



LUND UNIVERSITY
School of Economics and Management

Examining the Fans' Perception of Sponsorship Fit in eSports

Exploratory Study of Traditional Sports Determinants of Sponsorships Fit in the Context of eSports

By
Árni Alexander Baldvinsson
Joel Isopahkala

June 2019

Master's Programme in International Marketing and Brand Management

Abstract

Title: Examining the fan's Perception of Sponsorship fit in eSports - Exploratory study of Traditional Sports Determinants of Sponsorship Fit in the Context of eSports.

Date of seminar: 2019-06-05

Course: BUSN 39 - Degree Project in Global Marketing

Authors: Árni Alexander Baldvinsson & Joel Isopahkala

Supervisor: Andrea Lucarelli

Keyword: eSports, sponsorship, sponsorship fit, perceived fit, eSports fans

Thesis purpose: The main purpose of this thesis is to gain understanding of how fans perceive sponsorships in eSports. This study investigates sponsorships from the fans perspective, exploring the meaning of perceptions in the context of eSports. The thesis investigates fans perception by earlier perception studies done in similar type of setting.

Methodology: This thesis is guided by qualitative methods with an abductive approach. Primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews with eSports fans, as well as related literature examined from former studies.

Theoretical perspective: The proposed theoretical framework used for this study was built upon previous sport sponsorship fit studies. The previous literature on Perceived benefits, Regional Identification, Credibility, Ubiquity, and Association is reviewed. As for an exploratory, and abductive approach study, a theoretical framework was developed from empirical evidence.

Empirical data: The empirical data was collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with fans of eSports. The data was provided from six international eSport fans that possess relevant knowledge about the investigated phenomenon.

Findings: The main findings based on the proposed themes unfold that, traditional sport sponsorship fit studies are applicable in the context of eSports. Further, the study reveals that the both ubiquity of the sponsors and perceived benefits for the eSports scene is considered to have favorable influence on fans perception of the sponsorship fit. Sponsors' appropriate engagement through longevity and right intentions is perceived to be an important factor when it comes to the credibility. In addition to that, sponsors' association with eSports is seen more relevant through creative linkage and their product attributes, and that sponsors' regional identification is perceived by the importance of country fit and market availability.

Acknowledgement

This master thesis was constructed with the guidance, advice and help from Andrea Lucarelli. We would like to express our deepest appreciation towards Andrea, without him this project would not have been finished.

Also, we would like to thank our all interviewees who all contributed with valuable knowledge and insight about eSports. Lastly, we want to thank Lund University School of Economics and Management and the whole faculty for giving us the opportunity to be part of the International Marketing and Brand Management program.

Table of Content

Abstract	1
Acknowledgement	2
Table of Content	3
Introduction	6
1.1. Background	6
1.2. Purpose of the Study	8
1.3. Project Structure	10
2. Literature Review	11
2.1. Defining eSports	11
2.2. Sponsorships	12
2.3. eSports Sponsorship	12
2.4. eSports Fandom	13
3. Theoretical Framework	15
3.1 Previous Studies of eSports	15
3.2. Perceived Sponsorship Fit	16
3.3. Perceived Benefits	16
3.4. Regional Identification	17
3.5. Credibility	18
3.6. Ubiquity	19
3.7. Association	19
4. Methodology	21
4.1. Research Strategy	21
4.2. Research Philosophy	21
4.3. Research Approach	22
4.4. Research Design	23
4.4.1. Qualitative Research Method	24
4.4.2. Semi-Structured Interviews	24
4.4.3. Sampling Method	26

4.4.4. Coding	27
4.5. Data Collection	29
4.6. Quality of the Research	30
4.6.1. Ethical considerations	30
4.6.2. Limitations of the Study	31
5. Data Analysis	32
5.1. Perceived Benefit in eSports	32
5.2. Regional Identification in eSports	34
5.3. Credibility in eSports	36
5.4. Ubiquity in eSports	38
5.5. Association in eSports	39
6. Discussion & Conclusion	41
References	45
Appendix A - Interview guide	52
Appendix B – Overview of the coding process	54
Appendix C – Nvivo 12 coding notes	59

List of Figures and Tables

Figure 1 - Conceptual framework	8
Figure 2 - Project structure	9
Figure 3 - Theoretical framework	15
Table 1 - Summary of methodological choices.....	23
Table 2 - Coding process	27
Table 3 - Overview of interviewees	29

1. Introduction

The introduction chapter will introduce the general background of the eSports phenomenon. This is followed by the presented problematization of this specific field and the positioning of the study. Further, the purpose and intended contribution of the study is addressed in order to show why this research is useful and which areas within the field has not been explored thoroughly. Next, the research question is presented in which the study seeks to answer and lastly, the overview of the study is outlined providing the reader with a better understanding of the thesis structure.

1.1. Background

The crowd erupts in deafening cheers as the completely pressed arena of passionate and energetic fans are cheering for their idols. The electrical atmosphere and the thunderous shake of the arena are felt everywhere by the enthusiastic and emotional invested crowd. Everyone is standing on their feet, screaming and shouting, overwhelming the commentator's announcements. Everywhere around the world are millions of people glued to their screens meantime, spectating these final moments of this amazing match. What is being portrayed is not the World Cup finals in football, NBA finals in basketball, or the Super Bowl finals in American football. This is an example of a computer game rivalries where the environment reminds you of similar experience found in traditional sports.

In the last years, the market for digital games have increased, with the year of 2018 generating over 130 billion U.S. dollars and with expected growth to 150 billion U.S. dollars by the year of 2019 (Newzoo, 2018; Statista, 2019a). This meteoric growth and popularity past years has resulted in a segment which has been formed around the competitive aspect of the games called Electronic Sports (eSports). Numbers of actors have contributed to the development of the eSports such as; publishers, competitions, events, streaming platforms, and teams (Newzoo, 2019). The growth of eSports and the amount of eSports followers, has led to the attraction of large eSports major venues being held each year. These sponsored events are the ‘face’ of eSports for the public, such as Dreamhack, Intel Extreme Masters, and Blast Pro Series. The eSports events draw large crowds and much attention, with eSports fans desire for more events getting more popular with each year. The understanding of fans spectator motives and experience towards these events, facilitates directly with companies marketing engagement within eSports (Pizzo, Baker, Na, Lee, Kim & Funk, 2018). The emergence and growth of eSports has led to an irreversible transition from the conventional society, towards an modern technological society, that is deeply based on informations and communications (Wagner, 2006). Global viewership, participation, prize money, and sponsorship are the main actors within the eSports environment where the growth is noticeable (Jenny, Manning, Keiper & Olrich 2017). Watching eSports has as well become extremely popular among people, resulting in more people spectating rather than playing the games, outlining the fact that eSports is becoming more popular as spectator sport (Hamari and Sjöblom, 2017). According to Newzoo (2017) report, are 42% of fans that do not play any eSport games, outlining the fact that eSports is becoming more popular as a spectator sport, resulting in fans constant exposure towards marketing engagements.

The technological penetration of modern consumption in everyday life has allowed gaming to become ubiquitous (Li, n.d.). The eSports industry has shown enormous potential for brands as it provides demographics that are difficult to reach through traditional marketing engagements. The eSports scene has seen hosts of brand sponsorships entering in various guises, such as through; events, teams, tournaments, and broadcasting platforms (Nielsen, 2017). Even though exact numbers of eSports sponsorships are hard to be found, the support is evident. Multinational companies have started entering eSports in form of sponsorships such as, Intel, Coca-Cola, ESPN,

Red Bull, and Nissan, dedicating their engagement with eSports through various forms (Keiper, Manning, Jenny, Olrich & Croft 2017). Yet, organizations are still uncertain of how to attract the audience, and how to enter the eSports industry, as the growth of eSports has gone unnoticed by many companies until recently (Funk, Pizzo & Baker, 2018). Organizations see the sponsoring potential in eSports, however the problem with such a new sport remains around the evolving structure of the scene. Big brands are worried about approaching this new sport, and how to reach the fans successfully without making a misstep in their sponsorship approach (Bradbury & O'Boyle, 2017). The current published literature on sponsorship fit in eSports is still limited and dispersed, with most of the current literature focusing on defining the cultural aspect of the eSports phenomenon (Witkowski, 2012; Seo & Jung 2016), the eSports definition in comparison to traditional sports (Wagner 2006; Lee & Schoenstedt 2011; Jenny, Manning, Keiper & Olrich; 2016; Hallman & Giel, 2018), and focus on the eSports spectatorship (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017; Burroughs & Rama 2015; Macey & Hamari, 2018). We believe that there is a gap in the literature which does not position their primary focus on the fans' perceptions of the eSports sponsorship fit, and what influential factors contribute to their perception of the fit. Therefore, there is a need to explore and construct a theoretical framework which can be build around the fans perception on sponsorship fit within the eSports scene.

1.2. Purpose of the Study

Previously, sponsorship studies in eSports have been conducted from the corporation side, whereas our aim is to investigate the perceived sponsorship fit from the fans point-of-view in eSports. The nuances and differences in fans perception might variate in different eSport genres and platforms; like various traditional sports have their own fan bases, eSports genres have their own fan bases, as well. Former studies have revealed that there are several determinants which affect sponsorship fit in traditional sports (Woisetschläger, Eiting, Haselhoff & Michaelis, 2010; Woisetschläger & Haselhoff, 2009; Woisetschläger, Haselhoff & Backhaus, 2014; Koo & Lee, 2018; Speed & Thompson, 2000), but a little knowledge exists about what the main affecting determinants are in eSports, and what they mean in the context of eSports. Therefore, the purpose of the study is to

explore eSports fan's perception of the sponsorship fit build around on previous studies of fans perceptions within sport sponsorship fit.

The reason for the use of previous sport sponsorship fit determinants in eSports context is because former sport sponsorship fit studies have highlighted certain similarities in both fan bases, for instance in the form of consumption habits and viewership (Whitman Syracuse University, 2019). Researchers suggest that eSports fans are trying to fulfill similar motives as fans spectating traditional sports (Pizzo & Funk, 2017). These motives are sozialisation, athlete performance, and different types of achievements, suggesting similar consumer motives and needs as indicated with traditional sports (Funk, Pizzo & Baker, 2018). Therefore the research question of this thesis has been formulated as followed: *How do fans perceive sponsorship fit within eSports?*

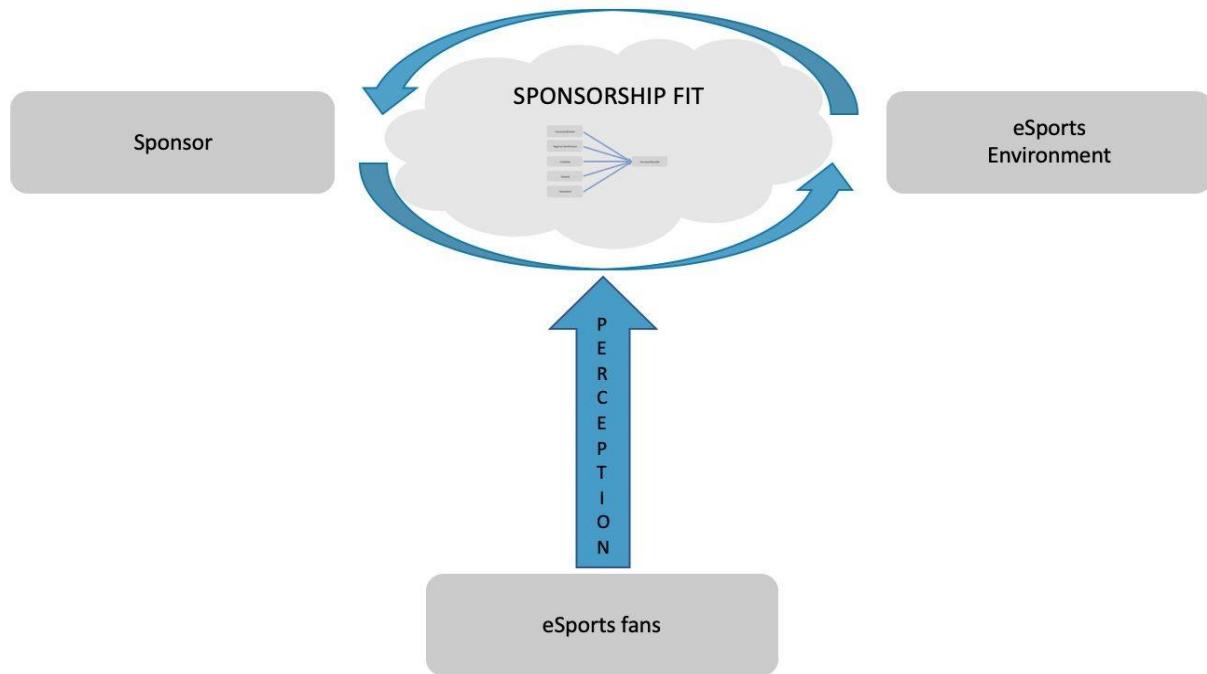


Figure 1: Conceptual framework, Source: Own creation

1.3. Project Structure

This paper is constructed into six sequential main chapters which all include different sections. In the beginning, the introduction chapter includes the background of the study and the problem statement. Second chapter introduces the literature review of the study, which subjects are in the core of this research and what they mean. Third chapter presents and describes the theoretical framework and its attributes, and justifies the empirical choices of the previous theories. Fourth part is describing the chosen method used in this study, what type of scientific approach and research design we are utilizing in this study. Fifth chapter describes and analyses the findings from the data gathered from the interviews and demonstrated in comparison with previous theoretical contributions. Lastly, the sixth chapter discusses the findings of the data and demonstrates them in the context of chosen field, in order to answer the research question.

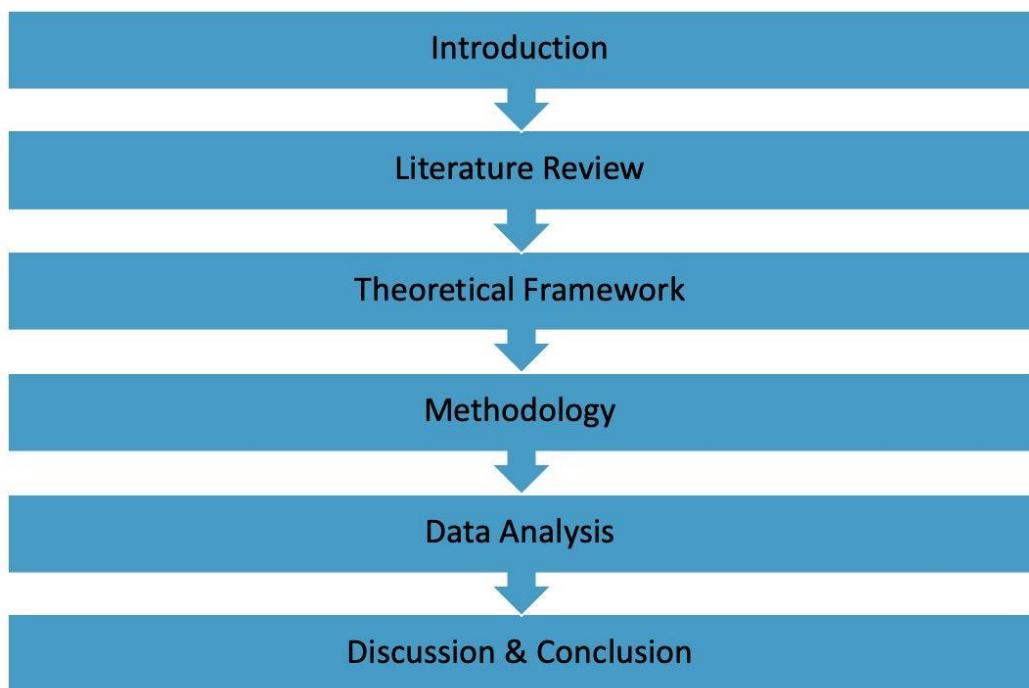


Figure 2. The Project Structure, Source: Own creation

2. Literature Review

This section will provide the reader with an outline of the existing literature about the definition of eSports, sponsorships in eSports, and fandom. The authors will as well present the previous studies done in the context of eSports and introduce the theoretical approach.

2.1. Defining eSports

Hamari and Sjöblom (2017) define eSports as a form of sport in which the main aspect of the sport is facilitated by the input of players, and the output of electrical systems mediated through human interactions. In eSports the activity is coordinated by the players which are operated through computer systems. In traditional sports the outcome of the activity can be seen in the ‘real world’, but in eSports the outcome of the activity happens within a ‘virtual world’ or within a computerized environment (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017). Wagner (2006) defines eSports as a ”Sports activities in which people develop and train mental or physical abilities in the use of informational and communicational technologies” (pp.3). eSports has its unique intersection that combines, interactional tasks, competition and collaboration that happens in intense virtual world (Freeman & Wohn, 2017). Regardless of how the eSport term is defined by different scholars, eSports is starting to becoming more accepted within the society of today as a sport (Jenny, Manning, Keiper & Olrich, 2016). Unlike traditional sports, has eSports interconnection of many genres that make up the whole eSports environment. The main criteria for a game to be considered a eSports game includes; A multiplayer video-game that is played competitively, includes equality and fair competition among all participants, the games are rule based and governed, have international spectator following, tournament and events, prize pool, and broadcasting for viewers (Baltezarevic & Baltezarevic, 2018; Funk, Pizzo & Baker, 2018).

2.2. Sponsorships

An entertainment or sport event in the world cannot be sold without any additional partners who bring financial support, publicity and credibility to the event (Abratt & Grobler 1989). Sponsorship deals facilitate the burden of expenses the organizations face when organizing such events. Abratt, Clayton and Pitt (1987) defined sponsorships as: “An agreement in terms of which a sponsor provides some aid to a beneficiary, which may be an association, a team or an individual, to enable the latter to pursue some activity and thereby derives the benefits contemplated in terms of its promotion strategy” (p. 300). There have been numerous attempts to qualify precisely what sponsorship means and what it is and still, there is no generally accepted definition made (Cornwell & Maignan 1998), as sponsorship differs in various of forms depending which industry is concerned (Bennet, 1999).

2.3. eSports Sponsorship

Sponsorship is the activity of paying “a cash and/or in-kind fee paid to a property such as a non-profit, sports, entertainment event in return for access to the exploitable commercial potential associated with that property” (International Events Group, 2000, p.1) that can be seen in eSports scene today. When it comes to eSports scene, the visibility is tremendous in those events for instance, the World Championship tournament of League of Legends attracted more than 43 million live spectators and the event was broadcasted for over 23 entities within 18 different languages all over the world (Kresse, 2016). Ströh (2017) reveals that companies entering the eSports scene as sponsors, are the most important financial pillars and key drivers of eSports growth, and he argues that “eSports increasingly attracts sponsors from outside the computer and gaming sphere [...] ongoing diversification of sponsors make sponsoring in eSports with its unique aspects, risk and opportunities a marketing field especially worth investigating” (pp.13).

The revenues in eSports are mainly gathered from sponsorship and advertising, and the yearly market revenue growth is expected to be around 35% until 2022 when it is expected to reach 1.790

billion dollars (Statista, 2019B). Due to these facts, a growing extent of companies are investing in eSports scene, and sponsorship deals are becoming an important financial pillars for the growth of the eSports scene (Statista, 2019b). According to Statista, (2019a) the whole eSports market is expected to reach 1.790 billion dollars by the end of 2022, generating over 30% annual growth each year to come.

Steen Leth-Jorgensen Executive Director of Lagardére Sports Denmark (Interview, March 1, 2019) mentioned that organizations entering eSports in the form of sponsorships cannot simply just assemble the whole eSports scene under one sponsorship banner “it is about creating relevance towards the specific game genre, creating authenticity, separate targeting, and different communication strategies [...] it is vital to emphasize on the linkage between the brand sponsorship towards the relevant eSports setting in order for brands to be successful in their sponsorship”. This can be elaborated even further with the beer company Budweiser which is very successful within traditional sport sponsorships. Budweiser entered the eSports market with their campaign called Bud Light’s eSports All-Star Program in 2016. The campaign was an example of endless series of mistake that only a company completely out of touch with the eSports community could have done. The main issue seemed to be the mismatch in sponsorship fit, resulting in Bud Light’s quick disappearance from the eSports scene (theScore-Esports, 2017).

2.4. eSports Fandom

Fandom, also mentioned as the fan culture, is an active group of individuals around a certain phenomenon, who participate in the cultural production at the same time when consuming it (Fuschillo, 2016). Dr. Fuschillo (2018) explained fandoms as social and cultural phenomenon, that was initially thought to be a marginal case without a big effect to society, while nowadays their influence affect major part of the society. They can be seen as more than a simple consumer, due to their dedication of resources into the brand, such as time and money (Jenkins, 1992; Fuschillo, 2016). It has also be argued that fandoms are formulating the traditional markets around the phenomenon with new innovative modes of exchange, such as today’s relatively popular case of “sharing economy” (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013). Spinrad (1981) defined a sports fan as “the person who thinks, talks about and is oriented towards sports even when [the fan] is not actually

observing, or reading, or listening to an account of a specific sports event” (pp. 354). There can be seen similar characteristics evolved into eSports and its consumers, where fans do not only spectate their favorite team but create and share their own content through streaming platforms, such as Twitch and YouTube (Newzoo, 2018).

In the year of 2018, the total eSports audience size worldwide reached a total of 395 million viewers, with the global eSports market valued at nearly 865 million U.S. dollars. According to projected forecasts, the year 2019 expected to exceed 450 million views, with the global eSports market value to reach 1.096 billion (Statista, 2019a; Statista, 2019b). Ströh (2017) pointed out that the age distribution in eSports is relatively young, around 80% of eSports fanatics are under 35 years old. There are obviously differences between the whole eSports fan base, but the biggest segment of fans are males between 21 and 35 years old.

Steen Leth Jorgensen Executive Director of Lagardére Sports Denmark (Interview, March 1, 2019) mentioned that eSports has become a modern entertainment platform with loyal fans following their games of interest, resulting in a major shift towards a culture with massive following of hardcore, passionate and loyal fans. The eSports fan culture, is an active group of individuals around a certain phenomenon, who participate in the cultural production at the same time when consuming it (Fuschillo, 2016). The same kind of way of thinking has evolved from sport fandom into eSports and its fans, resulting in the feeling of being a part of a community, being a part of the game, even though the fans may have zero experience of the sport (Branscombe et al., 1991).

3. Theoretical Framework

This section will provide the reader overview of previous studies of eSports and introduction of the proposed Theoretical Framework used in this study. Each element within the framework is as well explained in connection to sponsorship fit.

3.1.Previous Studies of eSports

Previous studies of eSports were investigating from the different angle, such as cultural study perspective (Jin, 2010; Witkowski, 2012; Seo & Jung 2016) where the focus was on defining the cultural aspects of the eSports phenomenon. Also, the perspective of defining eSports and the comparison between traditional sports was taken (Wagner 2006; Jonasson & Thiborg, 2010; Lee & Schoenstedt 2011; Seo, 2013; Jenny, Manning, Keiper & Olrich; 2016; Hallman & Giel, 2018). Additionally, socio-cultural studies of eSports (Jin, 2010) and eSports spectatorship perspectives (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017; Burroughs & Rama 2015; Macey & Hamari, 2018) have been studied earlier. These studies appeared to emphasize on different aspects within the eSports context, therefore they are not applicable to the aim of this study. However, since we want to investigate eSports fans perceptions of the sponsorship fit we had to look at broader perspective of sponsorship fit studies in general. In order to investigate fans' perception of sponsorship fit, we needed to build a framework by us looking at similar studies in a different context. After a thorough research on fans perception on sponsorship fit studies, we encountered similar types of fans perception studies in traditional sports context. We build our own theoretical framework from several sport sponsorship fit studies, since those studies have shown that fans perception can be measured based on certain attributes. These attributes are *Perceived benefits* (Woisetschläger et al, 2009); *Regional identification* (Woisetschläger et al, 2014); *Credibility*

(Speed et al, 2009; Woisetschläger et al, 2009 and Koo, et al, 2018); *Ubiquity* (Speed et al, 2000), and *Association* (Speed et al, 2000; Rifon, Choi, Trimble & Li, 2004). These specific attributes of how fans are perceiving sports sponsorship fit are listed and described below, and explored in the context of eSports.

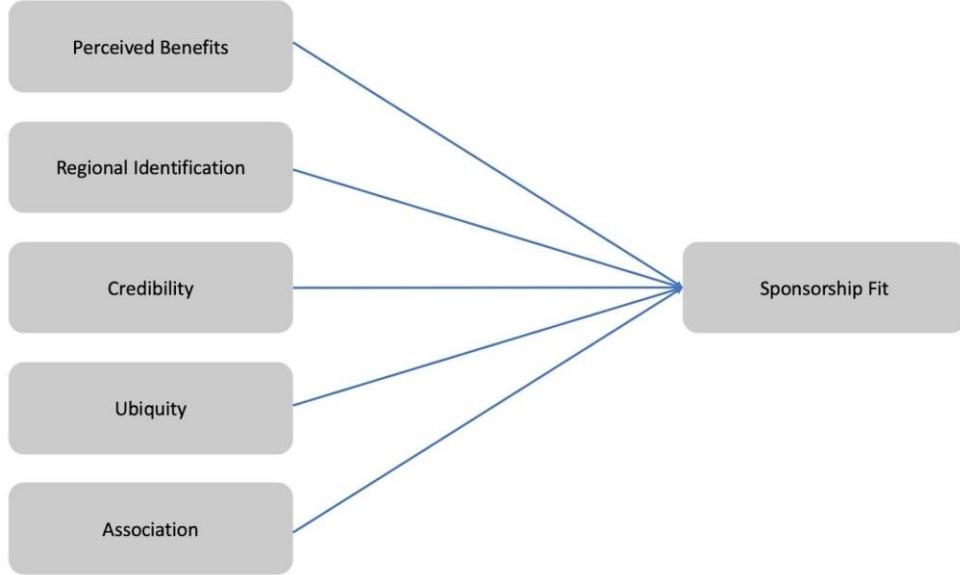


Figure 3 - Proposed Theoretical Framework for the study - Source: Own creation.

3.2. Perceived Sponsorship Fit

The perception of the fit between a brand sponsor in regards to sponsoring events, has been illustrated to have a significant impact on the attitudes towards the sponsor in the consumers minds and has been described as relevant, and complimentary to sponsorship literature (Gwinner & Bennett, 2008). The fit can arbitrate the consumer's thinking about the sponsor's relationship and the activity in which the perceived match between sponsor and event influences the response of consumers sponsorship attitudes towards the fit (Musante, Milne & McDonald, 1999). The level of perceived fit, influences consumer attitudes, beliefs and behavioral intentions and can determine how much consumers think about the sponsor's relationship with the event (Becker-Olsen, 2003). It is therefore important to understand some of the variables that may affect fans perception of sports sponsorship fit. Therefore, our aim is to extend the existing literature on fans perception to eSports sponsorship fit with the help of previous studies of sports sponsorship fit determinants.

3.3. Perceived Benefits

According to Meenaghan (2001) the belief that the sponsor's investment is benefitting the whole activity, will generate a goodwill effect influencing the attitude of people and their opinions

towards the sponsor. The extent of the fans attitudes is much motivated by their level of engagement and affiliation towards the particular activity. The positive emotional orientation towards the sponsor which provides benefits on the fans favorite activity is therefore more likely to gain favorable perceptions, resulting in a positive impact on sponsorship fit. Woisetschläger and Haselhoff (2009) confirm that fans' perceived benefits of the sponsorship in sports setting has a strong impact on fit as well. The fans normally identify themselves strongly with the sport or team they follow, suggesting that fans are more involved with the activity, are more likely to be aware of the sponsors. Fans that have more knowledge about the sport are more emotionally invested, and are therefore more critical in judging the sponsorship fit. Meenaghan (1991) mentions that the perception of the benefit is as well based on the degree of perceived exploitation by sponsors. Suggesting that fans might negatively relate the sponsor with the sponsoring activity based on the level of perceived exploitation. In sponsorship partnership, the sponsor uses elements from the activity, touching a part of the personal freedom and social identities of the fans for commercial purposes (Woisetschläger, Eiting, Haselhoff & Michaelis, 2009). Therefore, given the degree of the fans emotional attachment towards the activity, unwanted interference with the sport itself can lower the perception of the sponsorship fit. Since, eSport fans identify themselves strongly with the eSports community and are emotionally attached through constant engagement with eSports, we argue that this is suitable attribute that can be examined in the context of eSports.

3.4. Regional Identification

Professor Paasi (2002) stated that *regional identity* offers an answer to the question 'Where do I belong?', and he argues that answers are mainly based from one's personal or family history, and that they hardly ever define a specific region. The concept of regional identity is explained with the process where the region becomes institutionalized in the eyes of the people. The process includes "the production of territorial boundaries, symbolism and institutions" (Paasi, 2003, pp. 478). A study about how fans experience and engage in sports in their everyday life (Crawford, 2004) identified that localness is one of the most important element of the formation of sports fandoms. The study stated that fans are identifying themselves with the region, therefore they

possess relatively powerful support towards the 'place' where they live and where they are from. In addition to this, another study about 'determinants and consequences of sponsorship fit' (Woisetschläger, Haselhoff & Backhaus, 2014) indicates that fans [*this study investigated soccer fans from Germany*] are picturing themselves as in-group members at a regional level, and they will discriminate out-group members, who are not identified similarly. In other words, fans who think that sponsors are in-group members, perceive sponsors more positively in connection to the sponsorship fit (Woisetschläger & Haselhoff, 2009). Therefore, it is interesting to investigate to what level these propositions can be found in the context of fan's perception of eSports sponsorship fit.

3.5. Credibility

MacKenzie and Lutz (1989) define sponsor credibility as "the perceived truthfulness or honesty of the sponsor of the ad" (p.51). Credibility is an important element as it enhances the persuasive effects in generating certain attitudes and behaviors towards the sponsorship fit (Rifon, et al, 2004). In the study about the moderating role of sport involvement and mediating role of sponsor attitudes, Koo and Lee (2018) highlight that sponsors credibility is an important factor. The sponsors communications are received in a force field of scepticism and suspicion, which is evoked by obvious commercial intents. In addition to that, Speed and Thompson (2000) suggest in their study of sport sponsorship, that consumers do not perceive sponsorships as 'just another form of commercial activity' but rather a philanthropic dimension. The study found that the stronger the perception that sponsorship was pro-social, the more favorable the impact would be in fans minds. The motives of the sponsors are commercial in nature, but the perception of sponsors as being solely motivated by selfish consideration can be considered as 'free riders' and thus, not credible (Woisetschläger, Eiting, Haselhoff & Michaelis, 2009). Therefore, we believe that credibility is an interesting factor to include when examining sponsorship fit in eSports.

3.6. Ubiquity

Ubiquity as a concept means that something is “present everywhere or in many places especially simultaneously” (Merriam-Webster, 2019, n.p.) and it is a synonym of omnipresence which is often used linked in a religious discussions. When it comes to ubiquity in sponsorships, Speed and Thompson (2000) and Ko, Chang, Park and Herbst (2016) investigated consumers’ attitudes and perceptions’ of the sports events and its sport-event fit. Both of the studies assumed that ubiquity in sponsorships can an advantage or disadvantage for sponsor and the event itself. Both findings suggest that the consumers perceive the sponsor less positive light if the sponsor has high level of ubiquity within multiple sponsorship categories; being present in number of different events at the same time. Ko, Chang, Park and Herbst (2016) concluded that “ubiquity can even create negative impacts on perceptions of the sponsor because consumers are more likely to view the sponsors’ motives as self-interested and profit oriented” (pp. 183). The fact that the amounts of money invested in sponsorship deals in eSports are growing exponentially and companies are willing the get the their piece of the pie (Statista, 2019c). That is why ubiquity of a sponsor in eSports sponsorships is interesting to incorporate into our theoretical framework.

3.7. Association

Keller (2013) mentions that “Perceptions about a brand, as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory” (pp. 44). Dean (2004) further mentioned that associations are based on the product attributes, brand promotional strategies, and packaging, which shape the brand image. These associations are the consumers recognition and recall towards the brand which is linked in the memory. When it comes to sponsors association, former research (Rifon et al, 2004; Speed & Thompson, 2000) have concluded that individuals exhibit bias opinions about sponsors that are more product related towards the activity. In addition, the sponsor is seen as more genuine and in a positive light if it has a clear and creative link to the event (Speed & Thomson, 2000). The consumers are more likely to consider the fit more genuine if there is a relationship between the product and the event than no relationship at all. According to Smith (2004) there are many companies that try to improve their brand by sponsoring different types of events that might not be naturally fitted with their existing brand image. These decisions are relatively common and

often intentional even though the natural fit between the brand and sponsored event is not apparent (Mazodier and Quester, 2014). Speed and Thompson (2000), further highlight that the consistency between the meaning associated with the activity and desired meaning of the product have impact on consumers perception of fit. Therefore, if consumers think that the association is well thought, a positive feeling towards the fit can be transferred to the brand (Zdravkovic & Till, 2012). For that reason, the association factor in eSports is interesting to include in this study, to gain better understanding if product or service related sponsors within eSports effects fans perception on sponsorship fit.

4. Methodology

This chapter explains and discusses the methodological aspects used in this master's thesis. In the beginning, the chapter covers our strategy of the research, philosophical stance and the research approach. After that, explanation of our research design, data collection, and quality of the research is presented.

4.1. Research Strategy

The strategy of the study can be classified with different main categories, such as exploratory, descriptive, and explanatory studies (Saunders et al, 2009). Exploratory research is not aiming to deliver the final conclusive answers to the problem or phenomenon, but rather suggests possible results and solutions gathered from the empirical data. Exploratory research “tends to tackle new problem on which little or no previous research has been done” (Brown, 2006, pp.43). Descriptive research could not be used in this research, due to its primary focus on looking to quantify a problem through structured questionnaire. Explanatory, (also known as causal research) seeks to understand the relationship between variables. (Saunders et al, 2009; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). In relation to our aim and purpose of the study, this thesis employs exploratory research strategy.

4.2. Research Philosophy

There are different statements and perspectives about the world when dealing with the philosophy of science. They are also defined as scientific paradigms, which is defined as “a basic set of beliefs that guides actions, whether of the everyday garden variety or action taken in connection with disciplined inquiry” (Guba, 1990, pp. 17). In what way the research is conducted and what kind of findings and results does the research achieve depends on the choice of the scientific paradigm. In other words, the researcher is viewing the world through different types of lenses while conducting the research. These different paradigm lenses can be categorized as ontology, epistemology and

methodology. Ontology characterizes the basic belief about the nature of reality, “what is the nature of reality?” (Guba, 1990 pp. 18; Easterby-Smith et al, 2015). Epistemology is the study of “theories of knowledge” (Easterby-Smith et al, 2015, p.51) and “what is the nature of the relationship between the knower and the known, or knowable?” (Guba, 1990 pp.18). Lastly, methodology is searching the best answer with the question “how should the inquirer go about finding knowledge?” (Guba, 1990, pp. 18).

All of the aforementioned paradigm components differs between the overall paradigms positions; positivism, post-positivism, critical theory, and constructivism. Positivism and constructivism are viewed as the opposite perspectives about the reality and the creation of knowledge. This study is viewed and approached from the positivist epistemological philosophy, where the universal belief that there is only one right answer to the true nature of reality. Our research design is seen as a critical realism, because our aim is to develop knowledge from the specific phenomenon that we study and “our knowledge of reality is a result of social conditioning” (Saunders, et al 2009, pp. 115). As mentioned earlier, methodology is the third section of the scientific paradigms and the main notion of it is how the knowledge is gathered and found in this research. It is vital to choose the most suitable research method to answer the research questions and to get it in line with the aim of the study.

This thesis is theory-driven study, where the main idea is to gather the data from the interviews, and allocate it to the existing theories or models of sport sponsorship fit. The raw data gathered from the interview has no intrinsic meaning as such, but when the data is explained and decoded in the context of the research, it will be more interpretative. The reason we used this strategy is to investigate possible similar characteristics and aspects with sports sponsorship fit studies and our study of the eSports fan’s perception of the sponsorship fit in the eSports scene.

4.3. Research Approach

Every time research is conducted the main purpose is to generate new knowledge. Bryman (2012) introduced three different approaches for it, which are inductive, deductive, and abductive. Different approach describe the initial relationship with the theory and the research. To simplify

these, deductive research is guided by the theory and inductive approach is the theory is seen as the outcome of the research. Third, abductive research, involves a process of building new hypotheses and theories based on the evidence from the researched data. Abductive reasoning method is seen closer to inductive than deductive, and the central framework is developed by our empirical findings and theoretical insights of the phenomenon. Abduction is concluding the best explanation with the interplay between theory and initial empirical observation (Nilsson, 2019). When thinking about new ways to examine new phenomena, abductive reasoning delivers an invigorating way to think about theoretical innovations, such as the way the research is targeting the perception of sponsorship fit in the eSports scene. Abductive reasoning was seen the most suitable form of conducting this research, due to the exploratory study design of the fan's perception of the sponsorship fit in eSports (Haig, 2005). Nevertheless, our ambition is to gain better understanding about eSports sponsorship fit, with the help from existing theory and gathered interview data. After that it can be used to understand better how eSports fans perceive the sponsors and the fit between the sponsor and the sponsee (e.g. eSports event, a team or a player).

4.4. Research Design

This study follows a generic approach of qualitative analysis and the data is collected through semi-structured interviews with six respondents who are familiar with the subject of this study. Our research philosophy position in this study is critical realism, therefore thematic analysis is suitable for this type of a study, because the objective of the study is to explore and understand respondents' perceptions towards sponsorship fit in eSports (Boyatzis, 1998; Saunders et al, 2009; Saunders et al, 2016). The research is theory-driven therefore the use of abductive approach was selected, because the purpose of the study was to investigate respondents' perceptions in the frame of aforementioned themes, which is presented in the theoretical framework (Figure 3). Additionally, thematic approach was premeditated suitable technique to investigate also new themes from the data. The framework of traditional sports sponsorship fit helped us to recognize specific themes (*Perceived benefit, Regional identification, Credibility, Ubiquity and Association*), which was used to build up the structure of the interview. Coding was done after every interview was conducted and transcribed into separate documents. Our coding method was *values*

coding, which focuses on the respondents' values, attitudes and beliefs towards the particular topic (Saldaña, 2013). A summary of methodological choices is presented in the table below (Table 1).

	Methodological choices	Explanation
Research purpose	Exploratory	Problem which is not clearly defined
Research philosophy	Critical realist	Understanding social reality
Research approach	Abductive	Most likely explanation for the observations
Research design	Interviews	Semi-structured interviews
Research nature	Qualitative	

Table 1. Summary of methodological choices. Source: Own creation

4.4.1. Qualitative Research Method

Qualitative research is mainly based on the meaning which are based through words, sentences and the way respondents act, such as body-language (Patton, 2002; Saunders et al, 2009). This thesis seeks to explore perceptions and gain more understanding to the specific phenomenon investigated. Therefore it is vital to get fundamental understanding on the particular topic, and qualitative research is the most suitable method to do so. In addition to that, as the main weight of the study is respondent's perceptions and feelings towards a specific topic, we argue that the qualitative research methods are most suitable method.

4.4.2. Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews are the classical source of data gathering method and said to be the most used in qualitative studies (Bryman, 2012). The way we collected the data was through semi-structured interviews with six participants delivering an interesting insight on how they perceive sponsorship fit in eSports. One of the main reason why we choose interviews as our primary data collection technique is to gain understanding from the interviewees' perspective on a specific phenomenon

based on the respondent's thoughts and feelings toward the fit. In other words, we gave the respondents a possibility to freely discuss about their beliefs and perception in relations to the topic of the study (Saunders et al, 2009). Respondent's perspective includes their point of view of the phenomenon and additionally why they are holding those specific type of viewpoints (Easterby-Smith et al, 2015), therefore we decided to collect data from semi-structured interviews.

Saunders et al (2009) divided the different types of interviews methods into two different categories depending on its formality and structure. Non-standardized interviews, also known for the name of semi-structured or unstructured interviews, are related to primarily qualitative research interviews (King 2004; Saunders et al, 2009). The flow of the semi-structured interview is somewhat relaxed and enables researchers to collect rich and detailed data (Saunders et al, 2009). Therefore, we decided to construct a list of questions based on themes which we used in the interview. In addition to that, we added a few additional questions, also called as probe questions with which we tried to deepen respondents answers (Saunders et al, 2009). Another reason why we used probe questions in the interview was to gain more understanding towards different types of topics and themes that the respondents might presents from the questions asked (Saunders et al, 2009).

To mention a few additional probe questions types which we were using are; elaboration, echo and detail-oriented probes. The decision of using those different types of extra questions was because we wanted to seek more in depth information from the specific topic. Elaboration probe is one of the most used additional questions style (King, 2004; Saunders et al, 2009). Another used elaboration probes that we used in our interview were; 'Can you specify a little bit more' or 'Please, are you able to elaborate on that thought'. As the name 'Echo' already reveals it, we were simply repeating the answers of our respondent, and then asks them to continue with their specific thought in order to get more out of their answer. Lastly, we used detail-oriented probes through which we were able to seek more information from the respondents answers that opened much wider knowledge about the researched issue and bring a new perspective for the theme in question (King, 2004; Saunders et al, 2009).

Bryman and Bell (2015) state that there are benefits for a face-to-face interviews. Face-to-face interviews allow the interviewers to observe respondents' body language and gestures, as well the physical or personal traits that might affect the way of answers. Face-to-face interviews were not possible to conduct because the locations of our respondents were too distant. Therefore, we decided to conduct the interviews through the online conference software Skype. The same way face-to-face interview enables interviewer to observe respondents body language and gestures, we had the possibility to observe and monitor our respondents' body languages through live video connection. Another option was to conduct the interviews via phone, but due to the fact that there was no direct visual contact between interviewer and the respondents, and the cost to make an international phone call, made us to end up with video conference alternative.

4.4.3. Sampling Method

“Sampling techniques provide a range of methods that enable you to reduce the amount of data you need to collect by considering only data from a sub-group rather than all possible cases or elements” (Saunders et al. 2009 pp.210). To achieve the goal of the research and to answer the research question, we must dig deep into rather small and specific sample, which will provide in-depth information about the topic. The fact that the phenomenon to be investigated is relatively new in the academic literature, and because the topic has not reached the awareness of the majority population, we decided to use two sampling methods in the master thesis, purposive and convenience sampling.

Purposive sampling, also mentioned as judgmental sampling, is where the researcher chooses the sample to receive desired and sufficient answers for the research questions and to meet the goal of the study. Also, when the topic of the research is unusual to general population it is necessary to use purposive sampling, because it would not be possible to conduct the research without respondents' sufficient level of knowledge about the topic in hand (Saunders et al, 2009). As the topic of our study is relatively niche and not commonly known, we had to intentionally select our interview sample, in order to conduct the interview at sufficient level. Therefore, all of the respondents have a specific relation and interest for the topic. In addition to that, we can also use *homogeneous sampling* which is a one of the five different purposive sampling techniques. The

choice of using homogeneous sampling was because it is the most suitable for our research, due to our ambition is to investigate a particular subgroups in-depth in order to gather as much information as possible. Purposive sampling method is useful to use when the focus of the research is to gain an in-depth knowledge about the special topic and when the sample size is relatively small (Saunders et al, 2009; Easterby-Smith et al, 2015). We decided to use social media in order to get in contact with the interviewees since eSports fans were easiest to approach through computer mediated platforms. Additionally, the reason of using social media channels for building our sample was due to our lack of social connection here in Sweden and Skåne area, from where we could have selected the sample. Our sample selection process resumed until we reached the necessary size of the sample (Saunders et al, 2009).

4.4.4. Coding

After the data was collected and transcribed, the data was assembled together to gain broader understanding of the respondents answers, and in order to get more comprehensive picture of the their perceptions of the specific subject. This enabled us to go back to the respondents' answers and re-read them so every answer could be allocated to the right theme. Respondents' answers were categorized by the use of values coding. By using values coding method, the codes were identified based on respondents' values, attitudes and beliefs which describes respondents' own perception or world-views about the sponsorship fit within the eSports scene (Saldaña, 2013). Transcribed interviews were imported to the software system Nvivo in order to keep the data, and structurize it in a sufficient way in order to ease the coding process. Nvivo is a computer software developed for qualitative researchers who are transcribing text-based information from the data, and the newest Nvivo 12 was used in this study (Nvivo, online, n.p.). After the codes were identified, we focused on their meaning within the codes, as what kind of relationship does the code have with established themes from the theoretical framework. This was done in order to understand the meaning of the theme in the context of eSports. We identified the relationships and connected links from the respondents' answers and we found the matching links with the themes. To qualify our proposed eSports sponsorship fit framework we were looking for similar and different attributes from the data towards each predefined themes, in order to find the best explanation for our research a new sponsorship fit theory in eSports. The table below describes the

identified codes from the interview data and how they connect to the themes of the framework in the context of eSports (Table 2).

<u>Themes</u>	<u>Codes</u>	<u>Definition of the code from the interviews</u>
Perceived Benefit	“Positivity”	<i>Respondents feel that sponsors in eSports are positively affecting the scene, so that the industry is expanding and resulting in a positive image of the sponsor.</i>
Regional Identification	“Debatable”	<i>Respondents feel that sponsor's region does affect the perceptions at some level and at some level it does not affect the perceptions of the sponsorship fit.</i>
Credibility	“Engagement”	<i>Respondents feel that the longevity and the intentions of the sponsor are important for the credibility among sponsorship.</i>
Ubiquity	“Favorable”	<i>Respondents feel positive about the fact that organizations who are sponsoring in various markets are also engaging in the eSports scene.</i>
Association	“Relevancy”	<i>Respondents pointed out that the endemic companies are obviously more relevant sponsors in eSports, however non-endemic companies are seen suitable if there is creative link of product and service alignment.</i>

Table 2. Coding process. Source: Own creation.

4.5. Data Collection

As the research method of this thesis was qualitative, primarily our collection of the data was non-numerical data from the semi-structured interviews, thus it was mainly associated with sentences, words, feelings and other elements which are non-quantifiable (Saunders et al, 2009). All of the interviews lasted around thirty to forty minutes, and no technical difficulties occurred while we conducted the video conference meetings. All of the respondents were between the age of 21 - 31 years old, and five of the respondents were male and one female. All of the respondents have different backgrounds and have been engaged with eSports for many years, ranging from 5 - 15 years. We decided to conduct the interviews during the workday because all of the respondents have adequate workplace facilities where they could book a meeting room, so that the interview environment was silent and safe for distractions. In addition to that, all of the six interviews were conducted by using live video conference application Skype, which proved to be the most suitable way to implement them, because every interviewee had the application already downloaded and they were familiar with the system. The table below (Table 2) represents an overview of the interviewees, their nationality, gender, age, and a brief overview of each interviewee's background in eSports.

Respondent	Nationality	Gender	Age	Background
Respondent A	Icelander	Male	28	15+ years of eSports consumption, mainly FPS and MOBA genres
Respondent B	Swedish	Female	25	5 years of spectating and playing real-time-strategy genre
Respondent C	Icelander	Male	25	A decade of consuming eSports, mainly FPS and CCG (collectible card game)
Respondent D	Finnish	Male	22	Nearly a decade of consuming eSports, mainly FPS and MOBA
Respondent E	English	Male	31	A decade of consuming various genres, such as RTS and Sports genre
Respondent F	Finnish	Male	27	15+ years of consuming of various genres, such as FPS and RPGs (role-playing games)

Table 3. Overview of interviewees. Source: Own creation.

Each interview started with us introducing the aim of the study and general discussion about the interview. The interviewees were all notified that there would not be any right or wrong answers, in order to relax the respondent and build the trust between the interviewer and interviewee. Also, in the beginning of the interview we asked the permission to record the discussion. By recording the interview, we were able to focus more towards how respondents answered the questions and what type of signals they were giving while explaining their perceptions and feelings. Next step was to transcribe the interviews and it was done always within the same day, in order to discover every detail from the interview. Also through transcribed text we were able to have more comprehensive view of the gathered data before starting the analytic process.

While analysing the data we were able to re-listen to the interviews several times afterwards in order to get even more in-depth understanding of the given answers (Saunders, et al, 2009). A few reasons why each and every interview was conducted in English was to avoid mistranslations from one language to English and also it ease analysing work when the answers were answered and written with the same language. All of the questions from the list was asked and we used exactly the same wording in every interview question. After each interview, we transcribed the answers along with the audio-recordings the same day.

4.6. Quality of the Research

4.6.1. Ethical considerations

While conducting a research and similar type of investigations, ethical considerations is needed to be taken into account in order to protect respondents' privacy and their views (Easterby-Smith et al, 2015). The research method we utilized in this study was done through interviews with eSports fans. We took into account the new EU law about the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), thus we asked all of the respondents to have a permission to store and process their personal data (<https://gdpr-info.eu/>, 2019). As they opened their thoughts and attitudes towards sponsorships within eSports scene we wanted to make sure that they feel secured and that their personal identity was not revealed.

4.6.2. Limitations of the Study

Firstly, one of the limitation in this study was the sample size of our research. We explored and gained better understanding of fans' perceptions of the sponsorships fit in eSports, but the research does not offer a conclusive results. Therefore, with this relatively low sample we cannot generalize the results of how the whole eSports fan-base thinks about the sponsorships in eSports. In addition to that, the perception of sponsorship fit might be thought differently in different age groups and elsewhere in the world, therefore additional limitation of the sample was related to the respondents' profile. Hence, there is a need to conduct a further research into different demographic groups in order to improve the generalizability and reliability of the results. Secondly, the decision to use only one qualitative technique, semi-structured interviews as our main source of data collection, involves another limitation in this study. For instance, the use of netnographic approach could have given us another point of view on how eSports fans are discussing about the sponsorships in their own streaming channels and discussion forums.

With this, we would have gained more empirical data from the discussions, observing the way how fans think about sponsors entering into eSports scene, and most importantly how they perceive the sponsorship fit in the specific context. In addition to that, when it comes to alternative data collection methods, a qualitative perspective might have brought us more objective point of view on how sponsorship fit in eSports is perceived by fans. Therefore, another data collection method could have increased the validity of the research.

A third limitation of the study was the decision to carry out the interviews in English, even though it was not all of the respondents native language. This might have influenced the way the respondents produced their answers and may affect the depth of their responses to a specific question. On the other hand, all of the respondents felt natural to conduct the interview in English and as they mainly communicate in English while consuming eSports. Therefore, we can argue that this did not affect the validity of the data that much. Fourthly, and probably the prominent limitation of this study was time constraints. Lack of time affected almost all of the above mentioned limitations, which would have increased the reliability and validity of the study.

5. Data Analysis

Data analysis chapter describes the respondents' answers through values coding, which enables the reader to understand the identified code in connection to the specific themes, proposed for this study.

5.1. Perceived Benefit in eSports

During the interviews most of the respondents had positive attitude towards sponsors and that eSports as a whole was overall benefitting with their engagement in the eSports scene. They seemed to elaborate on the fact that sponsors have brought positive impact on the industry expansion and providing the fans better quality of the consumption. The perceived benefit of sponsors in eSports seemed to provide the scene with more professionalism, allowing the sport to grow to the level of traditional sports.

“Because it makes the environment more professional, and it puts the eSports towards the same level as general sports, I think also that it makes the players more professional and the whole environment more spectate friendly and overall more professional” (Respondent A)

It appears that respondent A, thinks that the professionalism in eSports is important, highlighting that professionalism makes him want to consume eSports. He compares the importance of the connection of sponsors in traditional sports, and with sponsorship will professionalism increase. The indication of the positive perception of sponsorships are therefore from the point of view of the sponsor making the scene more spectator friendly connected from the level of professionalism. Further, respondent E elaborates on the positive beneficial impact of sponsors' engagement in eSports, explaining that he considered the sponsors being the important actors providing the whole eSports scene with financial aid for its existence, and therefore expanding the industry to the size of today, which it could not be done without their engagement.

“Without sponsors there would not be any eSports tournaments [...] basically, I can conclude that sponsors are lifeline for eSports teams and the whole scene” (Respondent E)

It seems that Respondent E believes that without the interference of sponsorship deals in eSports that eSports would not be able to contribute to him as a spectating fan with any tournaments at all. He believes that sponsors are important financial pillars that contribute positively to teams and other important factors that apply to the existence of the scene. Respondent D also felt that because the eSports environment is benefiting overall with the engagement of sponsors, his perception of the engaging sponsor had positive impact on the perception of the fit. Their perception towards the sponsor image was sometimes neutral, until they got engaged with the scene, indicating that if the respondent perceives the eSports scene benefitting from sponsorship deals, the brand image changes positively.

“I have positive image about sponsors [...] there are some brands that I didn't really have any opinion towards before, but my thoughts about the sponsor changed in a positive way after they got engaged with the scene.” (Respondent D)

“But on the other hand, I have noticed that there are some brands to whom I have negative feelings towards, because they only seem to put their own logo everywhere just to exploit the booming scene, but my thoughts about the sponsor is really good when they getting more engaged with the scene and bring something to it.” (Respondent D)

There seems to be connection towards positive sponsor image among the respondent as a engaged fan and his perception of the sponsoring brand when they get engaged with the scene that he follows regularly. Also he confirms that his perception of the sponsor fit is influenced by his opinion on the sponsor image. This means that if the sponsor gets engaged within the eSports scene without giving something to the table, the likelihood of the fans perception will be less positive in regards of perception of the fit. When it comes to respondents' perception on sponsorship fit in eSports, the findings show a positive attitude of sponsors' engagement to the eSports scene. The

main factors that influence this perception was identified through the perceived benefits that the eSports scene was gaining through the sponsor. The findings showed that there were two main factors which were positively affecting the respondents perception of the sponsorships fit in eSports. These positive perceptions were influenced by the eSports industry growth by sponsors engagement, and the sponsors' engagement in eSports influencing the respondents' image on the sponsor positively.

5.2. Regional Identification in eSports

During the interview we noticed that respondents have fairly debatable thoughts about the regional identification of sponsor which affect sponsorship fit. For instance, the respondents elaborated that there has to be a fit with the audience when sponsoring an event in a specific country, as respondents D explained:

..but then again, as I watched the BLAST Pros Series in Madrid this spring, I noticed a sponsor which I had never seen before, and of course BLAST Pro Series is international event, so I felt that the fit was not there initially since I did not understand the brand or what service or product it represented, but after my observation on the tournament I noticed that it was a Spanish beer company so the fit was evident." (Respondent D)

It appears that respondent D at first did not understand the sponsor he saw through the live-stream platform. After a while of observation, he noticed that the sponsor was a local beer brand, and that the country fit was evident in this case. Initially, he did not have any opinion about the brand but afterwards he considered the sponsor to be appropriate for the event due to the fact that the brand was from the same country as the event. In addition to that, respondent F explained his view of the sponsors' origin and how it affect his opinion to the sponsorship fit:

“I know that for instance, ENCE (Finnish Counter-strike team) has non-hardware industry sponsors from Finland, so obviously for me as a Finn, the fit is there but for outsiders (people from abroad) they might not understand the fit at all.” (Respondent F)

“Sponsors are more personal with the team they sponsor since, they are from the same town or country” (Respondent B)

Respondent F also emphasizes the fact that sponsor's origin affect him when he can relate to the sponsor and notice the fit through regional identification. In other words, respondent F does not think that the origin of the sponsor is influencing the sponsorship fit, but there has to be a connective link between the sponsor and the sponsored entity, which is based on the the country of the sponsor and the sponsored team. Respondent B further states that the fit is more clear and tangible if the sponsor is from the same country, therefore the country of the sponsor is an influential factor how consumers are perceiving the sponsorship fit. On the other hand, some of the respondents felt that the sponsor's origin does not influence how they perceive the sponsors, rather the influencing factor for them is the market availability of the product or service, as the Respondent E explained below:

“No I still think the country of origin does not make that much difference in my opinion, as long as the product is sold in my country” (Respondent E)

Therefore, sponsors' product or service has to be available in the specific market in order for them as fans to understand the fit with the sponsor. His main perception is not build around the importance of the sponsors' origin, but rather that the sponsor is more likely to have affecting influence on perceptions if the respondent is able to purchase the sponsors product or services in their own country. The way how our respondents perceive the regional identification in the sponsorship fit in the eSports we can argue, based on our findings, that regional identification is seen from two perspective. For some respondents the region of the sponsor affects the understanding of fans perception of the fit, elaborating that they might perceive the fit more authentic and caring based on of country fit when sponsoring events or teams. Whereas for some

it did not affect the sponsorship fit, rather the influential factor was market availability, so that they are able to purchase the sponsors' products or services from the country they live.

Therefore, the findings showed a debatable attitude towards regional identification in eSports.

5.3. Credibility in eSports

Our findings from the respondents interviews highlight the fact that sponsors engagement as sponsors in eSports have impact on respondents' perception towards the sponsorship credibility as a sponsor in eSports. Respondents mentioned that the longevity of the engaging sponsors highly influences their perception of the sponsorship fit. Both respondent A and respondent E mentioned that if sponsors have been in the scene for quite the while, and been present before eSports vast and quick popularity and economic growth, the perception as a sponsor would affect their perception of the sponsorship fit.

"For example, if the sponsor has been there when eSports have had its downswings and upswings, and been there for long time, I would perceive it more authentic" (Respondent A).

Respondent A values the longevity of the sponsors' engagement as sponsor by evaluating their commitment as sponsors through the rough patches of eSports. The main influence that affects respondent A is the level of engagement that sponsors have shown in the past as well in the present. Respondent E further elaborates on the importance of the different way of sponsors' engagement. The respondent considered sponsors that are engaging in eSports solely by advertisement purposes, more likely to be considered less credible as sponsors for the eSports scene.

"For me, probably how long the sponsors have been involved in eSports, if it is a company that is just new to the scene and just pushing their products, has less impact on me as being credible, than the ones that have been there the last years" (Respondent E).

The respondents perception on credibility is highly determined by the ways of the sponsors engages in eSports, but as well the amount of time that the sponsor has been within the eSports scene. The main impact that influences his perception of the sponsors credibility are the sponsors intentions, indicating that sponsors that have been in the scene for longer time are more likely to be considered credible among the respondent. This can be elaborated even further with the respondents' answers towards right intentions of sponsors' engagement with respondent C.

“When it comes to the brand’s credibility, the company has to really understand where they are and what’s going on in this eSports environment, and not just put the company logo everywhere just because ‘you have to be there’, but to be present and bring some kind of activation for the fans, like through the product or service behind the sponsor”
(Respondent C)

Respondent C elaborates on the fact that sponsors engagement is much based on the activation that the sponsor can provide him with. He considers that sponsors might think of eSports as a platform for companies only as a revenue generator. His perception of the engagement is therefore based on the brands intentions towards him as a fan, which he then judges the credibility on. Further, respondents E and D, highlights the importance of sponsors engagement towards the fans, and that the main attributes affecting his perception of credibility is not based on the type of product or service behind the sponsor, but rather the engagement in the form of giving.

“For me it is not the product that are credible it is more how they are involved in the scene, like supporting the industry by having giveaways, or some kind of activation for the fans.”
(Respondent E).

“The sponsor has to be relevant and it must be suitable for target audience, therefore the audience can feel it as a good fit. The sponsoring company has to “give something” to the audience and to the event/tournament.”
(Respondent D).

The respondents feel that the intentions of the sponsor has to be somehow noticed by the fans, in order to be conceived as credible sponsors. The engagement has to be in the form of supporting the industry through different ways. The intentions of the sponsorship has to be connected by other means than only being present, as the fans perceive the sponsors being more credible through their engagement in tangible or intangible ways.

5.4. Ubiquity in eSports

Throughout the interview, the respondents had a favorable thoughts about sponsors who are also sponsoring elsewhere, in other areas. Respondents highlighted the fact that when big companies are entering into eSports scene, it will make the scene more mainstream and it shows that the companies are ready to commit and taking the scene more seriously.

“Big positive impact, getting big companies, like in football, getting big sponsors bring big pulling power for the scene” (Respondent E)

As the respondent E pointed out above, the fact that big organizations are entering eSports in various ways, they are simultaneously generating some sort of a pulling power for the whole eSports industry. The respondent thinks that this pullin power will attract more organizations to act the same way, which will then affect the whole growth for eSports. Both, respondent B and F pointed out an example of the pulling power provided from Red Bull engaging in eSports:

“I would say Red Bull, I feel like they sponsoring everywhere!, I think it is good, because it indicates that eSports is becoming more mainstream” (Respondent B)

“I would think that Red Bull thinks a lot of their brand, and if they are trying to connect with players, teams and events is good [...] I think that this is very good for the eSports scene, to get so big sponsors, and that such an international brand is coming in means that eSports is worth investing in” (Respondent F)

The fact that they both mention the energy drink company Red Bull was coincidence, but obviously the brand has a positive influence for the eSports audience even though they sponsor variety of sports. Therefore, as both of the respondents highlighted above, Red Bull's presence in the eSports scene seems to have positive impact on their attitude. The findings revealed that respondents have a favorable attitude towards sponsors who are sponsoring in various markets simultaneously. Therefore, sponsors' high level of ubiquity is affecting positively on fans' perception of sponsorship fit in eSports.

5.5. Association in eSports

The findings from the interviews in accordance to association, indicates that respondents perceive product attributes to have impact on their perception of sponsorship fit. The respondents indicate that products or services that are in-line with eSports, are more likely to be perceived as relevant in the eSports scene. Both respondents D and E perceive that sponsors who produce hardware equipments and components are easier to perceive as fitting towards eSports, as the attributes are more relevant than others, and easier to understand in terms of association with eSports.

"Well, for example these equipment and component manufacturing companies; Nvidia, INTEL, Logitech, BenQ, and Sennheiser are more fitting to eSports obviously. Almost every eSports team has a sponsor from such kind of hardware industry" (Respondent D)

"The equipment, Logitech, razer, those ones specifically resonate more in me, for me the sponsors should be the ones that go more hand in hand with gaming community" (Respondent E).

These responses elaborate on the fact that equipment sponsors that are more connected with the gaming sphere, are more likely to resonate in the minds of respondents. Indications of relevance in the form of association of sponsors in eSports were also in the form of creative linkage, which respondents F and B mentioned in regards to sponsorship fit.

“Well, I think that the sponsor is more authentic when there is clear link with the eSports scene or a purpose why they are there, the company has to show that they understand what they are doing, and to whom they are promoting their products/services” (Respondent F).

“I think there has to be some creativity, [...] when it comes to younger audience, you really have to find ways to connect with them, especially for instance if a non-connected company is thinking of sponsoring eSports” (Respondent B).

Respondents believe that sponsors that have products or services that are not directly linked with the gaming sphere have to associate their product or service relevancy through creative means. The respondents consider important for sponsors to identify their own relivancy by showing their purpose, and understanding of sponsoring within eSports. Respondent B elaborates on this matter and highlights the importance of understanding the sponsoring attentions in order to prevent possible mismatch in the perception of the sponsorship fit. Further, Respondent F, believes that through creative linkage the authenticity becomes stronger resulting in greater perception of the sponsorship fit.

6. Discussion & Conclusion

This thesis aimed to investigate fans perception of sponsorship fit in eSports. In order to give an in depth understanding of this research topic, previous studies of fans perceptions in sport sponsorship fit was applied in the context of eSports. Hence, the research question: *How do fans' perceive sponsorship fit within eSports*, which proposed in the beginning guided our work, in order to explore the meaning behind the fans' perceptions.

With our research question in mind, previous studies did not provide a comprehensive understanding of the determinants which affect the fans perception of sponsorship fit in eSports context. Therefore, we had to broaden our view on other sponsorship fit studies in order to provide a suitable framework and guideline to investigate perceptions in this research. After an intensive investigations of those studies we concluded that traditional sport sponsorship studies have investigated the perception of the sponsorship fit, which is applicable for our context due to vast similarities with the sport and eSports fans' viewerships and consumption habits. From the previous studies we modified a proposed theoretical framework which was applicable for our context of the study. The framework consisted five main themes, which are directly and indirectly involved around sponsorship fit, illustrating fans perceptions through observations and empirical material provided from the previous theories. Identified themes are; perceived benefit, regional identification, credibility, ubiquity, and association.

Firstly, the proposed contribution of perceived benefits by Woisetschläger and Haselhoff (2009) state that the perception of benefits to the sports team are associated with the sponsors can increase fan's acceptance and contribute positively to sponsorship fit. If the sponsors' out-come-to-input ratio corresponds to fans' own reference of outcome-to-input ratio, then fans will evaluate the fit of the sponsor more positively. Our findings show similar positive attitude towards sponsors when they are getting into the eSports scene. The main factors that contribute to the positive attitude of the sponsorship fit where based on the fans perception of the sponsor through their involvement in helping the industry to grow. On the other hand, in traditional sports setting fans perceive sponsorship fit in terms of the team they support and follow. This indicates that due to the

youngness of the eSports industry, fans do not base their sponsorship fit perceptions on individual eSports teams they follow, but rather the whole industry as one team.

Secondly, in study conducted by Woisetschläger and Haselhoff (2009), the regional identification is proposed to have impact on fans' perception, when the sponsoring company is from the same region as the sponsored sport team was located. In addition to this, another study about 'determinants and consequences of sponsorship fit' (Woisetschläger, Haselhoff & Backhaus, 2014) indicates that fans are picturing themselves as in-group members in a regional level, and they will discriminate out-group members, who are not identified similarly. Our findings show two perspectives when it comes how fans perceive regional identification in eSports. For some respondents the perception of the fit was more understandable when the sponsor's origin was from the same country as the eSports team was from, or the eSports event was held. For other respondents the sponsors' origin was not an influential factor, rather indicating the importance of the sponsors' product or service being available in their own market, in order to be able to perceive the fit better.

Thirdly, as proposed from Speed and Thompson (2000) is suggested that consumers do not perceive sponsors as 'just another form of commercial activity' but a philanthropic dimension, indicating that fans have stronger perceptions towards the sponsorship fit, if the sponsor is pro-social. Our respondents felt that sponsors engagement impacts the perception of the sponsorship fit, through longevity of the sponsor and their sponsoring intentions. Based on our findings, fans perceive sponsors more credible if the sponsors have been engaged in the eSports scene for longer period of time, rather than the ones just newly entering the scene. This is as well elaborated further by the indications of the sponsors' intentions in the scene. The intentions of the sponsorship has to be connected by other means than only being present, as the fans perceive the sponsors being more credible through their engagement in tangible or intangible ways. Therefore, we argue that fans perceive sponsors more credible if the commitment to the eSports scene is evident, such as through active engagement with the audience. This can be brought through various innovative ways, such as sponsor's brand related products which are connected with the eSports scene. As the eSports

fans share similar interests, the sponsors' integration through tone and alignment to the culture is one of the key perception indicator proposed by fans.

Fourthly, Speed and Thompson (2000) discovered that sponsors that are sponsoring in various different markets simultaneously are either perceived to be an advantage or disadvantage for the sponsorship fit. Our findings revealed that the respondents have only favorable attitudes towards sponsors that are engaged in different markets simultaneously. Respondents felt that multinational sponsors will make the eSports scene more mainstream and worth investing in. The sponsors' commitment level is perceived positively by fans when the fans perceive companies to take eSports seriously. This has a greater impact on their perception towards the fit as fans feel that multinational companies bring certain pulling power to the industry, attracts new sponsors to act in the same way.

Lastly, former studies (Rifon et al, 2004; Speed & Thompson, 2000) show that individuals express bias opinions towards sponsors that are more product related towards the activity. Findings from our interviews with eSports fans revealed that they perceive product attributes to be an important factor as they considered it easier to understand in the terms of the eSports environment. This was further elaborated by the fans, by indicating that hardware company sponsors are more that are in line with the core identity of eSports, are perceived to have more clear sponsorship fit. But on the other hand, the fans also argued that companies outside of the gaming sphere could also be relevant if a creative link was visible in their sponsorship activities. Based on the respondents' answers, the authenticity in eSports setting becomes stronger with relevant linkage and therefore the perception of the sponsorship fit is better.

To conclude, since this study is exploratory in nature, the contribution of this study was to provide a better understanding of how fans perceive sponsorship fit in eSports. Results from this study revealed that both ubiquity of the sponsors and perceived benefits for the eSports scene is perceived to have a favorable influence on fans perception of the sponsorship fit. Companies that are present in various market at the same time that they are engaged in eSports, have positive effects on the eSports fans, and they believe that through sponsors commitment with eSports affects industry

growth, resulting in a positive perception of sponsorship fit. In addition to that, sponsors initial intentions are perceived to be an important factor when it comes to the credibility of the sponsorship fit. Fans believe that the sponsors show their level of engagement by bringing the sponsors core values towards the level of eSports. How long sponsors have been present in the eSports scene, are as well perceived to bring higher perceived credibility among fans. Fans believe that sponsors' relevance with eSports is important when it come to their associations through creative links and product and service attributes. Perception of the fit is considered to be more understandable, if the product and service attributes are in line with eSports environment, such as hardware companies. However, companies outside of the the eSports scene such as non-hardware companies, can be seen as relevant sponsors if they are able to build a creative link between the company and eSports. Lastly, eSports fans have two debatable perceptions when it comes to regional identification, namely country fit and market availability. Fans highlight the importance that in order to perceive the fit better, the product or service needs to be available in their country of residency, or in order to understand the fit, the sponsor has to be from the same country that the sponsored entity is from.

References

- Abratt, R., Clayton, B. & Pitt, L. (1987). Corporate Objectives in Sports Sponsorship. International Journal of Advertising, 6(4), pp.299-312.
- Abratt, R. & Grobler, P, S,. (1989). The Evaluation of Sports Sponsorships, International Journal of Advertising, 8:4, 351-362.
- Becker-Olsen, K. & Hill, R. (2006). The Impact of Sponsor Fit on Brand Equity. *Journal of Service Research*, 9(1), pp.73-83.
- Baltezarević, R. & Baltezarević, B. (2018). THE IMPACT OF VIDEO GAMES ON THE eSPORTS FORMATION. *Facta Universitatis, Series: Physical Education and Sport*, 16(1), p.137.
- Boyatzis, R. E. (1998). Transforming qualitative information: Thematic analysis and code development. Thousand Oaks, CA, US: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Bradbury, T. & O'Boyle, I. (2017). *Understanding sport management*. London: Routledge, p.181.
- Branscombe, N., R. & Wann, D., L. (1991). “The Positive Social and Self-Concept Consequences of Sports Team Identification”, *Journal of Sports and Social Issues*, Vol. 15, pp. 115 - 127.
- Brown, R.B. (2006). “Doing Your Dissertation in Business and Management: The Reality of Research and Writing” Sage Publications, p.43.
- Bryman, A. (2012). “Social Research Methods”. 4th edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bryman, A. and Bell, E. (2015). Business research methods. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press.
- Burroughs, B. & Rama, P. (2015). The eSports Trojan Horse: Twitch and Streaming Futures. *Journal For Virtual Worlds Research*, Volume 8. Issue 2.
- Cornwell, T. B. & Maignan, I. (1998). An international review of sponsorship research, *Journal of Advertising* 27(1), 1-21.

Crawford, G. (2004). Consuming Sport: Fans, Sport and Culture. International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship, 6(2), pp.47-62.

Dean, D. H. (2004). Evaluating potential brand associations through conjoint analysis and market simulation. Journal of Product and Brand Management, 13(7), pp. 506–513.

Easterby-Smith, M., Thorpe, R. & Jackson, P, R. (2015). Management and Business Research. Fifth edition. SAGE Publication Ltd.

European Commission (2019). “Data protection” *Rules for the protection of personal data inside and outside the EU* Available at:

https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/law-topic/data-protection_en [Accessed at 05.05.2019]

Freeman, G. & Wohn, D. (2017). Understanding eSports Team Formation and Coordination. *Computer Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW)*, 28(1-2), pp.95-126.

Funk, D., Pizzo, A. & Baker, B. (2018). eSport management: Embracing eSport education and research opportunities. *Sport Management Review*, 21(1), pp.7-13.

Fuschillo, G. (2016). “Beyond the Market: The Sociential Influence of Fandoms” In Consumer Culture Theory. pp. 169-192.

Fuschillo, G. (2018). Fans, fandoms, or fanaticism? *Journal of Consumer Culture*. pp. 1-19.

General Data Protection Regulation (2019). Available online: <https://gdpr-info.eu/> [Accessed: 16.4.2019]

Guba, E. G. (1990). The alternative paradigm dialog. In E. G. Guba (Ed.), *The paradigm dialog*. pp. 17–30. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE.

Gwinner, K. & Bennett, G. (2008). The Impact of Brand Cohesiveness and Sport Identification on Brand Fit in a Sponsorship Context. *Journal of Sport Management*, 22(4), pp.410-426.

Haig, B., D. (2005). An Abductive Theory of Scientific Method. *Psychological Methods* 2005, Vol.10, No.4, pp. 371 – 388.

Hamari, J. & Sjöblom, M., (2017). What is eSports and why do people watch it? *Internet Research*, 27(2), pp. 211-232.

International Events Group (2000). “Year One of IRL Title Builds Traffic, Awareness for Northern Light,” IEG Sponsorship Report, 19 (23), 1,3.

Jenkins, H. (1992). *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Jenkins, H., Ford, S. & Green, J. (2013). *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*. New York; London: NYU Press.

Jenny, S. E., Manning, R. D., Keiper, M. C. & Olrich, T. W. (2016). Virtual(ly) Athletes: Where eSports Fit Within the Definition of “Sport.” *Quest*, 69(1), pp. 1–18.

Jin, D. J. (2010). *Korea’s Online Gaming Empire*, The MIT press, Cambridge, Massachusetts

Jonasson, K. & Thiborg, J. (2010). Electronic sport and its impact on future sport. *Sport in Society*, 13(2), pp. 287 - 299.

Keiper, M., Manning, R., Jenny, S., Olrich, T. & Croft, C. (2017). No reason to LoL at LoL: the addition of esports to intercollegiate athletic departments. *Journal for the Study of Sports and Athletes in Education*, 11(2), pp.143-160.

Keller, K. (2013). *Strategic Brand Management*. 4th ed. Pearson, p.44.

King, N. (2004). Using Templates in the Thematic Analysis of Text, Essential Guide to Qualitative Methods in Organizational Research. London: Sage, pp. 256–70.

Ko, Y., Chang, Y., Park, C. and Herbst, F. (2016). Determinants of consumer attitude toward corporate sponsors: A comparison between a profit and nonprofit sport event sponsorship. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, 16(2), pp. 176-186.

Koo, J. & Lee, Y. (2018). Sponsor-event congruence effects: The moderating role of sport involvement and mediating role of sponsor attitudes. *Sport Management Review*, 22(2), pp.222-234.

Kresse, C. (2016). 43 million unique viewers reached throughout League of Legends World Championships 2016. eSports Marketing Blog. Available at: <http://esports-marketing->

blog.com/43-million-unique-viewers-reached-throughout-league-legends-world-championship-2016/#.WHzy21MrJQI [Accessed 02.05.2019]

Lee, D. & Schoenstedt, L. J., (2011) Comparison of eSports and Traditional Sports Consumption Motives. Journal of Research. Vol. 6. Issue 2. pp. 39-44.

Macey, J. & Hamari, J. (2018). Investigating relationships between video gaming, spectating esports, and gambling. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 80, pp.344-353.

MacKenzie, S. B. & Lutz, R. J. (1989). An empirical examination of the structural antecedents of attitude toward the ad in an advertising pretesting context. *Journal of Marketing*, 53, 48–65.

Mazodier, M. & Quester, P. (2014). The role of sponsorship fit for changing brand affect: A latent growth modeling approach. *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 31(1), pp.16-29.

Meenaghan, T. (1991). The Role of Sponsorship in the Marketing Communications Mix, *International Journal of Advertising*, 10:1, pp. 35-47.

Meenaghan, T. (2001). Understanding sponsorship effects. *Psychology and Marketing* , 18(2), pp. 95-122.

Merriam-webster.com (2019). “Ubiquity”. Online dictionary. Available online: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ubiquity> [Accessed: 04.04.2019]

Musante, M., Milne, G. & McDonald, M. (1999). Sport Sponsorship: Evaluating the Sport and Brand Image Match. *International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship*, 1(1), pp.24-39.

Newzoo.com (2017). “2017 Global eSports Market Report”: Trends, Revenues, and Audience toward 2020. Available at:

https://asociacionempresarialesports.es/wp-content/uploads/newzoo_free_2017_global_esports_market_report.pdf [Accessed 2.3.2019]

Newzoo.com (2018). Free global Esports market report. Available at:
https://asociacionempresarialesports.es/wp-content/uploads/newzoo_2018_global_esports_marketing_report_excerpt.pdf [Accessed 3.3.2019]

Newzoo.com (2019). Global Esports market report. Available at:
https://resources.newzoo.com/hubfs/Reports/2019_Free_Global_Esports_Market_Report.pdf
[Accessed 4.3.2019]

Nielsen Report (2017). The Esports Playbook: Maximizing your investment through understanding the fans. *The Nielsen Company*, vol 1, pp.1-36.

Nilsson, M. (2019) Lecture 1: Introduction Qualitative Research, BUSR31, PowerPoint presentation, LUSEM Lund, 16th of January 2019.

Nvivo software (2019). Available online:
<https://www.qsrinternational.com/nvivo/nvivo-products> [Accessed 5.5.2019]

Paasi, A. (2002). Place and region: regional worlds and words. *Progress in Human Geography*, 26(6), pp.802-811.

Paasi, A. (2003). Region and place: regional identity in question. *Progress in Human Geography*, 27(4), pp.475-485.

Patton, M., Q. (2002). Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods. Third Edition. Thousand Oaks.

Pizzo, A. & Funk, D. (2017). eSport vs. sport: A comparison of consumer motives. Paper presented at the meeting of the North American Society for Sport Management (NASSM).

Pizzo, A., Baker, B., Na, S., Lee, M., Kim, D. & Funk, D. (2018). eSports vs Sport: A Comparison of Spectator Motives. *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, 27(2), pp.108-123.

Rifon, N., Choi, S., Trimble, C. & Li, H. (2004). Congruence Effects in Sponsorship: The Mediating Role of Sponsor Credibility and Consumer Attributions of Sponsor Motive. *Journal of Advertising*, 33(1), pp.30-42.

Ryan, G, W. & Bernard, H, R. (2003). Techniques to Identify Themes. *Field Methods* 15 (1): pp.85-109.

Saldaña, J. (2013). The coding manual for qualitative researchers. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Saunders, M., Lewis, P. & Thornhill, A. (2009). Research Methods for Business Students. 5th edition. Prentice Hall.

Saunders, M., Lewis, P. & Thornhill, A. (2016). Research Methods for Business Students 7th edition. Harlow: Pearson.

Seo, Y. (2013). Electronic sports: A new marketing landscape of the experience economy. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 29(13/14) pp. 1542-1560.

Seo, Y. & Jung, S. (2016). Beyond solitary play in computer games: The social practices of eSports. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 16(3), pp. 635-655.

Smith, G. (2004). Brand image transfer through sponsorship: A consumer learning perspective. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 20 (3/4), pp. 457–474.

Speed, R. & Thompson, P. (2000). Determinants of Sports Sponsorship Response. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 28(2), pp.226-238.

Spinrad, W. (1981). The function of spectator sports. In Lüschen, G. R. F. & Sage, G. H. (Eds.), *Handbook of social science of sport: With an international classified bibliography*. Champaign, IL: Stipes Publishing Company. Pp. 354-365

Statista.com (2019a). eSports market revenue worldwide from 2012 to 2022 (in million U.S. dollars). Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/490522/global-esports-market-revenue/> [Accessed 29.3.2019]

Statista.com (2019b). eSports audience size worldwide from 2012 to 2022, by type of viewers (in millions). Available at:

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/490480/global-esports-audience-size-viewer-type/> [Accessed 29.3.2019]

Statista.com (2019c). Global sponsorship spending from 2007 to 2018 (in billion U.S. dollars) Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/196864/global-sponsorship-spending-since-2007/> [Accessed at 29.3.2019]

Ströh, J. (2017). The eSports Market and eSports Sponsoring. Tectum Verlag, p.13.

theScoreesports.com (2017) Esports meets mainstream: Looking back on Bud Light's failed entry into esports one year later. Available at:

<https://www.thescoreesports.com/news/14165-esports-meets-mainstream-looking-back-on-bud-lights-failed-entry-into-esports-one-year-later?fbclid=IwAR0srC7ziEvANGywBVdlxUm9rVoHirhQoanna99pXvRJALcvGl8Ibqf5DbQ> [Accessed 25.4.2019]

Timmermans, S. & Tavory, I. (2012). Theory Construction in Qualitative Research : From Grounded Theory to Abductive Analysis. *Sociological Theory* 2012 No 30 pp. 167-186.

Wagner, M. (2006). On the Scientific Relevance of eSports. Las Vegas, ICOMP 2006.

Whitman Syracuse University (2019). “With Viewership and Revenue Booming, Esports Set to Compete with Traditional Sports” (Online) Available at:

https://onlinebusiness.syr.edu/blog/esports-to-compete-with-traditional-sports/?fbclid=IwAR2nNRgzes6q3qGVkr0FRNELdo_h0pVad2pukEhP-sx2aVHMcHDIIGJitLo [Accessed at 11.5.2019]

Witkowski, E. (2012). On the Digital Playing Field. *Games and Culture*, 7(5), pp.349-374.

Woisetschläger, D. M. & Haselhoff, V. J. (2009). ‘The name remains the same for fans — Why fans oppose naming right sponsorships’, *Advances in Consumer Research*, Vol.(36), pp. 2-28

Woisetschläger, D.M., Eiting, A., Haselhoff, V. & Michaelis, M. (2010). Determinants and consequences of sponsorship fit: A study of fan perceptions. *Journal of Sponsorship*, 3(2), pp.169-180.

Woisetschläger, D.M ., Haselhoff, J. V. & Backhaus, C. (2014). Fans’ resistance to naming right sponsorships. *European Journal of Marketing*, 48(7/8), pp.1487-1510.

Zdravkovic, S. & Till, B. D. (2012). Enhancing brand image via sponsorship. *International Journal of Advertising*, 31(1), pp.113–132.

Appendix A - Interview guide

Short Introduction

General Question:

- 1) How do you consume eSports? (Streams/attend events/play)?
- 2) What type of Esports genre do you consume? How often? Have you ever been part of eSports team?
- 3) Why do you follow those genres particularly?
- 4) What type of Esport competitions are you interested in? Why these competitions?
- 5) While consuming eSports, can you recall any sponsors in the eSports environment?

Perceived benefits:

- 6) What are your thoughts (your feelings) of sponsors entering into eSports? Such as sponsoring teams/players/ events?
- 7) Why do you believe that sponsors are entering into the eSports scene?
- 8) What are your thoughts about the eSports scene getting out of the sponsorships?
- 9) What might be the benefits of the sponsorship for eSports / what might be the negatives of the sponsorship for eSports?

Regional identification:

- 10) Can you mention eSports team that you follow more than other, and why?
 - Do you believe that your origin/ current state of residence has an influence of the team you support?
- 11) Do you believe that sponsor's origin (town/country/continent) affect the sponsorships fit when they are sponsoring a specific players, a team, or an events?
 - Does it make the sponsorship fit more successful in your opinion?
- 12) Picture this situation, a eSports event is held in your country where for instance, a beer company is the main sponsor of the event, and is also from your country.
 - How do you feel about the sponsor-event fit?
 - What might be the benefit for this kind of regional sponsorship?
 - What might be the negatives for this kind of regional sponsorship?13) Picture this situation, a eSports event is held in your country where for instance, a beer company is the main sponsor of the event, and it is not from your country.
 - How do you feel about the sponsor-event fit?
 - What might be the benefit for this kind of regional sponsorship?
 - What might be the negatives for this kind of regional sponsorship?

Credibility:

- 14) In your opinion, what makes a sponsor in eSports more authentic / credible than other sponsors in eSports?

- For example; there are two companies sponsoring an event/team/player (Mercedes Benz and Honda), which one would you see as more credible sponsor in eSports, and why?
- 15) Does the product/service behind the brand make the sponsor more credible in eSports, if yes/if no why is that?

Ubiquity:

- 16) Can you mention any organization who are sponsoring in various guises (such as through; events, teams, tournaments, and broadcasting platforms) in eSports and are as well noticeable sponsoring other sports?
- 17) What are your thoughts about brand/organizations sponsoring various sports events, and now entering into the eSports scene as well?
 - What do you think, that their intentions might be?

Association:

- 18) Can you describe (or do you have an example of) certain companies/organizations acting as a sponsors in eSports which are more fitting than others?
 - Such as hardware company vs. beer company, and why?
- 19) What makes a non-endemic company a good sponsor for a eSports scene?

Appendix B – Overview of the coding process

Themes	Codes	2 nd layer Coding	Quotes	Respondents
Perceived benefit	Positivity	Industry expansion	<i>“without sponsors there would not be any eSports tournaments [...] basically, I can conclude that sponsors are lifeline for eSports teams and the whole scene”</i>	Respondent D
			<i>“Because it makes the environment more professional, and it puts the eSports towards the same level as general sports, I think also that it makes the players more professional and the whole environment more spectate friendly and overall more professional”</i>	Respondent A
			<i>“I have positive image about sponsors [...] there are some brands that I did not really have any opinion towards before, but my thoughts about the sponsor changed in a positive way after they got engaged with the scene.”</i>	Respondent D

Regional identification	Debatable	Country fit	<p><i>"But then again, as I watched the Blast Pros series in Madrid this spring, I noticed a sponsor which I had never seen before, and of course blast pro series is international, so I felt that the fit was not there initially since I did not understand the brand or what service or product it represented, but after my observation on the tournament I noticed that it was a Spanish beer company so the fit was evident."</i></p>	Respondent D
			<p><i>I know that for instance, ENCE has non-hardware industry sponsors from Finland, so obviously for me as a Finn, the fit is there but for outsiders (people from abroad) they might not understand the fit at all.</i></p>	Respondent F
			<p><i>"sponsors are more personal with the team they sponsor since, they are from the same town or country"</i></p>	Respondent B
	Market availability		<p><i>"No I still think the country of origin does not make that much difference in my opinion, as long as the product is sold in my country"</i></p>	Respondent E
			<p><i>"Of course, it is natural that e.g. beer brand is sponsoring an event from the same country, from where you are able to buy it"</i></p>	Respondent D

Credibility	Engagement	Longevity	<i>"For example, if the sponsor has been there when eSports have had its downswings and upswings, and been there for long time, I would perceive it more authentic"</i>	Respondent A
			<i>"For me, probably how long the sponsors have been involved in eSports, if it is a company that is just new to the scene and just pushing their products, has less impact on me as being credible, than the ones that have been there the last years"</i>	Respondent E
	Intentions		<i>"For me it is not the product that are credible it is more how they are involved in the scene, like supporting the industry by having giveaways, or some kind of activation for the fans."</i>	Respondent E
			<i>"when it comes to the brand's credibility, the company has to really understand where they are and what's going on in this eSports environment, and not just put the company logo everywhere just because 'you have to be there', but to be present and bring some kind of activation for the fans, like through the product or service behind the sponsor"</i>	Respondent D

			<p><i>"the sponsor has to be relevant and it must be suitable for target audience, therefore the audience can feel it as a good fit. The sponsoring company has to "give something" to the audience and to the event/tournament."</i></p>	Respondent D
Ubiquity	Favorable	Commitment	<p><i>"big positive impact, getting big companies, like in football, getting big sponsors bring big pulling power for the scene"</i></p>	Respondent E
			<p><i>"I would say Red bull I feel like they sponsor everywhere!, I think it is good, because it indicates that eSports is becoming more mainstream"</i></p>	Respondent B
			<p><i>"I would think that Red Bull thinks a lot of their brand, and if they are trying to connect with players, teams and events is good [...] I think that this is very good for the eSports scene, to get so big sponsors, and that such an international brand is coming in means that eSports is worth investing in"</i></p>	Respondent F
Association	Relevance	Product & service attributes	<p><i>"the equipment, Logitech, razer, those ones specifically resonate more in me, for me the sponsors should be the ones that go more hand in hand with gaming community"</i></p>	Respondent E

		<p><i>"Well, for example these equipment and component manufacturing companies; Nvidia, INTEL, Logitech, BenQ, and Sennheiser are more fitting to eSports obviously. Almost every eSports team has a sponsor from such kind of hardware industry"</i></p>	Respondent D
	Creative Link	<p><i>"Well, I think that the sponsor is more authentic when there is clear link with the eSports scene or a purpose why they are there, the company has to show that they understand what they are doing, and to whom they are promoting their products/services"</i></p>	Respondent F
		<p><i>"I think there has to be some creativity, [...] when it comes to younger audience, you really have to find ways to connect with them, especially for instance if a non-connected company is thinking of sponsoring eSports"</i></p>	Respondent B

Appendix C – Nvivo 12 coding notes

