

Gender Dynamics in Esports Fan: Exploring Sponsorship Perception in Mobile Legends Professional League (MPL)

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Submission date: 14 February, 2024

Accepted date: 17 August, 2024

Published date: 15 September, 2024

ABSTRACT

This research investigates the effects of gender dynamics on fan engagement and perceptions within Mobile Legends Professional League (MPL) sponsorships. Specifically in exploring the factors that influence fans' attitudes, engagement and consumption behaviors. The results reveal significant gender-based disparities in perceptions and interactions with MPL sponsors, with male and female fans exhibiting distinct attitudes, particularly within the fan community associated with MPL-sponsored brands. Notably, a distinct correlation between fan engagement and consumption subsequent behaviors underscores the importance of gender-specific marketing strategies in the Esports landscape. This research contributes to understanding sports sponsorship in the digital age, emphasizing the need for tailored marketing approaches that accommodate gender dynamics in Esports. The insights gathered are crucial for developing effective sponsorship strategies that resonate authentically with diverse fan groups, ultimately enhancing the impact and reach of Esports sponsorships..

Keywords: *Mobile Legends, Gender Dynamics, Esports Sponsorship, Fans Engagement, Consumption Behaviour.*

INTRODUCTION

Sports sponsorship is one of the most effective marketing strategies for positioning a brand in the minds of customers. According to Pan & Phua (2020), sponsorship has been utilized as a successful marketing tactic for creating company identities and brand names, offering chances to enhance sponsors' symbolic values, and maximizing the advantages of collaborations during sporting events (Koronios, Thrassou, Ntasis, Sakka, 2022). Besides that, it creates such strong emotional connections with those who watch it and because it has such a large audience, the sport has proven to be a popular industry for sponsorship and other related business strategies. Sponsorship is typically thought of as a tool for businesses to develop their brand equity in the context of sports raising awareness and effectively communicating the desired brand personality can enhance brand recognition and positively influence customer purchasing behaviours (Schönberner & Woratschek, 2023). Besides that, the internet has catalysed the rapid growth and popularity of sponsorship in Esports. According to Abbasi et al., 2023, the number of worldwide spectators was 465.1 million in 2021, and global revenue generated through Esports is estimated to be around \$1.0bn in 2021 and predicted to reach \$1.6 by the end of the year 2022.

Concurrently, the ascent of Esports is aligning seamlessly with the increased utilization of social media, particularly among younger generations (Apandi et al., 2023). The Esports trend is continuously expanding in Asian countries, especially Malaysia. Competitive video gaming has started to gain momentum because of Esports tournaments, host events and broadcast video games (Kim et.al, 2020). The main goals of Esports sponsorship are the improvement of image, attitude, loyalty and the increase in brand awareness among fans. However, certain goals also relate to the behavioral segment the influence on purchasing intentions and decisions. Even fans state that brand promotion, increasing brand awareness, and empowering image and reputation are the main reasons for Esports sponsorship, which positively impacts their loyalty towards sponsors (Pan & Phua, 2020).

Sports fans typically accepted sponsor brands and associated advertisements as part of the contemporary sporting landscape and reported few objections to sponsor brands in sporting events. The perception and attitudes towards the sponsorship of the Mobile Legends Professional League (MPL) can significantly influence the level of engagement and consumption behavior among Esports enthusiasts. This phenomenon can be leveraged by sponsors to enhance their brand-building strategies or to cultivate customer loyalty, which is often linked to the loyalty fans have towards specific sports clubs or events. This understanding aligns with the suggestions from Pan & Phua (2020), who imply that exploring the impact of sponsorship perceptions in the realm of Esports, such as in the context of MPL, could be a valuable area of study for understanding and enhancing brand engagement and customer loyalty (Pan & Phua, 2020).

The advent of Esports has not only expanded the boundaries of traditional sports but also introduced a new dimension to sports marketing, where digital platforms offer unprecedented opportunities for brand integration and audience interaction. However, the effectiveness of these sponsorships hinges on a deep understanding of the diverse Esports audience, particularly the influence of gender on fan engagement and sponsorship perception. Employing quantitative methodology, this study delves into the intricacies of fan behavior, attitudes, and perceptions towards MPL sponsorships, drawing on a rich dataset to uncover gender-specific trends and insights.

Through a meticulous analysis encompassing regression models, chi-square tests, and Pearson's correlation coefficients, the research unveils a complex tapestry of gender differences in Esports sponsorship engagement. These findings challenge marketers to rethink traditional one-size-fits-all strategies, highlighting the need for tailored approaches that resonate with the distinct preferences and behaviors of male and female audiences. The implications of this research extend beyond the Esports industry, offering valuable lessons for the broader field of sports marketing in the digital age.

By bridging the gap between gender studies and sports sponsorship research, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the factors driving fan engagement in Esports. It not only enriches the academic discourse on sports marketing but also equips practitioners with actionable insights to design more effective, gender-sensitive sponsorship strategies. As the Esports industry continues to evolve, this research underscores the importance of embracing diversity and inclusivity in marketing practices, ensuring that the dynamic world of Esports remains accessible and engaging for all fans. In short, this study was conducted to answer the following research questions:

- I. How does gender influence the perception of MPL sponsors among Esports fans?
- II. What is the difference in attitudes towards MPL sponsors between male and female Esports fans?
- III. What is the relationship between engagement and consumption behaviour related to MPL sponsors among Esports fans?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Respondents

This study employ a case study design to concurrently assess both the outcomes and exposures of respondents. This method involves analyzing data from a population at a specific point in time, commonly employed to gauge the prevalence of perceptions, attitudes, and demographic characteristics related to MPL sponsorship and consumer Esports engagement. This study's target population comprises Esports fans of the Mobile Legends Professional League (MPL). A randomized distribution of questionnaires was conducted among 464 MPL fans, utilizing a probability technique in sample random sampling. Based on the total reported fan base for the year 2022 is 42,620, referring to Bukhari's table (2020), the recommended sample size is 387. An additional 20% is included to account for potential dropouts, totaling 77. Consequently, the final sample size aimed for and successfully collected is 464 responses.

Instrument

This research employed a questionnaire as its primary method for data collection, strategically designed to answer the research questions. The questionnaire structure included a demographic section (Section A). Through the adapt and adopt method, Section B is derived from established research, incorporating elements from Melovic et.al, (2019) 'Perception and Attitudes on MPL Sponsorship Questionnaire', and Abbasi et.al, (2023) 'Consumer Esports Engagement Questionnaire' for Section C. Administered in both English and Malay, the instrument utilized a Likert scale to assess respondents' levels of agreement or disagreement, as well as satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

Data Collection Procedure

In November 2023, data for this study was collected through the distribution of 464 questionnaires among enthusiasts of the Mobile Legends Professional League (MPL). The questionnaires, were conveniently accessible to respondents via QR codes and a Google Form link, streamlining the participation process. To ensure the respondents' active involvement, the researcher directly interacted with them, whether in person or through various contact methods, providing detailed explanations of the process and addressing any inquiries. Each questionnaire was estimated to require approximately 10 minutes to complete. Emphasis was placed on the significance of confidentiality, assuring respondents that their identities would be safeguarded. To further reinforce this commitment, respondents were not compelled to disclose their names on the questionnaires, thereby preserving anonymity and confidentiality.

Statistical analysis

The statistical analyses for this study were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics 25 software. Linear regression was employed to evaluate the effects of gender on Esports fans' perception of MPL Sponsors. Chi-square tests, suitable for comparing categorical data (in this instance, the categorical variable being gender), were utilized to determine if there existed a statistically significant difference in attitudes between male and female fans. Additionally, the Pearson correlation was applied to investigate the relationship between two continuous variables: engagement and consumption behavior. This correlation method aided in gauging the strength and direction of the relationship. A significance threshold of $p < .01$ was set for the results.

Pilot Study

The pilot study employed Cronbach's alpha coefficient to evaluate the reliability of the utilized scale, a metric gauging the internal consistency and cohesion of a group of items. This coefficient serves as an indicator of scale reliability, with higher values signifying enhanced reliability. The pilot test results demonstrated an overall classification of "excellent" for the variables, affirming that respondents comprehended the survey well, thereby validating its suitability for continuation into the actual survey. Specifically, the reliability test yielded a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.81, surpassing the widely accepted threshold of 0.7 (Taber, 2017). This outcome underscores the high internal consistency of the scale across the four items assessed. The absence of excluded cases in the analysis ensures the full dataset's contribution to establishing the scale's reliability. This inclusive approach guarantees that the reliability assessment accurately reflects the entire sample population involved in the pilot study (Tavakol et.al, 2011).

Table 1. The result of the pilot study

Variables	No. of Item	Cronbach's Alpha	Level
Sport sponsorship perceptions	4	0.72	Reliable
Attitude	6	0.87	Very Reliable
Consumer Engagement	11	0.81	Very Reliable
Consumption Behaviour	9	0.85	Very Reliable
Overall	30	0.81	Very Reliable

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The regression analysis below in Table 2 was conducted on a sample size of N=464. The results show unstandardized coefficient (B) values that also standardized coefficient values that include beta and standard error values. Gender is considered an independent variable. For the female gender, the beta value is at -0.36, the standard error value is 0.01, t statistic value of -5.21 (negative value) and a significant rate at 0.00. Female gender exhibit a significantly higher perception of MPL sponsors compared to males as indicated by a highly significant constant B value ($p < 0.01$). Although the t-value for the sponsors' coefficient falls slightly above conventional thresholds (0.09), it remains statistically significant, indicating a negative relationship between gender and perceptions of MPL sponsors. These findings underscore the importance of considering gender dynamics in understanding Esports fans' perceptions of sponsorships within the MPL context.

Table 2: Regression Coefficients of the effects of gender on the perception of MPL sponsors among Esports fans

Gender		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
Female	(Constant)	4.82	0.05		89.25	0.00
	sponsors	-0.07	0.01	-0.36	-5.21	0.00
Male	(Constant)	4.61	0.03		138.64	0.00
	sponsors	0.03	0.01	0.15	2.62	0.01

*Note N=464. Researchers examined the effect of gender on the perceptions of MPL Sponsors among Esports fans. In table 2, researcher entered the control variable on gender to predict effects of perceptions of MPL Sponsors among Esports fans.

The frequency distribution shows that out of 464 participants, 248 males (which is 61.2% of the total sample) and 180 females (38.8% of the total sample) shown in Table 3 were surveyed to determine their attitudes toward MPL sponsors. The chi-square statistic (X2) is 44.15 with 1 degree of freedom. The p-value associated with this chi-square statistic is less than 0.001, which is highly significant.

Table 3. Attitudes towards sponsors based on gender

Gender	Male		Female		X2 (1)
	n	%	n	%	
Male	248	61.2			44.15a
Female			180	38.8	

In Table 4, the Pearson Correlation coefficient for the relationship between engagement and consumption is .91, indicating a very strong positive relationship between the two variables. In Table 4, the Sig. level for this correlation is less than 0.01 (1-tailed), which indicates that the correlation is statistically significant at the 0.01 level.

Table 4. Relationship of engagement and consumption behaviors related to MPL sponsors among Esports fans

Engagement	Consumption	
	Pearson Correlation	.91**
Sig. (1-tailed)	0	
N	464	

****. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed).**

The regression analysis revealed a statistically significant negative relationship between gender and the perception of MPL sponsors among Esports fans, with female fans tending to perceive MPL sponsorship less favourably compared to their male counterparts ($B = -0.36, p < 0.01$). This finding is supported by the significant chi-square value, indicating a clear distinction in attitudes towards MPL sponsors among male and female fans, with a higher proportion of male respondents expressing favourable attitudes compared to female respondents. The observed differences are not likely to have occurred by random chance, as indicated by the highly significant chi-square value ($p < 0.01$).

Moreover, the Pearson correlation analysis demonstrated a very strong positive relationship between engagement and consumption behaviors associated with MPL sponsors among Esports fans (for both genders), suggesting that increased engagement with MPL sponsors leads to a substantial increase in consumption behaviors related to these sponsors. This aligns with previous research emphasizing that engagement with sponsors can lead to augmented brand loyalty and consumption among sports fans. The study by Ruvalcaba et al. (2018) sheds light on the experiences of female players during competitive gaming online, highlighting the poor representation of women players in Esports and the need to understand

their experiences. This is relevant as it underscores the challenges faced by female players in the Esports landscape, which could contribute to the observed gender differences in the perception of MPL sponsors.

Additionally, Cunningham et al. (2018) noted that events in Esports frequently feature abusive language and the hyper-sexualization of women, which could contribute to the negative perception of MPL sponsors among female fans (Cunningham et al., 2018; Freitas et al., 2021). It also highlighted the common occurrence of derogatory remarks directed at female players, further emphasizing the challenges faced by women in Esports environments (Freitas et al., 2021). These references provide valuable insights into the gendered experiences and treatment of women in Esports, which could influence their perception of sponsors.

Furthermore, Jang et al. (2021) discussed the moderation effects of genre and gender on Esports gameplay intention, indicating that gender plays a significant role in shaping gaming behavior. This is pertinent as it underscores the influence of gender on Esports-related activities, which could extend to the perception of sponsors within the Esports community. In short, the gender disparities in the perception of MPL sponsors among Esports fans are influenced by the experiences and challenges faced by female players in the Esports field play. The negative treatment, hyper sexualization, and derogatory remarks directed at women in Esports could contribute to the observed differences in perception. Understanding these gender dynamics is crucial for developing inclusive and effective marketing strategies within the Esports community.

CONCLUSION

The study's findings offer vital insights into the evolving landscape of sports sponsorship within the Esports context, highlighting two key aspects: significant gender differences in the perception of sponsors and a strong correlation between sponsor engagement and consumption behavior. These insights challenge the traditional one-size-fits-all approach in sports sponsorship, emphasizing the need for more tailored, gender-specific strategies in the Esports environment. The theoretical contribution of this research lies in its extension of traditional sponsorship models to the unique demographic and digital nature of the Esports audience. Practically, it suggests that Esports sponsors should develop segmented and engaging marketing strategies that resonate with different gender groups, leveraging digital platforms for targeted and immersive experiences.

This study not only advances our understanding of sports sponsorship in the digital age but also sets the stage for further exploration in this field. Future research could investigate the long-term impacts of these gender differences and engagement strategies, potentially across different Esports genres and markets. Additionally, exploring the nuances and distinct characteristics of various Esports genres could provide deeper insights into how sponsorship strategies might need to be tailored to specific types of games and their unique audiences. Longitudinal studies on sponsorship perceptions would also be valuable, offering a detailed view of how these perceptions evolve and the factors influencing these changes. In a nutshell, the study underscores the importance of adaptability and audience specificity in the field of sports sponsorship, especially in a domain as dynamic and diverse as Esports. The findings provide a roadmap for both theoretical exploration and practical application in developing effective sponsorship strategies that align with the unique characteristics and preferences of the Esports audience.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank all participants for the respondent and MPL organizer who participated in this study.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTIONS

This study is extracted from the undergraduate thesis written by the first author. The authors have made substantial contributions to the study design and data analysis. The second author revised the manuscript before submission for each content of this manuscript.

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