

Activational Imbalance: Sponsees' Roles in E-sports Sponsorship Marketing



Nicholas Burton
Brock University

Abstract

This study explores the role of esports organizations in activating sponsorship partnerships through social media channels. In examining the NBA 2K League's Raptors Uprising GC's efforts to leverage sponsors through their Twitter and YouTube accounts, the study provides a contextualized analysis of sponsor and sponsee activations. The study's findings show that, despite tremendous growth in esports sponsorship investment, activation of esports sponsorship on the part of sponsors is negligible. Rather, esports properties would appear to assume much of the responsibility for sponsor promotion, leveraging partnerships extensively through both social channels examined here. The commitment shown by sponsees in this respect is paramount to successful and sustainable sponsorship relationships, and highlights the potential commercial value posed by sponsoring esports properties, as well as the latent value not yet exploited by sponsors.

Keywords: esports, sponsorship, servicing, social media marketing, social media.

Nicholas Burton is an Associate Professor with the Department of Sport Management Brock University, Catharines, ON., Canada. Address author correspondence to Nicholas Burton at nburton@brocku.ca

1. Introduction

The study of esports sponsorship represents an important and emerging area of scholarship. Despite its relatively recent rise from independent recreation to networked competition to elite performance sport, the esports industry has grown immensely in recent years both in terms of market size and viewership, accentuated by significant gains in corporate support and sponsor investment. Estimates of the esports market globally have projected total revenues to exceed \$4.3 billion USD in 2024 (Statista, 2024), rivaling major traditional sports leagues across North America, Europe, and Australasia for market size and growth. Importantly, within estimates of esports' market size and growth, sponsorship represents a substantial portion of overall esports revenues and annual turnover. Recent industry reports have projected the global esports sponsorship market size to reach \$1.1 billion (Allenstein et al., 2020), indicative of both the considerable corporate support received by esports teams, competitions, and facilities, as well as the significant contribution sponsorship plays in esports' commercial viability (Gray, 2018). As most competitive gaming is experienced digitally, and that many users consume esports via streaming services such as Twitch, YouTube, and others (Ward & Harmon, 2019), this reliance on sponsorship is understandable. 'Traditional' spectator sports benefit from ticket sales revenues, on-site concessions, and other

ancillary revenues (e.g., parking, corporate hospitality), whereas esports require a new business model and alternative revenue streams to continue the growth and viability of the industry across digital media and streaming platform delivery.

This progressive commercial growth and international reach has established esports in its various competitions, formats, and deliveries as one of the largest and most global sports products, challenging normative boundaries in sport and ushering in a new era of digital marketing, broadcasting, and sport creation. In turn, traditional sports organizations have increasingly embraced esports as a mechanism for extending their brands and accessing new audiences. Amongst the most prominent of such extensions has been the National Basketball Association's NBA 2K League, launched in 2018. The NBA's entry into esports represented the first such foray from a 'traditional' sports league, enabling the league to extend its brand into esports and to develop a new and innovative point of access and attachment for professional basketball fans internationally (Funk et al., 2018). Seventeen member organizations of the NBA entered the new league upon its launch in 2018, since growing to 25 participating organizations, each created as a unique extension of their parent NBA club's brand (e.g., Knicks Guard Gaming, Raptors Uprising GC), as well as three international franchises. From a sponsorship

perspective, despite the brand/sub-brand relationship present across most organizations within the NBA 2K League, many of the league's gaming teams boast their own sponsorship portfolios featuring both brands shared between the parent and esports organizations, as well as sponsors unique to the esports teams.

This is of relevance for the esports organizations both in terms of the development of their own sponsorship portfolios and commercial growth, as well as the challenges faced by many esports organizations in securing and promoting positive sponsorship relations. Research in this area has emphasized the potential risks and opportunities associated with esports firms engaging non-endemic partners (Huettermann et al., 2020; Rogers et al., 2020). Equally challenging, however, may be the nature of esports consumption and the behavioral habits of esports fans specific to viewership and traditional media. Esports competitions are primarily digitally created and consumed, meaning more traditional forms of sponsorship leveraging and activation on mass-media such as television, radio, print media, and in-stadium advertising may not access sponsors' intended audiences as readily. This stands in contrast to their parent NBA counterparts, for whom televised broadcasts and in-stadium activations remain standard-bearers.

This work thus seeks to explore what role sponsees (the sporting rights holder, in this

instance the esports teams within the NBA 2K League) play in leveraging sponsors' investments. In so doing, this research seeks to extend sponsorship servicing and management scholarship, and to examine sponsorship relations within the confines of esports partnerships and sponsee activation responsibilities.

2. Literature review

Sponsorship remains a central source of revenue and integral vehicle for sport marketing. The sponsorship industry is projected to reach \$90 billion US by 2027 (Gough, 2021), a nearly 60% growth in total industry value over a seven-year period, driven largely by new media opportunities such as streaming services and new sporting entrants such as major esports properties. Such a rise in sponsorship investment and growth bears significant managerial and strategic consequences for sports organizations and marketers.

The wealth of research in this field has taken as its focus the sponsor's perspective. This literature has served to emphasize the strategic management of sponsorship that has gradually emerged, with set objectives to be met and measured, and more rigorous planning, organization, and management required of contemporary sponsorship practices (Walliser, 2003). Central to this managerial focus has been an emphasis on sponsorship-linked marketing as a means of leveraging sponsors'

investments, realizing commercial objectives, and maximizing returns through corresponding marketing and advertising activities, so-termed sponsorship-linked marketing (Cornwell, 1995).

In this capacity, sponsorship-linked marketing most often occurs through two primary forms: leveraging, which refers to the macro-level integrated marketing communications activities designed by a firm to communicate their partnership; and activation, which refers to those micro-level activities intended to drive consumer-engagement and involvement with the sponsoring brand (Weeks et al., 2008). Evidence suggests that activational approaches may outperform non-activational marketing initiatives in improving attitudes toward the sponsor and purchase intent (Ballouli et al., 2018). However, it has been suggested that such activations may equally require additional resources and planning to achieve such returns (Dees, 2011), thus potentially mitigating the sponsor's ultimate commercial returns. Moreover, Cornwell (2019) argued that sponsors' absence of apparent strategy, activational investment, and corresponding marketing communications stress the need for sponsors to engage in partnerships in a more authentic and brand-focused manner.

Importantly, despite the significant scholarly attention committed to sponsorship-linked marketing (Marceau & Pons, 2023), relatively few studies have explored the role that sponsees

may play in leveraging or activating sponsorship agreements (Morgan et al., 2020; Toscani & Prendergast, 2018). This despite prior calls for greater involvement of sponsees in facilitating sponsor-led marketing efforts, and the acknowledgment of sponsee activation as an essential component of sponsorship fulfillment (O'Reilly & Huybers, 2015). Indeed, servicing responsibilities encompass a variety of internal and network roles for the sponsee intended to manage partnerships and ensure sponsor satisfaction. These roles require strategic integration and collaboration between sponsor and sponsee as a source of shared value more effectively (Buser et al., 2020). Rights holders engage with and must service multiple sponsors each with their own bespoke objectives, collateral investments, needs, and abilities to integrate within the event, organization, or property (Chanavat et al., 2016). Unfortunately, however, the marketing involvement of sponsees has largely gone underappreciated within sponsorship research, reflective of the limitations experienced at a partnership level (O'Reilly & Huybers, 2015). Sponsees have commonly been found to lack the required infrastructure and internal investments needed to successfully navigate such partnerships (Morgan et al., 2014), lacking adequate human resources and experiencing challenging personnel turnover (Morgan et al., 2020), as well as the marketing expertise required to

identify and articulate potential sponsorship-linked marketing opportunities to partners.

Social sponsorship activation

In this capacity, the predominance of social media marketing and activations in sponsorship may afford rights holders an opportunity to assume greater responsibility for sponsorship messaging. Digital media channels have granted sports organizations increased ownership over communications channels and modes of delivery, in turn evolving sport's relationship with fans, consumers, sponsors, and traditional mass-media entities (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010). This in turn has resulted in a wealth of literature exploring social media marketing across a variety of contexts; within a sponsorship marketing context, these advances have informed an important advancement in the study of activation and sponsorship-linked marketing specific to social media. Gillooly et al. (2017), for example, noted that social channels enable brands to engage with consumers as key activational means. The authors highlighted that sponsors' activational strategies exemplified an intent to engage directly with consumers and to facilitate brand experience through social interaction. Further research in this area has explored social sponsorship across different contexts including national sponsorship activation (e.g., Geurin & Gee, 2014) and event-specific sponsorship digital strategy (e.g., Burton et al., 2024).

Despite these advances, however, there remains considerable need for greater examination of social and new media channels in sponsorship marketing, as well as greater diversification of media studied, and methods adopted. Unfortunately, research investigating sponsorship on social and digital media has historically been limited by *prima facie* methods (Burton et al., 2024). While the extant social media research in sport marketing has provided an important foundation upon which to build, more in-depth examinations accessing data and meta-data from platform as made available by information systems and social media analytics tools is needed. Moreover, the preponderance of social media research in sport marketing has narrowed its focus to singular platforms, often conflating behaviors on single channels (often Twitter) as being representative of myriad services and media.

Perhaps most significantly, the preponderance of research to date in sponsorship activations on social channels has prioritized sponsors' perspectives – exploring sponsor strategy and user engagement on social media platforms. This represents a significant limitation of the extant sponsorship literature, particularly within digital settings. Chadwick et al. (2021) noted that social media users in most instances are more likely to follow sports

properties than they are brands; this is particularly noteworthy, as the greater reach and prospective audience accessed by rights holders via digital settings may further accentuate the role sponsees must play in activating partnerships.

Esports sponsorship: growth and potential

This need is perhaps no more evident than in the context of esports sponsorship, which remains a growing yet nascent area of study in the sport marketing and sponsorship literatures. Given the digital nature of esports, sponsorship activation via mediated channels and social platforms represents a central consideration for corporate partner. The absence of large in-stadium audiences and marketing opportunities typically found in traditional sports necessitate greater digital activation on the part of sponsors, accessing streaming audiences, social media followers, and gamers via digital and virtual means. Despite these challenges, however, sponsorship represents an integral part of the esports industry's growth and long-term sustainability (Gray, 2018). Moreover, esports consumers have been found to be highly receptive to commercial partners, subject to activation strategy, target audience, and brand type (Freitas et al., 2019).

Indeed, brand image and fan identification have been found to be integral antecedents to esports consumers' response to sponsorship

relations (Cuesta-Valino et al., 2022), emphasizing the importance of strategic communication and perceived fit in esports sponsorship. In their review of esports sponsorship scholarship, Gawrysiak et al. (2020) noted that endemic partnerships are commonly first movers in esports sponsorship, informed largely by consumer acceptance and industry trends. Endemic here refers to the perceived fit or congruence between a sponsor and a sponsee, such as companies that produce gaming technologies in the case of esports, whereas non-endemic describes those brands without a natural place or presence in the sport's delivery. The authors argued that non-endemic brands are better served entering the esports space as the market matures, engaging with professional organizations and established properties, and connecting esports teams or players with established locations, brands, and personalities (Gawrysiak et al., 2020).

This discussion of endemic versus non-endemic brands has informed much of the extant esports sponsorship literature. Rogers et al. (2020) found that the endemicity of an esports sponsorship improved consumers' perception of sponsor credibility and resulted in greater positive attitude formation as compared to non-endemic partners. By comparison, it has likewise been argued that non-endemic esports sponsorship may improve brand perception and consumers' attitudes toward a

brand, and that esports sponsorship can play an important role in improving consumers' perception of a brand's goodwill and ultimate purchase intentions irrespective of endemic fit (Huettermann et al., 2020).

Endemicity has equally been examined as a moderating variable in consumers' evaluations of esports sponsorship. Freitas et al. (2019) explored the impact of esports' global appeal and reach, examining the potential impacts of fans' globality on endemic and non-endemic sponsors. The authors found that global brands benefit more from the industry's international appeal as compared to national or local brands, whose partnerships risk specificity and access to immediate target markets. Hedlund et al. (2020) similarly highlighted the importance of endemic fit in esports sponsorship, noting that authenticity in esports partnerships represents a means through which partners may establish fit and provide value for consumers.

In addition to this line of study, more recently scholars have examined the use of esports organizations as a brand extension for established sports brands from more traditional sports, including European football and North American basketball. Findings in this area have suggested that fans of the parent club brand were uninterested and uninvested in the new esports team, creating divergent fan bases for the club to access and engage (Bertschy et al., 2020). Indeed, the

lack of integration or overlap found between football club supporters and club-owned esports team fans would indicate that a team-owned esports entry may neither reinforce nor compromise a parent brand's identity or equity, instead creating a new and independent market for the brand to access (Muhlbacher et al., 2021). Nevertheless, within the context of the NBA's NBA 2K League, Lopez et al. (2021) found that the diversity of the NBA's esports league's sponsorship portfolio serves as a valuable growth strategy for the parent organization. This suggests that esports teams and leagues may serve as value-added brand extensions of parent sport brands, enabling teams, leagues, and sponsors to access new markets and audiences through established media and brand identities, whilst simultaneously developing and leveraging new brand images and entry points.

However, despite these advances, esports sponsorship presents several challenges for potential commercial partners. Freitas and Contreras-Espinosa (2020), for example, found that negative perceptions of esports and professional gaming may impact upon sponsors' willingness to support and promote partnerships with esports properties. For esports partners, this represents a significant concern. Evidence suggests that esports fans welcome the legitimacy and support provided by sponsors (e.g., Freitas et al., 2021; Freitas et al.,

2020), however external pressures and perceptions may influence sponsors' decision making and activation of esports partnerships, where the potential for backlash or criticism exists (Freitas et al., 2022). Nevertheless, sponsors have been highlighted as essential to the success and financial sustainability of esports competitions (Pizzo et al., 2022), assisting in the performance and distribution of esports properties. Indeed, sponsors are seen as "indispensable" to esports as a key source of funding (Wong & Meng-Lewis, 2022, p. 8).

Ultimately, the study of esports sponsorship represents an important and emerging field of study for sport marketing and sponsorship research. As well as providing a unique context through which to examine and expand upon existing theories of endemcity, activation, and audience reach, esports organizations equally provide a new lens through which to investigate sponsor-sponsee commitment and sponsee servicing. The ability of sponsors and sponsees to engage with sponsorship audiences via new and social media is likewise important to explore further. Finally, as recent research has illustrated (e.g., Bertschy et al., 2020; Lopez et al., 2021; Muhlbacher et al., 2021), greater research into the advantages posed to 'traditional' sports brands entering and activating in the esports space suggest

that further investigation is required. Moreover, social media provide important metrics through which to analyze marketing engagement, reach, and efficacy (Achen, 2017). Despite accessing different target audiences and divergent supporter groups through the same parent-brand, esports teams present a legitimate growth strategy for sporting organizations; the extent to which those organizations invest in and leverage this opportunity remains to be seen.

3. Method

To examine esports sponsorship activation on social media, an exploratory approach was adopted, taking the Toronto Raptors Uprising GC as an exemplar case. The Uprising were launched in 2018 under Maple Leaf Sports and Entertainment, joining the NBA 2K League in its inaugural season. As a member team, the Uprising represent the only Canadian inclusion in the league and thus boast a nation-wide target market. Within Canada, 21.2 million people self-identify as gamers, making the country the eighth largest esports and video gaming market globally (Maple Leaf Sports and Entertainment Digital Labs, 2021). As a team, the Uprising are active across social media channels, posting regularly on multiple platforms including Twitter (now X), Instagram, and YouTube, as well as hosting live streaming on YouTube and Twitch

and engaging with followers on their own Discord server. Based upon this active digital presence, alongside their diverse sponsorship portfolio, and unique market position, the Uprising were determined to provide a distinct case through which to explore esports sponsorship activation on social media.

The research was guided by two central research questions: *RQ1: how do sponsors of the Raptors Uprising GC activate their partnerships on social media?* And *RQ2: to what extent do the Raptors Uprising GC activate their sponsors' partnerships?* To address these questions, two social media platforms were selected for analysis: Twitter and YouTube. Examining sponsorship across multiple social platforms was determined to provide a more full and robust analysis of social sponsorship. Social sport marketing research has historically been limited by perspectives limited to single platforms or channels (Scott et al., 2021). The inclusion of two divergent and unique social media channels thus provided renewed insight and context for the study's sample.

Data collection

Data collection comprised two phases, intended to address the study's two central research questions and to explore esports sponsorship activation on multiple media channels. Two social media platforms – Twitter and YouTube – were selected to provide the

study's sample; these platforms were chosen were chosen based on several criteria. First, a preliminary assessment of both the Uprising and their sponsors' activities on different social media networks was undertaken (including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Twitch, and YouTube), which revealed that Twitter and YouTube presented the most active and engaged networks for the study. These were thus determined to afford the study the greatest depth and breadth of sponsor and property content for collection and analysis. This initial analysis was further supported by the extant literature on social media sponsorship which has highlighted Twitter's prominence and value as a communications medium for brands (e.g., Meenaghan et al., 2013; Pegoraro, 2014; Stavros et al., 2014); YouTube, although less commonly examined within the sport marketing literature, has likewise been recognized in marketing scholarship for its potential as a communications platform for brands, including as a medium for sponsors (Broughton, 2012; Burton & Schlieman, 2021). As a video-sharing platform, YouTube is commonly used by teams, leagues, and brands as a medium for content creation and sharing, which has enabled greater brand-led and owned media creation and dissemination (Burton & Schlieman, 2021; Kim, 2012).

Secondly, at the time of data collection both Twitter and YouTube provided substantial Application Programming Interface (API) access for researchers allowing for the collection of all relevant and appropriate data, including both post and user metrics. Other social networks (i.e. Meta-owned Facebook and Instagram or Twitch) heavily restrict access, thus limiting potential data collection. Additionally, R packages *rtweet* (Kearney, 2024) and *Tuber* (Sood, 2020) provide extensive data scraping capabilities for Twitter and YouTube, respectively, thus further enabling data collection and analysis.

Finally, the selected platforms were determined to offer the most representative and relevant data for the study's purpose and context. Rather than examine live-streamed content and activations, as may be present on other networks popular within the esports space (e.g., Twitch, Discord), Twitter and YouTube allowed for the analysis of posts, content, and engagement temporally, thus facilitating a more longitudinal and complete analysis.

To facilitate both phases, a preliminary search was conducted to identify all sponsors of the Uprising for the 2022 campaign, alongside their official Twitter and YouTube Canadian accounts (reflective of the national scope of the partnerships). Upon completion of this search and manual confirmation of the

official, verified status of each account, the study's sample was determined, and data collection commenced. In total, ten official sponsors were included in the final sample: IBM, OLG (Ontario Lottery and Gaming), Bell, Tangerine, LG, Coors Light, Uber Eats, Axe, Ford, and Trowbridge. Eleven social media accounts on Twitter (banking brand Tangerine's main account as well as a Toronto Raptors-specific sponsorship activation account) were both included in the final sample, and nine sponsor YouTube accounts.

For phase one, to access and collect data from Twitter, Kearney's (2024) *rtweet* package for open-source coding language R was employed. *rtweet* enables users to scrape and analyze data from Twitter, affording the researcher the opportunity to examine and assess digital sponsorship activities both qualitatively and quantitatively. *rtweet* was used to scrape (up to) the 1,600 most recent tweets from each sponsor over the past four years (accounting for the Uprising's franchise existence and the duration of all sponsor agreements), as well as the most recent 1,000 tweets from the Uprising's official account, excluding retweets. The resultant sponsor dataset comprised 16,225 tweets collected across 64 variables, ranging from the number of retweets, favorites, and quote tweets earned by a post to meta-data such as the geographical location of the tweet sender, user follower

counts, and embedded media URLs. Each individual sponsor dataset was subsequently collated into one master dataset and exported into an Excel .csv file for analysis. Likewise, the Raptors Uprising dataset was exported into .csv format, thus enabling a thorough review and in-depth analysis of the Twitter data.

For the second phase of data collection, Sood's (2020) Tuber package for R was used to access and scrape data from YouTube for both the Raptors Uprising and their sponsors. Data collection was again informed by a preliminary database of both the Uprising and their sponsors' official YouTube accounts. Tuber was then employed to access and scrape all videos posted by both the team and each sponsor, resulting in an initial data corpus of 179 Uprising posts and 2,026 total sponsor posts. Upon completion of this initial data scraping, individual sponsor datasets were again collated into a single file and exported for analysis, as was the Raptors Uprising dataset. Each video and corresponding caption within both datasets was then reviewed to determine which Uprising posts featured or promoted team sponsors, and which sponsor posts served as activations of their esports sponsorship. This parsing of the data yielded 100 Uprising videos to be included in the final analysis and only two

sponsor posts activating their Uprising sponsorships.

Analysis

Upon completion of data collection, all Twitter posts by the Uprising promoting sponsors or crediting sponsors were identified and collated as a subset within the data corpus, and all sponsor posts activating a partnership with the Uprising on Twitter were parsed and combined into a new dataset. User metric data provided by rtweet was then tabulated and analyzed for both subsets to evaluate reach and response of social activations on Twitter. Individual counts for Twitter Favorites and Retweets were analyzed, then subsequently aggregated to create a total engagement metric, reflective of user actions responding to each individual post. Engagement represents a complex and contentious metric across social media analytics, complicated by social platforms' different metrics, API access, and user behaviours. The approach taken was thus informed by previous scholarly works (e.g., Achen, 2016; Scott et al., 2021). Upon completion of this data collation, total engagements were then divided by the number of posts (reflecting Uprising activations, sponsor activations, and non-sponsor Uprising posts) to examine engagement response rates relative to sponsor and sponsee posts.

In analyzing the YouTube data, a similar process was undertaken. First, relevant sponsor-focused posts by both the Uprising and their sponsors were manually parsed. This allowed for the creation of discrete subsets for sponsee activations by the Uprising and sponsor activations by their commercial partners. User response metrics (in this instance total views, likes, and comments) earned by each post were then collated and catalogued corresponding to each post, likewise informed by prior research (i.e., Burton & Schlieman, 2021). These metrics were again combined to create a total user engagement metric and calculated against the number of videos to provide a relative engagement rate for sponsor-related YouTube activations.

Finally, a manual content analysis of all relevant sponsor and Uprising activation posts across both Twitter and YouTube datasets was completed (Saldaña, 2015). In lieu of categorizing posts based on prior examinations of social media content (e.g., Gillooly et al., 2017), a thematic analysis of posts was undertaken in line with Burton et al.'s (2024) analysis of Paralympic sponsorship. Post structure, content, and focus were analyzed, affording a more in-depth examination of post objectives, sponsor integration, and execution.

4. Findings

The study's findings reflect a stark reality for esports organizations and their sponsors. The pronounced absence of sponsor activations of brands' partnerships with the Uprising relative to the total number of posts by those brands, and as compared to the volume of messaging provided by the Uprising in support of their sponsors, is significant. Likewise, the relative user engagement to sponsor- and sponsee-led activations is noteworthy, and perhaps revealing as to the general paucity of sponsorship-linked marketing created and communicated by brands on their social channels.

Sponsor-led activation on social media

To begin, RQ1 sought to examine how and to what extent sponsors of the Raptors Uprising GC activated their partnerships with on social media. In examining first sponsors' Twitter activations, a total of 16,225 posts by sponsors were collected across the complete data corpus, of which only 64 posts activated brands' sponsorship of the Uprising. Table 1 illustrates the relative inactivity of sponsors on Twitter, as well as the user metrics collected for each. Amongst all sponsors, IBM accounted for more than half of all posts, whereas three brands did not activate on Twitter at all, and all but two (IBM and Tangerine) posted less than five times connected to the Uprising and their partnership. These figures represented less than 1% of all Tweets

by sponsors promoting or communicating their sponsorship of the Uprising. Similarly, across the 2,026 sponsoring brand videos posted to YouTube included in the study's final sample, only two promoted in any way

the Uprising. Both activations came from LG Canada and promoted their technology as a sponsor and supporter of esports and the Uprising, emphasizing their endemic fit.

Table 1. Sponsor Twitter activation and engagement

	Activations Posts	Total Favorites	Total ReTweets	Total Engagement	Engagemen Rate
Axe	0	0	0	0	0
Bell	1	2	0	2	2
Coors Light	2	14	1	15	7.5
Ford	0	0	0	0	0
IBM	38	454	78	532	14
LG	4	24	5	29	7.25
OLG	3	14	3	17	5.67
Tangerine	4	170	30	200	50
Tangerine Hoops	9	201	36	237	26.33
Trowbridge	3	9	3	12	4
Uber Eats	0	0	0	0	0
	64	888	156	1044	16.31

Sponsors' return on this inactivity was equally notable, as overall engagement and relative engagement rates for sponsor posts were largely underwhelming. Tangerine was unique in their ability to drive engagement, averaging 50 interactions per post, yet only shared four tweets over three years of their partnership to activate their agreement. IBM, by contrast, most heavily promoted their sponsorship posting 38 times over the duration of their sponsorship, earning consistent albeit muted engagement from users. These activations – however minimal – were not carried over onto YouTube, however, as

sponsors' activation of the Uprising via YouTube channels was negligible.

In exploring sponsors' activations more in-depth, the thematic content analysis undertaken revealed several insightful findings. Across the ten sponsors examined, discrete differences in approach and execution were apparent. Amongst the more endemic brands, IBM and LG both prominently featured the integration of their technologies in the Uprising's performance and broadcasts, using the team as a platform to communicate the benefits of their products (e.g., @IBMCANADA: "When technology and talent come together, anything is possible. Alongside @RaptorsGC,

we helped rewrite eSports history.”). These posts featured audiovisual materials and brand integrations, accentuating the partnership congruence and communicating the brands’ contributions to the Uprising’s performance. Across the Twitter dataset, though, less than 40% of all sponsor posts contained multimedia components (pictures, videos, collateral marketing); this seemingly also impacted upon engagement, as IBM and Bell’s video integrations in their activations further yielded greater engagement.

By comparison, banking brand Tangerine sought to cross-promote their association with the Uprising’s parent NBA team, staging promotional giveaways and leveraging the popularity of the Raptors as means of activating their Uprising partnership. Alongside these more engaging and interactive posts, each of the brands studied posted congratulatory messages to the Uprising and individual players, as well as more basic sponsorship identification posts (e.g., “@OLG_ca is a proud partner of @RaptorsGC. When we play together, we win together.”).

These different approaches to activation and content presented different intentions regarding engagement and interaction with followers. Sponsors who actively promoted endemic, direct associations with the Uprising earned significantly more Favorites from followers yet generated little in the way of Retweets or earned media. Posts by IBM and LG promoting the use of their technology by

the Uprising, significantly outperformed athlete integrations or posts celebrating the team’s achievements. Likewise, Tangerine Hoops’ promotional giveaway posts proved highly engaging, whereas more typical sponsorship identification posts (e.g., “proud sponsor of the Uprising”) attained minimal engagement.

These results indicate that while sponsor activation on Twitter was limited, and on YouTube nearly non-existent, where brands promoted their partnership creatively and strategically audiences were responsive. This was particularly true of more endemic brands, whose ability to leverage brand and product integration – and whose efforts made greater use of multimedia materials and creative content – succeeded in driving the greatest response from users, despite the limited sample

Property-driven sponsorship activation

Building upon this examination of sponsors’ activations of their partnerships, RQ2 sought to explore the Uprising’s role in activating and promoting their sponsors on social media. Contrasting sponsors’ own activation efforts on social channels, the Uprising data revealed that the team has assumed a considerable degree of ownership and accountability for sponsorship-linked marketing activities online. The Uprising’s YouTube activity (see Table 2) prominently featured sponsor content and activations, accounting for 56% of all posts by the team. Of note, in activating their partnerships each sponsor featured in bespoke, unique content allowing for sponsors to differentiate their partnerships and to

communicate an endemic fit more easily. Bell and LG's provision of high-speed fibre optic broadband and gaming screens and computing equipment, for example, were featured prominently by the team in promoting their competitive technological advantage.

Likewise, IBM was promoted by the team as their analytics sponsor, highlighting the brand in pre- and post-game content breaking down performance metrics for the team and their opposition as a means of showcasing IBM's computing power.

Table 2. Uprising YouTube activation and engagement

Sponsor	Total Posts	Total Views	Total Likes	Total Comments	Total Engagement	Mean Engagement	Mean Views
All sponsors	2	8413	278	18	8709	4354.5	4206.
Axe	12	4261	202	31	4494	374.5	355.08
Bell	11	17200	225	37	17462	1587.45	1563.6
Ford	1	527	20	0	547	547	527
IBM	1	241	6	0	247	247	241
LG	19	7982	258	31	8271	435.32	420.12
OLG	35	5232	234	40	5506	157.31	149.4
Tangerine	5	1353	47	9	1409	281.8	270.6
Uber Eats	14	1507	47	11	1565	111.79	107.64
Total	101	46716	1317	177	48210	899.63	871.23
No sponsor	79	376102	7400	696	384198	4863.27	4760.7

Equally of note, however, was the significant difference in viewership and user engagement experience by the Uprising between sponsor-related content and non-sponsored posts: a total of 79 posts within the Uprising's YouTube library did not mention or promote a sponsor, however these videos achieved a substantially higher engagement rate and average viewership. Many of these unsponsored videos featured highlights and game recaps, as well as how-to videos providing tips to improve users' gameplay in NBA 2K, which proved very popular among

the team's YouTube viewers. Additionally, given the small sample sizes for many brands, average engagement was skewed, most prominently for Bell, whose viewership of one popular video which provided users with a tour of the Bell Fibe House significantly outweighed other, less-engaging content featuring the brand.

Table 3. Uprising Twitter activation activity

Sponsor	Total Posts	Total Favorites	Total ReTweets	Total Engagement	Engagement Rate
Bell	15	1187	174	1361	90.73
Coors Light	2	39	10	49	24.5
Ford	13	200	93	293	22.54
IBM	77	1862	362	2224	28.88
LG	15	929	217	1146	76.4
OLG	154	3274	944	4218	27.39
Tangerine	28	949	318	1267	45.25
Uber Eats	27	389	158	547	20.26

Similarly, more than 30% of all tweets collected from the Uprising – which included replies to users and conversations between the team, team members, and fans in various instances – featured sponsor content. The Uprising prominently advertised sponsors' integrations within different content, such as podcasts, performance analytics pre- and post-game, and behind-the-scenes access. The efficacy of this approach is apparent in the relative engagement rates achieved for each sponsor, which eclipsed sponsors' own efforts for all brands save Tangerine (see Table 3). Across each of the seven remaining sponsors activated by the Uprising on Twitter, significant differences in total and relative engagement. Perhaps equally notable within the Twitter data was the absence of any quote-tweets generated by the team, indicating that engagement and sharing of Uprising posts was somewhat restricted.

Exploring the Uprising data in greater depth, differences in how endemic and non-

endemic sponsors were activated were apparent. Technology-based partners such as LG and Bell were featured in Uprising posts highlighting their congruent relationships. LG featured most prominently as sponsors of the Uprising's North Code vodcast and docuseries; Bell likewise benefited from Uprising-created content featuring life inside the Bell Fibe House, the shared accommodations and competitive venue for members of the team. By contrast, non-endemic brands like OLG and Uber Eats, although promoted consistently by the Uprising, featured greater cultural appeals through podcast sponsorships and crossover partnerships with celebrities, musical artists, and esports athletes.

5. Discussion

The study's findings provide important insight into esports sponsorship activation on social media, and the role of sponsees in leveraging commercial partnerships. On the ev-

idence presented here, sponsors of the Uprising do not engage in social media activations of their partnerships in any meaningful way, posting little in the way of activational content on either Twitter or YouTube related to their Uprising sponsorships. It should be noted, however, throughout both the Twitter and YouTube data myriad examples of sponsorship activation for other properties, including the Toronto Raptors, Montreal Canadiens, and the Canadian Olympic team, as well as arts and music festivals and cultural properties, were present. This suggests that the brands investigated here do activate partnerships on social channels, and that the absence of Uprising-linked activations is a deliberate omission. It is also notable that despite the clear relationships that exists between the Uprising and their parent NBA team the Raptors, instances of activations promoting both teams and leveraging the Raptors connection in Uprising posts were limited. As such, while an esports team may provide a valuable extension of an existing sports brand in driving revenue streams and accessing new audiences (Lopez et al., 2021), sponsors seemingly understand that esports and 'traditional' sports fans represent unique, bespoke audiences and commercial opportunities (Bertschy et al., 2020; Muhlbacher et al., 2021).

As such, the relative paucity of sponsor-

led posts is an important finding, as it highlights the lack of investment and relational commitment present in these partnerships. The lack of activation and minimalist use of social media highlight the commonly disinnovative approach to social media typically taken by sport stakeholders (Mastromartino & Naraine, 2021). Unfortunately for rights holders and sport organizations, however, this bears significant consequences with respect to sponsor commitment, as the lack of investment, engagement, and activation may undermine relational trust and mutual understanding (Chadwick, 2002; Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

By contrast, the significant commitment displayed by the Uprising in promoting their sponsors as frequently and extensively as they do is indicative of the important role sponsees must play in activating partnerships. This is particularly true in instances of asymmetric relationships, such as imbalanced audience reach as may be true of social media followings between teams and their sponsors. Farrelly and Quester (2005) have previously highlighted the challenges and opportunities posed by asymmetric sponsorship relations and the impact such imbalance may pose for partners. The findings presented here suggest that both sponsors and sponsees must be aware of such considerations and manage relationships proactively

to best leverage sponsor audiences and target market access across different media.

Importantly, sponsee-led activation may be a requirement of properties within sponsorship contracts, and an expected servicing role within many partnerships (O'Reilly & Huybers, 2015). Within the context of social media engagements, this expectation of the Uprising may be particularly pertinent: given the inventory available to esports properties as compared to more traditional sports (principally digital activations), and the higher likelihood of Uprising fans following the team on social channels rather than individual sponsors, the Uprising's role in promoting sponsors online is perhaps not unexpected. From the sponsors' perspective, however, the degree of commitment demonstrated by the Uprising is highly promising and should further mark-out esports as a potential value-driver for sport organizations (Lopez et al., 2021).

This may be particularly true in the context of sponsors for whom an endemic fit is perceived or can be effectively communicated through collateral marketing activities, wherein congruence can be articulated by the sponsee through creative activations. Endemic partners benefitted somewhat in this space, as technology and telecommunications companies (e.g., IBM, LG, Bell) were more natively aligned with Uprising content

and could fit product/service with Uprising posts. Non-endemic brands such as OLG and Uber Eats were activated successfully through more creative means, presenting content such as cultural tie-ins with musicians and artists, docuseries featuring the team and their home facility, and podcasts providing all-access content and popular culture integration. Given the emphasis placed on endemcity in esports sponsorship within the extant literature as a means of driving consumer response and driving sponsor value (e.g., Hedlund et al., 2020; Rogers et al., 2020), the Uprising's success in activating both endemic and non-endemic sponsors meaningfully and authentically is promising.

Furthermore, the Uprising's role in activating sponsors' agreements is further reflective of esports organizations' own endemic fit with social and digital media, and the heightened engagement and interaction commonly sought by esports fans via digital communications (Pizzo et al., 2018). Although intuitive, it is often overlooked in social media sport marketing research that sponsor audiences are most likely to follow and engage with sports properties on social channels, rather than sponsor-owned brand accounts. This contrasts typical mass media marketing, where sponsoring brands invest in advertising and leveraging across media

channels, but arguably parallels the in-stadium provision of marketing media and inventory by sponsees. While this remains an area of research in need of expansion, the example of the Uprising and esports here suggests such a dynamic may inform sponsor relations in digital settings.

6. Conclusion

The role of the sponsee in activating and communicating esports partnerships has been previously understated. However, sponsees bear a significant responsibility to communicate sponsors' messaging and aid in achieving partner objectives, particularly on social media channels where sports organizations benefit from greater followership and fan engagement than do brands typically. This is further amplified within the context of esports, where sponsors have been found to be apprehensive to partner with esports properties and to activate those partnerships broadly (Freitas & Contreras-Espinosa, 2022). The present study's findings, however, illustrate the unique opportunity presented to sponsorship stakeholders to engage audiences and activate partnerships on Twitter and YouTube, as well as the significant shortcomings which exist in sponsors' present use of social media as an activational medium. In so doing, the research addresses a notable gap in the extant sport marketing and esports literatures, where

the role of the sponsee in leveraging sponsorship across sport marketing has commonly been overlooked.

Implications

The limited engagement earned by sponsors across both Twitter and YouTube reaffirm Mastromartino and Naraine's (2021) argument that sponsors' disinnovative approach to social media use may significantly undermine their marketing attempts. Particularly when engaging with digitally fluent and highly engaged audiences such as those captured by esports organizations, sponsors must better leverage digital media and social platforms and create more innovative, creative, and engagement-inspiring content through which to activate partnerships. Bell's sponsorship of the Bell Fibe House, for example, enabled the brand to create bespoke promotional content activating the partnership and giving consumers unique access to the team's living and competitive space. Mastromartino and Naraine's (2021) call for greater innovation in social media sponsorship activation is thus reiterated here.

Further, this work provides a new lens through which to investigate sponsee roles. While previous research has highlighted the relational dynamics of sponsee engagement (Morgan et al., 2014; Morgan et al., 2020), and has identified several key roles played by sports properties in effective sponsorship agreements (O'Reilly & Huybers, 2015),

sponsorship servicing and sponsee activation remain understudied in the extant sponsorship and sport marketing literatures. In contributing to our understanding of sponsees' potential responsibility and opportunity to activate partnerships via social media channels – particularly where sponsors' own communications efforts are limited – this research advances a new line of study and offers new insight into sponsee roles in sponsorship-linked marketing.

Furthermore, from a methodological perspective the approach taken here advances sponsorship and esports research by examining social media marketing across multiple channels, and by accessing and analyzing social data. Scott et al. (2021) advocated for greater breadth and platform diversity in studying social media, citing the limited scope of study historically in sport marketing literature. The inclusion of YouTube as a platform for analysis here represents an important step for sport marketing and sponsorship research; understanding better the role that the streaming and video-hosting site plays in sport marketing more generally, and esports development and community interaction more specifically, merits greater scholarly attention.

From a managerial perspective, esports organizations must take greater ownership of sponsorship activation. The present's study's findings suggest an apparent imbalance in commitment displayed by the Uprising and

their sponsors, which must be addressed. Likewise, sponsors and sponsees both must use social media channels more strategically and creatively to effectively reach target audiences, particularly given the unique challenges posed by an esports audience defined by new media consumption and a rejection of traditional sport models and the historical global sport media nexus. Internal marketing and social media analytics would be useful in this instance for identifying trends and opportunities within the data available to them. These presently unsponsored YouTube posts by the Uprising which earned significant viewership and engagement, for example, may be a missed opportunity by the team to leverage a saleable asset in sponsorship negotiations. This content would appear to be the most engaging and appealing to viewers, and thus would be a worthwhile inclusion in future sponsorship negotiations or business development.

Limitations and future directions

The study was limited to a cross-sectional view of sponsorship activations, within the specific context of an individual team. A more longitudinal approach to studying sponsor-sponsee commitment, including activation approach and investment by both parties, is needed. Likewise, a broadened sample to include multiple organizations or teams, across difference sports, gaming competitions, or organizational structures (e.g., teams

owned by existing 'traditional' sports organizations as here versus independently owned and operated units) could offer important insight into relational complexities and differences in sponsorship relations based on sponsee capacity and investment ability. The limited engagement by sponsors uncovered here meant a more advanced statistical analysis of the findings was impractical, as such a broadened sample or context may be beneficial. Likewise, Twitter's API access does not readily facilitate the collection of quote-tweet frequency, or the number of replies received by a post, two additional engagement metrics that would be useful to further explore in Twitter-based research. Further study in this area should look to expand upon the present conceptualization of engagement and engagement rate in harnessing the wealth of social media data available.

Furthermore, while this study delimited its focus to sponsors of the esports team and the activation of those partnerships specific to the esports unit, it would be useful to further explore the potential differences that may exist between the sponsorship activation approaches of sponsors common to the parent and esports team brands. A comparison of social media activations by sponsors of traditional sports organizations versus those of esports teams may afford greater insight into this space. Given esports' digital underpinnings and platform, commensurate digital marketing on

the part of sponsors would be expected, however the findings revealed here would appear to indicate otherwise. There remains considerable need for research into sponsee servicing and activation, and social sponsorship marketing.

Finally, while the selection of YouTube and Twitter as the social channels of study here provided an important first look into social activations for esports sponsors, there is considerable need to study other streaming platforms and social media more in depth in this space, such as activations on major and popular esports platforms like Twitch and Discord. A media analysis of competition streams may also prove insightful in examining sponsor activations during event broadcasts, providing a new lens for analysis. As well, there is a dearth of quantitative analysis in social sponsorship research, to which this research has modestly contributed. More research in this space, specifically examining evaluation metrics and modelling more in-depth, is needed. The present research has demonstrated the potential for social media analytics to inform sponsorship research as well as practice, and to further promote esports scholarship. Continued research in this space, embracing the analytics potential of social media platforms and esports viewership, consumption, consumer behavior, and sponsorship is required.

REFERENCES

- Achen, R. M. (2017). Measuring social media marketing: Moving towards a relationship-marketing approach. *Managing Sport and Leisure*, 22, 33-53. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23750472.2017.1379883>
- Allenstein, U., Gediehn, O., Lehmann, S., & Singer, D. (2020, July 31). Esports and the next frontier of brand sponsorships. <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/growth-marketing-and-sales/our-insights/e-sports-and-the-next-frontier-of-brand-sponsorships>
- Ballouli, K., Koesters, T. C., & Hall, T. (2018). Leverage and activation of sport sponsorship through music festivals. *Event Management*, 22(2), 123-133. <https://doi.org/10.3727/152599518X15173355843299>
- Bertschy, M., Muhlbacher, H., & Desbordes, M. (2020). Esports extension of a football brand: stakeholder co-creation in action? *European Sport Management Quarterly*, 20(1), 47-68. <https://doi.org/10.1080/16184742.2019.1689281>
- Burton, N., Naraine, M. L., & Scott, O. (2024). Exploring Paralympic digital sponsorship strategy: an analysis of social media activation. *Managing Sport and Leisure*, 29(1), 90-106. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23750472.2021.1990789>
- Burton, N., & Schlieman, T. (2021). User response to extended reality sponsorship activations on social media: exploring impressions of GoPro's use of 360° video in marketing. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 21(2), 93-107. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15252019.2021.1944405>
- Buser, M., Woratschek, H., & Schonberger, J. (2020). 'Going the extra mile' in resource integration: evolving a concept of sport sponsorship as an engagement platform. *European Sport Management Quarterly*. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/16184742.2020.1820061>
- Chadwick, S. (2002). The nature of commitment in sport sponsorship relations. *International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship*, 4(3), 65-82. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSMS-04-03-2002-B005>
- Chadwick, S., Fenton, A., Dron, R., & Ahmed, W. (2021). Social media conversations about high engagement sports teams. *IIM Kozhikode Society & Management Review*, 10(2), 178-191.
- Chanavat, N., Desbordes, M., & Dickson, G. (2016). Sponsorship networks: toward an innovative model. *Sport, Business and Management*, 6(4), 424-439. <https://doi.org/10.1108/SBM-12-2015-0041>
- Cornwell, T. B. (1995). Sponsorship-linked marketing development. *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, 4(4), 13-24.
- Cornwell, T. B. (2019). Less "sponsorship as advertising" and more sponsorship-linked marketing as authentic engagement. *Jo*

- urnal of Advertising, 48(1), 49-60. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.2019.1588809>
- Cuesta-Valino, P., Gutierrez-Rodriguez, P., & Loraca-Valle, C. (2022). Sponsorship image and value creation in e-sports. *Journal of Business Research*, 145, 198-209. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2022.02.084>
- Dees, W. (2011). New media and technology use in corporate sport sponsorship: performing activational leverage from an exchange perspective. *International Journal of Sport Management and Marketing*, 10(3/4), 272–285. <https://doi.org/10.1504/IJSM.2011.044795>
- Farrelly, F., & Quester, P. (2005). Investigating large-scale sponsorship relations as co-marketing alliances. *Business Horizons*, 48, 55-62. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2004.10.003>
- Freitas, B. D. A, Contreras-Espinosa, R.S. (2022). How the Negative Public View of Videogames Threatens Esports Sponsors. In A. Torres-Toukourmidis (Ed.), *Esports in the Media*. Routledge.
- Freitas, B. D. A, Contreras-Espinosa, R.S., & Pereira Correia, P.A. (2020). Sponsoring esports to improve brand image. *Scientific Annals of Economics and Business*, 67 (4), 495-515. <https://doi.org/10.47743/saeb-2020-0030>
- Freitas, B. D. A, Contreras-Espinosa, R.S., & Pereira Correia, P.A. (2021). Esports sponsoring: The double-edged sword effect of having a global audience. Proceeding of the Videogames Sciences and Arts conference, Mirandela, Portugal. <https://ceur-ws.org/Vol-3082/paper5.pdf>
- Freitas, B. D. A, Contreras-Espinosa, R.S., & Pereira Correia, P.A. (2022). How sponsors should bring relevant-added value to esports. *Scientific Annals of Economics and Business*, 67(3), 363-387. <https://doi.org/10.47743/saeb-2020-0019>
- Funk, D. C., Pizzo, A. D., & Baker, B. J. (2018). eSport management: Embracing eSport education and research opportunities. *Sport Management Review*, 21(1), 7-13. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2017.07.008>
- Gawrysiak, J., Burton, R., Jenny, S., & Williams, D. (2020). Using esports efficiently to enhance and extend brand perceptions – a literature review. *Physical Culture and Sport. Studies and Research*, 86, 1-14. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2478/pcssr-2020-0008>
- Geurin, A.N. and Gee, S. (2014). Alcohol, sponsorship, and new media activation: An investigation of Molson Canadian and the 2014 Olympic Games. *International Journal of Sport Management and Marketing*, 15(5/6), 322-339. <https://doi.org/10.1504/IJSM.2014.073209>
- Gillooly, L., Anagnostopoulos, C., & Chadwick, S. (2017). Social media-based spons

- orship activation – A typology of content . *Sport, Business and Management*, 7(3), 293-314. <https://doi.org/10.1108/SBM-04-2016-0016>
- Gough, C. (2021, 28 September). Esports sponsorship and media rights revenue worldwide 2023. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/672204/brand-esport-engagement-impact-consumer-opinion/>
- Gray, A. (2018, July 3). The explosive growth of eSports. Retrieved from <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/07/the-explosive-growth-of-esports/>.
- Hedlund, D. P., Palomba, A., Hanson, L. C., Naraine, M. L., & Wear, H. (2020). Esports Marketing. In D. Hedlund, G. Fried, & R. Smith (Eds), *Esports Business Management*. Human Kinetics.
- Hennig-Thurau, T., Malthouse, E.C., Friege, C., Gensler, S., Lobschat, L., Rangaswamy, A., & Skiera, B. (2010). The impact of new media on customer relationships. *Journal of Service Research*, 13(3), 311-330. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1094670510375460>
- Huettermann, M., Trail, G. T., Pizzo, A. D., & Stallone, V. (2020). Esports sponsorship: an empirical examination of esports consumers' perceptions of non-endemic sponsors. *Journal of Global Sport Management*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/24704067.2020.1846906>
- Kearney, M. (2024). rTweet: Collecting Twitter data. *R package version 2.0.0*. <https://cran.r-project.org/web/packages/rtweet/rtweet.pdf>
- Lopez, C., Pizzo, A. D., Gupta, K., Kennedy, H., & Funk, D. C. (2021). Corporate growth strategies in an era of digitalization: A network analysis of the National Basketball Association's 2K league sponsors. *Journal of Business Research*, 133, 208-217. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2021.04.068>
- Maple Leaf Sports and Entertainment Digital Labs (2021). Esports. <https://www.mlse.digital.com/innovation-initiatives/esports>
- Marceau, P., & Pons, F. (2023). Sponsorship activation: a systematic review and future research agenda. *International Journal of Sport Management and Marketing*, 23 (1-2), 99-134. <https://doi.org/10.1504/IJSM.2023.130433>
- Mastromartino, B., & Naraine, M. L. (2021). (Dis)Innovative digital strategy in professional sport: Examining sponsor leveraging through social media. *International Journal of Sport Marketing and Sponsorship*. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSM-02-2021-0032>
- Morgan, A., Adair, D., Taylor, T., & Hermens, A. (2014). Sport sponsorship alliances: Relationship management for shared value. *Sport, Business and Management*, 4(4), 270-283. <https://doi.org/10.1108/SBM-12-2013-0044>

- Morgan, A., Taylor, T., & Adair, D. (2020). S ports event sponsorship management from the sponsee's perspective. *Sport Management Review*, 23(5), 838-851. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2020.04.006>
- Morgan, R., & Hunt, S. (1994). The commitment-trust theory of relationship marketing. *Journal of Marketing*, 58(3), 20-38. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002224299405800302>
- Muhlbacher, H., Bertschy, M., & Desbordes, M. (2021). Brand identity dynamics – reinforcement or destabilisation of a sport brand identity through the introduction of esports? *Journal of Strategic Marketing*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0965254X.2021.1959628>
- O'Reilly, N., & Huybers, T. (2015). Servicing in sponsorship: a best-worst scaling empirical analysis. *Journal of Sport Management*, 29(2), 155-169. <https://doi.org/10.1123/JSM.2013-0292>
- Pizzo, A. D., Sangwon, N., Baker, B. J., Mi, A. L., Doohan, K., & Funk, D. C. (2018). eSport vs. Sport: A comparison of spectator motives. *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, 27(2), 108–123. <https://dx.doi.org/10.32731/SMQ.272.062018.04>
- Pizzo, A. D., Su, Y., Scholz, T., Baker, B. J., Hamari, J., & Ndanga, L. (2022). Esports scholarship review: Synthesis, contributions, and future research. *Journal of Sport Management*, 36(3), 228-239. <https://doi.org/10.1123/jsm.2021-0228>
- Rogers, R., Farquhar, L., & Mummert, J. (2020). Audience response to endemic and non-endemic sponsors of esports events. *International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship*, 21(3), 561-576. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSMS-09-2019-0107>
- Saldaña, J. (2015). *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. Sage.
- Scott, O. K. M., Burton, N., & Li, B. (2021). Sponsor and ambush marketing during the 2018 Commonwealth Games on Twitter and Instagram. *International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship*. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSMS-04-2021-0086>
- Sood, G. (2020). tuber: Access YouTube from R. *R package version 0.9.7.9002*. <https://cran.r-project.org/web/packages/tuber/index.html>
- Statista (2024). Esports – worldwide. <https://www.statista.com/outlook/amo/esports/worldwide>
- Toscani, G., & Prendergast, G. (2018). Sponsees: the silent side of sponsorship research. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, 36(3), 396–408. <https://doi.org/10.1108/MIP-10-2017-0228>
- Walliser, B. (2003). An international review of sponsorship research: extension and update. *International Journal of Advertising*, 22(1), 5–40. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2003.11072838>

Ward, M. R., & Harmon, A. D. (2019). ESport superstars. *Journal of Sports Economics*, 20(8), 987-1013. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527002519859417>

Weeks, C., Cornwell, T. B., & Drennan, J. (2008). Leveraging sponsorships on the internet: Activation, congruence, and articulation. *Psychology and Marketing*, 25(7), 637-654. <https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.20229>

Wong, D., & Meng-Lewis, Y. (2022). Esports: an exploration of the advancing esports landscape, actors and interorganisational relationships. *Sport in Society*, 26(6), 943-969. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2022.2086458>