because such fans have knowledge that they belong to the social category which is the Diogo Jota esports team (Hogg et al., 1995).

The results also suggest that the direct effects of identification with Diogo Jota on brand word-of-mouth and brand purchase intention are positive and significant in the presence of the mediating variable – team identity. It is possible to confirm that these findings are consistent with the existing literature considering that team identification (Lee, 2021) and celebrity identification (Harasta, 2021; Pransopon & Hoonsopon, 2019) are predictors of behavioral responses in the traditional sports. Theoretically, this study adds knowledge to esports studies. The fan identity with celebrity has a greater role in creating identity with esports team and in future behavioral intentions. This is consistent with previous researcher's suggestions (Felbert & Breuer, 2020; Hou, 2012; Madrigal, 2001; Um, 2016) that fan identity appears to have a strong influence on brand support intentions. A mediator clarifies how/why an antecedent construct moves to its outcome construct. Thus, our findings imply that a strong identity with Diogo Jota is crucial, and naturally fans transfer its identity to the esports team, enhancing their consumption behavior towards the team's sponsor brand. Based on our results, we can conclude that celebrity identity and team identity are important elements to generate strong brand consumption. By investigating the mediating role of team identity, this study offers a more comprehensive understanding of the relations between identity with a celebrity and fan's behavioral intentions. As much as fans' identification with a celebrity would result in fans' brand word-of-mouth and brand purchase intention, our findings add that team identity explains how that positive effect happens and helps to solidify the relationship between these two constructs. Interestingly, despite the mediating role of this variable, the respondents reported a low mean score over the team identity ($M_{team} = 3.10$). Fans feel more identified with Diogo Jota than with his esports team. It suggests that people may not know Diogo Jota's esports team or have a lack of connection or attachment to it. This weak feeling of identification with the esports team is probably because they are not exposed to the team or the sport (Prayag et al., 2020). Some fans are also loyal to various teams or a lot of athletes in different teams, which sometimes can weaken their identification with a particular team (Dwyer, 2011). In line with this, there are fans who show more interest in individual players instead of the team, which can result in the fans' allegiance and loyalty shifting every time the player they

support switches teams. According to Sun (2010), fans tend to connect more with the athlete than with the team, both psychologically and behaviorally, because, for sports fans, athletes seem more personal and tangible than teams. Additionally, the reported weak identity with the esports team could be due to Diogo Jota's team being relatively recent in the athlete's investment structure since it was founded in 2020 (FPF eFootball, n.d.). This explains the need to strengthen the fans' social identity or to aid the transfer of fans' identity and attachment with the celebrity towards his team.

Unlike other empirical studies, this study is context-specific, which means, rather than measuring relationships between those constructs, which is already proved by other scholars (Carlson & Donovan, 2013; Harasta, 2021; Lee et al., 2021; Wann & Branscombe, 1993; Yu et al., 2019), we also looked on the mediating role of team identity in a celebrity-behaviors relationship. From the results of the study, we can deduce that while creating a strong fan identity with team is crucial, it should be inextricably linked to the celebrity such that team attachment is formed. Both celebrity identity and team identity can together contribute to ensuring behavioral intentions of fans through purchase and WOM recommendation intentions.

6.1.2. Managerial implications

The current investigation carries significant managerial implications for organizations, brands, and teams operating in the esports industry.

The first empirical finding of this study indicates a positive effect of fans' identity with sports celebrities on their identification with esports teams which serves to let teams and their institutional entities know that associating themselves with a sports celebrity is advantageous in fostering the fans' team identification (Carlson & Donovan, 2013). Esports managers should start by associating popular sports celebrities with their teams, through endorsements, sponsorships, or collaboration and cultivating those relationships. For instance, they could have gaming content featuring sports celebrities and members of the esports team, invite famous athletes to be main sponsors and provide them with naming rights, or do advertisements with said personalities to reach out to fans and create a connection with them. At this point, these entities can transfer the existing fan affinity for these famous athletes to their esports teams (Hasaan, et al., 2016)). Fans due to the need to belong will consider the success of the team as the success of the athlete and therefore as being theirs as well.

In the same line of thought, integrating the sports celebrity into the team branding's narrative is essential as it can create a sense of shared identity among fans and deepen fans' emotional connection with both the celebrity and the esports team (Chih-Hung et al., 2012; Fisher & Wakefield, 1998). Diogo Jota esports team already has a few contents with Diogo Jota, however, it would be interesting to have a profound marketing strategy and activities integrating the celebrity (Diogo Jota) and the members of the esports team. For example, there could be more content on social media or YouTube where Diogo Jota and the members of his esports team interact, share stories and their professional experiences, explain to the viewers how and why they got into esports, show people their favorite equipment to use while gaming, or compete in a mini tournament between each other.

By recognizing and capitalizing on the positive effect of fans' identity with Diogo Jota on their identification with esports teams, Diogo Jota's team staff can foster deeper connections with fans, enhance brand loyalty, and ultimately drive business growth in the esports industry, locally and internationally (Freitas, et al., 2019; 2020; Kamath et al., 2021; Shabir, 2017).

Our results also prove that esports team identification has a positive influence on fans' behavioral intentions, meaning that because of their identification with the esports team and the psychologically favorable biases, these fans are more likely to buy the sponsor's products, support the team, feel connected to the in-group (Abrams & 1988; Madrigal, 2001). However, when analyzing H4 and H5, and comparing the influence sports celebrities and esports teams have on fans' behavioral intentions, it's possible to conclude that famous athletes end up having an equal or greater influencing power than the esports team. To this end, Diogo Jota team staff should focus on strategies that result in long-term effects such as team identity (Wu et al., 2012). If they wish to increase the supporters' behavioral intentions towards their sponsor, it's primordial to reinforce and strengthen the fans' identification with the team. This could be done by creating or redirecting the team's brand into something that resonates with fans, fostering in that way a sense of identification between supporters. For instance, creating a team motto to go along with the team's logo and incorporating the team's colors in the merch and tournament jerseys. Also, it's advised to have a dynamic website with flash interviews of the team members, including quotes and information about them, making them seem not so distant and within the fans' reach; with information about latest news and competitions' results; with behind-the-scenes content; and with a section dedicated to the fanbase.

Additionally, management could increase the fan engagement activities such as meet-ups and interactive live streams. A friendly tournament could be organized, online or in a venue, between the players and their fans; a few giveaways could be arranged for fans to win exclusive merchandise, a visit to the team's headquarters, gaming equipment, or even attend a tournament and go backstage with the team; to increase interaction esports teams could, through social media, ask fans to share their best moments or highest scores/points of the week (e.g., their best goal or end score in a FIFA match), creating this way a sense of camaraderie.

Likewise, marketers and brands should channel efforts into the teams they are sponsoring and apply strategies that enhance the fans' team identity, and consequently, an identity towards the brand (Gawrysiak, et al., 2020; Huettermann et al., 2020). Indeed, the findings of our research propose that brand managers who aim to increase the sponsored team fans' consumption behaviors towards their brand, they need to aid strengthen team identification, due to both its direct relationship with fans' behavioral intentions and its mediating role between identity with a celebrity and behavioral intentions towards the sponsoring brand. This is of relevance because deepening the fans' identification with the team will most likely enhance their willingness to advocate for the sponsoring brand and purchase their products. Adidas, for instance, should implement plans to strengthen its relationship and connection with Diogo Jota Esports' fans. It should rely on the passion and loyalty of esports fans by creating authentic, immersive and inclusive experiences, such as hosting events for fans or sponsoring fan tournaments. On friendly events organized by the teams for the fans, the sponsor could have naming rights and even employ some activations like fan photo booths, interactive games and merch stands. Also, social media initiatives can be executed where fans can share their team-related experiences by using specific hashtags and participate in challenges and contests focused on both the team and the sponsoring brand. More collaborative content could be produced with the celebrity -Diogo Jota- and with the esports team, like advertisements, behind-the-scenes videos and extras of the esports team and the sponsoring brand's staff playing video games, showcasing the strong relationship between the sponsor and the esports team.

A final suggestion is for sponsors within the esports market to include a section on their websites and social media dedicated to esports, fortifying the bond and link between the brand and the esports team, athlete, or event they're sponsoring. This is important because for the sponsor to be considered as a member of the in-group and benefit from it with positive word-of-mouth and

purchase intention, (Chih-Hung et al., 2012; Gwinner & Swanson, 2003). The brand needs to be perceived as an entity that is bringing and encouraging positive outcomes and experiences for the team and the fans (Freitas, et al., 2019; Shabir, 2017). Furthermore, sponsor brands can also be highly benefited if they properly activate their sponsorships and maximize the potential of pro-players and teams as brand endorsers and brand ambassadors (Abreu et al., 2021). Therefore, it is crucial for sponsoring brands to associate themselves with the team and its principles to form an authentic and genuine bond with supporters.

7. Limitations and further studies

The main limitations of this study were: a) the exploratory nature of the current research means that it needs to be adjusted, especially because there are other variables that can allow us to better understand and study the fan's behavioral intentions; b) our sample was composed mainly by individuals from male gender, which didn't allow a global analysis of the genders; c) we didn't profusely use and developed the identity theory alongside the social identity theory to explain both sides of fan's identification with a celebrity; d) due to the multiplicity of identity it wasn't possible to study the various determinants and factors that can affect it; and e) some limitations in attending to the Diogo Jota's fans.

Given this, for future studies we suggest more investigations focused on other external factors to understand behavioral intentions, such as loyalty and satisfaction. Future studies should consider larger samples, or samples based on different groups, to find possible differences between fan types. For example, to understand if there are differences in behavioral intentions between people who are subjected to campaigns with the presence of an esports team, a sports celebrity, and a sponsor versus those who aren't. An additional suggestion could be replicating this research on various countries, to then proceed with a comparative study while also considering the different cultures and seeking a more equal sample in terms of gender to conduct an analysis based on that. It is also recommended to add a qualitative analysis to a study like this by conducting interviews with fans, members of esports teams and the sponsoring brands to understand how fans' social identity can influence their future behavioral intentions.

8. Conclusion

Through the current study, it was possible to answer the research questions and assert that a) a fan's identity with a sports celebrity positively influences their identity with the celebrity's esports team; b) fan identity with an esports team positively affects their behavioral intentions (word-of-mouth and purchase intention) towards the team's sponsoring brand; and lastly, c) there exists an direct relationship between the fan's identity with the sports celebrity and their behavioral intentions, mediated by the team identity. Consequently, all the hypotheses were confirmed and supported, and the investigation's objectives were fulfilled.

This research on the structural relationship between fans' identification with celebrities, esports team identification, and their behavioral intentions can be a relevant contribution to the theoretical lens in the esports field. It allowed us to understand how fans' social identity can generate positive influences in their attitudes and behaviors in the esports field. As an innovative contribution, this paper focuses on the effect that sports celebrity has on an esports team since there is a literary gap based on this relationship.

The findings of this study hold significant implications for the esports industry, since as esports continue to grow in popularity and commercial value, understanding the reasons behind fan behavior becomes crucial for organizations working within this market. Identification with celebrities and teams, as well as the mediating role of team identity, provide valuable strategic insights for esports organizations and sponsors. Moreover, the information gained from this study has implications for managing fan engagement, attachment, and loyalty in esports, but it can also be extended to traditional sports. By acknowledging the influence of celebrity identification on team identity, and the impact these two variables have on fans' behavioral intentions, sports organizations can develop and implement effective marketing and fan engagement strategies.

To this end, we contributed to the empirical understanding of fan identity within the esports context, providing practical implications for the esports industry and sports management. This research has given way for future studies and provided suggestions for practitioners seeking to optimize fan identity, teams' identity, brand relationships, and sales within the esports industry.

10. References

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Appendix: Factor Loadings, Z-Values, CFA item statistics, and correlation matrix of the variables used in the structural model

Variables/Items	Factor loading	Z-value	CR	AVE
Fan identity with Diogo Jota			.94	.78
1. Diogo Jota and I share many of the same values.	.824	20.68		
2. What is important to Diogo Jota is important to me	.924	24.12		
3. I try to imitate Diogo Jota's behavior	.969	22.21		
4. I support those who support Diogo Jota.	.864	22.91		
5. When someone criticizes Diogo Jota, it feels like a personal insult	.919	22.42		
Fan identity with Diogo Jota Esports Team			.97	.86
6. It is important for me to see myself as a fan of Diogo Jota Esports.	.849	21.33		
7. It is important for my friends to see me as a fan of Diogo Jota Esports.	.959	26.25		
8. Overall, my esports team is viewed positively by others.	.962	26.44		
9. When someone criticizes Diogo Jota esports team, it feels like a personal insult.	.903	23.61		
10. In general, being associated with Diogo Jota esports team is an important part of my self-image.	.952	25.91		
Brand word-of-mouth			.98	.97
11. I will recommend Adidas to friends and family.	.988	27.57		
12. I recommend Adidas to someone seeking my advice.	.966	26.46		
Brand purchase intention			.98	.95
13. I consider buying Adidas products in the future.	.992	28.20		
14. It is likely that I will try to buy Adidas products in the future.	.981	27.58		
15. I intend to / will buy new Adidas products in the future	.993	28.27		
Correlation matrix				
Construct	1	2	3	4
1. Fan identity with Diogo Jota	1.00			
2. Fan identity with Diogo Jota Esports Team	.35	1.00		
3. Brand word-of-mouth	.26	.17	1.00	
4. Brand purchase intention	.13	.25	.54	1.00