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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Navigating the 'wild west': governance challenges and solutions in (un)healthy esports sponsorship

Matthew Hutchinson [iD][a], Qi Peng [iD][b] and Leah Gillooly [iD][b]

aKeele Business School, Keele University, Newcastle-under-Lyme, UK; bFaculty of Business & Law, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK

ABSTRACT

Esports sponsorship lacks an overarching governance framework, particularly regarding the involvement of unhealthy brands. Building on previous literature on sport governance, this study aims to identify the governance challenges presented by unhealthy brands in esports sponsorship and explore how esports sponsorship might best be governed. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with UK-based esports players ($n = 11$) and fans ($n = 10$), this study offers original insights into esports sponsorship governance, revealing a thin and '*wild west*' governance landscape, characterised by a vulnerable financial structure, imbalanced power nexus and a lack of stakeholder representation. Findings highlight that despite concerns about the involvement of unhealthy brands, key stakeholders such as players and fans feel somewhat powerless to influence sponsorship decision-making due to the overreliance of esports on sponsorship revenue. In response, an integrated governance model comprising a multistakeholder approach and individual responsibilisation is proposed to address the challenges. Within such a model, individuals have responsibility for their own consumption choices, but this should be supported by education around healthy consumption of sponsor products and services. Another key feature of this proposed governance model is the representation of all key stakeholders within the sponsorship decision-making process. Consequently, policy makers are recommended to not bluntly remove or ban certain esports sponsorships but learn to trust and empower individuals to make responsible decisions, alongside introducing education initiatives to ensure that sufficient knowledge is provided for informed and guided choices.

Introduction

In 2022 the global esports market was valued at $1.384 billion, a figure expected to grow to $1.866 billion by 2025 (Statista 2023a). Sponsorship provides by far the largest proportion of this revenue, contributing $837 million in 2022 (Statista 2023b). This reliance on sponsorship revenue exposes a key financial vulnerability of the industry. Alongside this, the infancy of esports, characterised by volatility in terms of tournaments, teams and players, limited knowledge of the esports ecosystem from potential sponsors, and a lack of standardisation and regulation (Freitas 2023), underscores the importance of understanding the dynamics and governance of sponsorship in esports.

The financial precarity and reliance on sponsorship has led many esports teams and tournaments to welcome with open arms a vast array of non-endemic sponsors seeking to connect with the lucrative and hard to reach esports consumer market (Huettermann *et al.* 2023). Prominent among these non-endemic sponsors are so-called unhealthy brands in sectors such as fast food (Byrum 2022), alcohol (Kelly and Van der Leij 2021) and gambling (Biggar *et al.* 2023, Mangat *et al.* 2023). While undoubtedly bringing in important revenue, the growing prevalence of these brands in esports has drawn scrutiny within the public health sphere (e.g. Greer *et al.* 2021, Marchica *et al.* 2021, Biggar *et al.* 2023). There are concerns that these brands might exacerbate health issues raised within esports including sedentary behaviour, problem gambling and poor mental health (Wattanapisit *et al.* 2020). These fears have led tournaments, like the League of Legends tournament LEC, to ban certain sponsor product categories like gambling companies, cryptocurrencies, political campaigns and several alcohol products (Esports Insider 2023b).

Currently, the regulation of sponsorship within esports is piecemeal, as tournaments and teams devise their own rules, with no discernible standardisation between them. To counter this inconsistency, there are calls for an 'overarching regulatory framework for esports', including rules on sponsorship (Chambers 2020, p. 145), yet existing esports associations perhaps lack the legitimacy to achieve this (Peng *et al.* 2020, Wong and Meng-Lewis 2023). Given these challenges, this study adopts an exploratory qualitative approach to address the following research questions:

- What governance challenges are presented by the involvement of unhealthy brands in esports sponsorship?
- How might sponsorship in esports best be governed?

Much extant work on esports has focused on the views of sponsorship and/or team managers (e.g. Finch *et al.* 2020, Freitas 2023) and fans (Kim *et al.* 2018, Huettermann *et al.* 2023), with the latter largely approached through large-scale surveys. The voices of esports participants have been largely absent from extant research (Koronios *et al.* 2022). Responding to calls for greater representation and involvement of fans and players in addressing issues of governance and reform (Geeraert *et al.* 2014, García and Welford 2015), the present study captures the voice of UK-based fans and professional esports players, through a series of semi-structured interviews. Players frequently display sponsor logos on clothing and may be required to engage in sponsor-led activation activities. However, their voice has, thus far, been neglected in the literature on esports sponsorship. The interpretivist, qualitative approach adopted in this study allows for a deeper understanding of the tensions, complexities, and differing realities of esports players and fans as regards attitudes towards governance in relation to (un)healthy sponsors.

To this end, the paper advances two key contributions. First, consistent with the work of Peng *et al.* (2020), we reveal a fragmented esports governance landscape, characterised by imbalanced power dynamics and a lack of stakeholder representation. Specifically, the over-reliance of esports on sponsorship revenue means that sponsorship from unhealthy brands is often justified to ensure the continued financial survival and growth of the industry. Within this landscape, players and fans express concerns over the involvement of unhealthy brands as sponsors but feel somewhat powerless to influence sponsorship decision-making.

To overcome the challenge of how best to govern esports sponsorship, a *multi-stakeholder approach* will be required. However, consistent with *individual responsibilisation* models of governance, our findings also reveal support for a model based on free choice, supported by education around healthy consumption. We therefore propose an integrated governance model of individual responsibilisation with light regulation, to encourage healthy and balanced consumer choices while permitting involvement from unhealthy sponsors to provide valuable financial support for esports. The proposal of this model of governance represents our second contribution.

Literature review

Sponsorship and esports

In traditional sport, sponsorship is of strategic importance to sports organisations in terms of generating an overall competitive advantage in the market (Koronios *et al*. 2021). Similarly, commercial sponsorship has played a key role in the development of esports organisations (Finch *et al*. 2020, Scelles *et al*. 2021) and is a primary source of revenue for many esports properties (Wong and Meng-Lewis 2023). In return, esports offer a host of sponsorship platforms through which brands can reach this sought-after segment of consumers, including esports players (Lehnert *et al*. 2022), teams (Huettermann *et al*. 2023), leagues (Chambers 2020), and events (Rogers *et al*. 2020). The earliest esports sponsorships were largely by brands endemic to the esports sector (Wong and Meng-Lewis 2023). Endemic sponsors are those where the sponsor's products are associated with a particular market (Huettermann *et al*. 2023). Esports examples include technology brands such as Alienware, Intel and Logitech. However, esports are increasingly attracting sponsorship from large non-endemic brands (i.e. brands not directly associated with esports) such as Mercedes-Benz, Adidas and Coca-Cola, who view esports as an attractive arena to reach young, tech-savvy consumers who might be hard to reach through traditional sports sponsorship (Buser *et al*. 2019, Finch *et al*. 2020, Wong and Meng-Lewis 2023). Esports fans are often passionate in their support of esports players (Finch *et al*. 2020) and thus esports sponsorship represents a strong platform for audience engagement (Buser *et al*. 2019, Finch *et al*. 2020, Cuesta-Valiño *et al*. 2022).

Of notable focus within esports literature has been the exploration of sponsorship effectiveness for endemic versus non-endemic brands (Rogers *et al*. 2020, Huettermann and Pizzo 2022). Endemic sponsors are viewed as more credible than non-endemic sponsors by esports fans, with non-endemic brands seen as having a lower level of fit with esports. This, in turn, leads to more favourable attitudes towards endemic sponsors among esports audiences (Rogers *et al*. 2020). Esports fans can be hostile towards sponsors who they observe as trying to exploit them for commercial gain (Huettermann *et al*. 2023) but are open to sponsors who they perceive to be adding value to the esports industry and community (Finch *et al*. 2020, Freitas *et al*. 2021). One notable point of departure from traditional sports sponsorship is the contribution fans like to see from esports sponsors. While in traditional sports, the focus has increasingly turned to delivering added value to fans through sponsorship activation (Dreisbach *et al*. 2021, Koronios, Ntasis and Dimitropoulos 2022), esports fans also want to see sponsors contributing to the wider esports industry and community (Freitas *et al*. 2021). This expectation to help the esports industry to grow may be reflective of the relative infancy of esports, but represents, nonetheless, an important point of note for brands seeking to sponsor esports.

Echoing the situation in traditional sports, esports are increasingly being sponsored by unhealthy non-endemic brands, with Kelly (2019, p. 791) describing this exposure as 'pervasive and unregulated'. Much of the work in this field, like in traditional sport, is derived from a health and harm perspective (Chambers 2020, Marchica *et al*. 2021, Greer *et al*. 2021, Biggar *et al*. 2023, Mangat *et al*. 2023), with particular concerns held for the younger population, who are a key audience within esports (Marchica *et al*. 2021, Macey *et al*. 2021, Biggar *et al*. 2023). Such health issues include mental health problems, sedentary behaviour, drug use, gambling (Wattanapisit *et al*. 2020), unhealthy diets and increased consumption of sugary drinks (Chan *et al*. 2022). Notably, many fans and players of esports are under the legal drinking age (Chambers 2020), and studies have found evidence of a link between exposure to alcohol sponsorship in esports and alcohol consumption (Kelly and Van der Leij 2021).

In addition, there has been increasing concern around potential harm to esports audiences through exposure to gambling sponsorship (Valdez 2023), particularly for younger fans

(Biggar *et al*. 2023). In particular, esports betting has been found to be associated with problem gambling (Greer *et al*. 2021), notably among adolescents (Marchica *et al*. 2021, Hing *et al*. 2022). Clearly the cost-benefit trade-offs involved in accepting sponsorship from unhealthy brands raise questions of governance for the esports industry. It is thus to the subject of sponsorship and governance that we now turn.

Sponsorship and governance in esports

Esports are facing a range of governance challenges, including unregulated gambling, doping, as well as concerns over the physical and mental health of participants (Kelly *et al*. 2022). This has led to calls from a public health perspective for greater esports regulation covering sponsorship, promotion (Chambers 2020) and betting (Marchica *et al*. 2021). As mentioned above, in some cases, esports leagues have chosen to prohibit sponsorship by certain brands, but as yet there is no industry-wide regulation of sponsorship within esports. Notably, there seems to be a reluctance among esports teams and publishers to impose restrictions, with concerns for the impact on all-important sponsorship revenues (Chambers 2020). Thus, when deciding on whether and how to implement greater regulation of sponsorship in esports, legislators and managers need to balance public health concerns with the potential benefits that sponsorship investment can bring to esports. For example, esports could be leveraged as a platform for health promotion education among young audiences (Chan *et al*. 2022). These arguments underpin the need for our study, to inform future decisions regarding the implementation of governance policies or frameworks relating to esports sponsorship.

As with other emerging technological fields such as biotechnology and artificial intelligence (Ulnicane *et al*. 2021, Djeffal *et al*. 2022), a key governance challenge for policymakers in esports is the dominant role of big technology companies (e.g. game publishers) due to their underlying intellectual property ownership. This leads to power and resources being concentrated in their hands (Peng *et al*. 2020, Ulnicane *et al*. 2021). Other stakeholders such as states, players, or fans therefore have very limited influence on how esports should be developed and/or governed. Recent research suggested that despite attempts made by certain esports stakeholders such as league organisers, international esports organisations and even third-party organisations to regulate the industry (Peng *et al*. 2020), esports governance is still very fragmented and, in most cases, seems to be caught in between limited stakeholder network governance and individual responsiblisation.

Models of governance

Network governance refers to the structural arrangement where a variety of stakeholders in a network defuse conflict among themselves and create broad consensus on policies, contributing to the co-delivery of public services (Wang and Ran 2023). Network governance is based on the principles of trust, reciprocity, negotiation, and mutual interdependence amongst stakeholders (Provan and Kenis 2008). Managing stakeholders' interests within a network is well studied in sports (e.g. Ferkins and Shilbury 2015; Chappelet and Mrkonjic 2019; Parent et al. 2023). Geeraert *et al*. (2014) focused on stakeholder representation in sports organisations and argued that stakeholders such as fans and players play an important role in promoting reform. Consequently, there has been an increased interest in the good governance of sport over the past decade that calls for broader fans' representation in decision-making positions in sport to address governance issues (García and Welford 2015, Hums and MacLean 2018). Equally, Thibault *et al*. (2010) argued that athletes' involvement and participation in deliberations and decision-making meetings could improve the accountability of sports organisations, especially in relation to protecting the interests of these most vulnerable stakeholders in the sports system. Nonetheless, there appears to be a lack of mechanism (or incentive) that facilitates dialogues between these stakeholders and focal organisations (e.g. clubs or federations) (Donnelly 2015, Hoye *et al*. 2023). Moreover, literature suggests that managing

multiple stakeholders' interests in a network is not straightforward, as some may focus on economic gains while others are concerned about non-economic outcomes (Amis *et al*. 2020). In addition, Houlihan (2013, p. 186) pointed out that 'not all stakeholder groups are (a) active in pursuing their collective interests; (b) aware that they have a collective interest; or (c) willing to accept that they share a common interest'. This insight may explain the reason why esports players and fans do not necessarily have a voice in esports governance.

Conversely, individual responsibilisation is a form of governance, stemming from neoliberalism (O'Malley 2009), which indicates that citizens should take responsibility for their lives and their communities (Peeters 2013). Enabling individuals' independence and empowerment, individual responsibilisation entails a new concept of governance, which emphasises autonomous and responsible individuals, freely choosing how to behave and act (Miller and Rose 2008). The term denotes a shift from traditional state-citizen relations, i.e. with a representative government, to an 'advanced' liberal form of citizen-subject relations, imbued with specific civil rights and a new-found sense of collective loyalty and responsibility to contributing to society (Trnka and Trundle 2014, p. 137). It highlights the importance of individual choice, freedom, and responsibility with the government playing a role from afar (Crawshaw 2012, Taylor-Gooby and Leruth 2018). As Freeman and Napier (2009), p. 403) suggested, 'a responsiblised society does not see individuals as socially situated but as autonomous actors making choices that determine their lives'. The term has been extended to consumer responsibilisation, which is the awareness of the environmental, health, and societal implications of consumption choices (Giesler and Veresiu 2014). The approach sees prescriptive moral regulations from the top-down shunned in favour of freedom-of-choice models, which are accompanied by a variety of moral guidelines, codes of conduct, and nonbinding rules (Giesler and Veresiu 2014, Pyysiäinen *et al*. 2017). Responsibilisation argues that traditional institutions alone are insufficient for governing society, and effective interventions in actual civic processes are deemed necessary (Peeters 2013). Given the critical challenges existing in the esports governance, i.e. the lack of regulation from government or other agencies to protect the wellbeing of the esports community (Kelly *et al*. 2022), the notion of individual responsibilisation potentially offers insights or solutions to esports sponsorship governance.

Methodology

Driven by the exploratory nature of the research questions, this study adopts an interpretivist qualitative research design, allowing for rich, 'thick' phenomenological insights (Geertz 1973) to emerge. Responding to calls for qualitative research among key stakeholders to explore the opportunities and challenges to improving esports governance (Kelly *et al*. 2022), this allows us to deeply explore the lived experiences of esports players and fans from their own perspectives (Hair *et al*. 2019).

Participants

Fans and players were the identified participants of this study. Regarding fans, prior work has revealed that esports fans tend to be 'primarily tech-savvy and affluent young adults' (Huettermann and Pizzo 2022, p. 1) and largely male (Alivia 2021), but the esports fanbase is ever growing and becoming increasingly diverse in terms of age and gender (Colormatics 2023). Inclusion criteria for fans were that they must: be over 18; self-identify as a fan of at least one professional esports team; and live in the UK. In the case of players, key inclusion criteria were that they must be over 18; class themselves as a competitive esports player (consistent with the definition of Cunningham *et al*. (2018), i.e. competing or competed in high-level tournament level interactive video gaming); be based in the UK; and have been in receipt of payment linked to playing of esports (prize money, sponsorship, expenses, salary).

Consistent with previous esports fan research (e.g. Tang *et al.* 2022, Barney and Pennington 2023), esports fans were recruited via social media (X and Discord) using purposive and convenience sampling techniques (Gray 2014). Specifically, players were sought by searching X for 'Esports player'. The identified players were then either contacted via email or via X's messaging service. In addition, snowball sampling techniques were used for both fans and players among early participants. While we acknowledge that this sampling approach may have contributed to a homogeneity in perspectives and responses, the intention was not to select interviewees to be representative of all esports fans (Bryman and Bell 2011), but rather to include those with relevant experiences as guided by the research questions.

Regarding the UK focus, the UK government has expressed optimism over the potential for esports to become an area of national strength (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport 2020). Furthermore, it is a growing esports market, with a number of esports venues and teams based in cities across the nation (Esports Insider 2023). Given these current and future market conditions and the desire for our findings to impact policymakers, this study focused on UK-based respondents. Having said that, we acknowledge that UK-based esports fans and players cannot fully represent the global esports community in their perceptions of (un)healthy sponsorship. However, it is not in our intention to generalise our findings. Instead, we position this study as the first exploratory study of governance in the esports sponsorship landscape and as will be discussed, there is potential to replicate this research in other developed and emerging esports markets to explore how attitudes towards sponsorship governance may differ.

Interview procedures

Prior to the interviews, all participants were provided with a participant information sheet and given the opportunity to ask questions before signing a consent form confirming their willingness to participate in the research. Semi-structured interviews were guided by a series of questions and prompts, beginning with a discussion of respondents' respective esports journeys. For fans, the interviews then moved on to explore their knowledge, understanding of and attitudes towards (un)healthy sponsorships in esports. Building from this, discussions moved to explore fans' perspectives on the nature of and need for greater governance and regulation of sponsorship in esports. For players, interviews explored their perceptions of what constitutes (un)healthy sponsorships in esports, their attitude towards accepting sponsorship from brands they might perceive as unhealthy, and their views on the need for and nature of regulation and governance surrounding esports sponsorship. In all cases, follow-up questions and probes were included where appropriate to unpick emerging, prominent, interesting or topical issues. This interview approach allowed us to deeply explore how and why participants feel and engage the way they do (Gratton and Jones 2010) and unearth findings that may otherwise have remained hidden, resulting in a more comprehensive exploration of aspects of the research questions that were most salient to respondents (Bryman 2004).

In total, 11 esports players and 10 esports fans were interviewed. Table 1 provides key demographic information for all participants. Interviews were carried out via Microsoft Teams and took place during September and October 2023, lasting between 42 and 69 minutes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim for subsequent analysis.

Data analysis

Guided by the research questions, we undertook an inductive and iterative form of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2022). Each researcher initially undertook the first three steps of reflexive thematic analysis – dataset familiarisation, data coding, and initial theme generation. In doing this, it is important to acknowledge that our prior knowledge of theory and literature may, to some extent, have influenced our coding of the data at this stage (Smith and McGannon 2018). In recognition of the importance of confirmability in qualitative research (Lincoln and Guba 1982), the researchers subsequently met to discuss, clarify, and negotiate emergent themes from the data. This process of

Table 1. An overview of participants in this study.

Participant name	Age	Gender
Fan 1	19	Male
Fan 2	18	Male
Fan 3	24	Male
Fan 4	27	Male
Fan 5	19	Female
Fan 6	23	Male
Fan 7	26	Male
Fan 8	24	Female
Fan 9	24	Male
Fan 10	22	Female
Player 1	33	Female
Player 2	40	Female
Player 3	26	Male
Player 4	29	Male
Player 5	48	Male
Player 6	20	Male
Player 7	21	Female
Player 8	19	Male
Player 9	20	Male
Player 10	24	Female
Player 11	23	Male

Theme 1: Challenges for esports sponsorship governance
- Over-reliance on sponsorship financially
- A '*wild west*' situation
- Imbalanced power nexus

Theme 2: Solutions to esports sponsorship governance
- A concerted governance approach with all esports stakeholders (e.g., parents, governments, sponsors, players, fans, publishers, tournament organiser)
- Individual responsiblisation

Figure 1. An overview of the themes and sub-themes emerged from the data.

collective analysis represented the fourth and fifth steps of reflexive thematic analysis, namely theme development and review, and theme refining, defining and naming. Through this iterative process, two key themes emerged: challenges and solutions for esports sponsorship governance, with sub-themes identified within. These are outlined in Figure 1. The resultant findings are presented and discussed below.

Findings and discussion

Echoing extant literature on esports sponsorship, product categories such as alcohol (Chambers 2020, Kelly and Van der Leij 2021), drugs (Wattanapisit *et al*. 2020), gambling (Biggar *et al*. 2023, Mangat *et al*. 2023), and junk foods (Byrum 2022) were identified as 'unhealthy' by participants within this study. Specifically, respondents found product categories that promoted physical or mental harm and those with a legal age restriction as problematic. Similar to work in traditional sports sponsorship (Bunn *et al*. 2019, Gonzalez *et al*. 2020), some respondents argued to regulate unhealthy brands in esports. However, these views were not universal, revealing a complex picture of governance challenges in esports sponsorship.

Esports sponsorship governance challenges

Demonstrating their awareness of the significance of sponsorship as a revenue stream for the esports ecosystem, participants highlighted how the esports industry has been *over-reliant on sponsorship financially* due to the need to grow, and this over-reliance has thereby compromised and jeopardised the integrity and reputation of the industry. Mirroring the findings of Gillooly *et al.* (2021) regarding fans' reluctant acceptance of stadia naming rights sponsorship unless a deal generated sufficient revenue to the club, our findings reveal a pragmatic attitude towards accepting sponsorship from unhealthy brands. Fans and players acknowledge this conflict between reality and ideality, with the survival and growth of the industry influencing sponsorship decision-making in esports (Scelles *et al.* 2021):

> We were very new starting out in the space, so our priority was to get something on the jersey rather than nothing at all. In terms of that, we were 'beggars can't be choosers'. (Player 3)

> I think they [sponsors] are there to better support the industry because [...] it's a tough one financially [...] it's hard to make money from it. Sponsors are [a] crucial part of keeping the industry alive. (Fan 1)

Esports teams and players are thus faced with the challenge of not having the financial means to be selective with sponsors, even if they are unhealthy:

> I think that right now the industry is in a place where they just need money because it's not making that much money [...] I don't think they're really in a position to care realistically about which sponsorships they're taking. (Fan 5)

> As much as I don't like these brands being a part of the ecosystem, those brands need to be here in order for the whole ecosystem to grow. (Fan 6)

This feeling of reliance upon sponsorship and the precarity of the esports industry is also widely evidenced, with redundancies and sponsors pulling back (Esports Insider 2023).

Relatedly, the esports scene is deemed a '*wild west frontier*' (Player 5), with very little regulation or structured governance system in place that offers guidance and protection for sponsorship (Murray *et al.* 2022). Therefore, unhealthy product categories have entered the esports industry without scrutiny, casting doubt on its integrity and reputation:

> There is not a lot outside of your own due diligence to try and say, OK, maybe this company isn't the right one to work with. There's nothing there, there is nothing at the top end to say this brand we're working with cannot and should not work in this way. (Player 3)

If there is to be a wider regulatory framework governing esports sponsorship, a major challenge is the *imbalanced power nexus* that exists between stakeholders. Fans and players have very limited power in deciding which sponsorship their team should take. Several players expressed a desire to be involved in, or at least consulted on, decisions around which sponsors an esports team should take. Players see themselves as the 'face' of an esports team and so they want the opportunity to be involved in sponsor-related decisions, partly to protect their own brands:

> Players should definitely have more say because we're the ones representing whatever brand chosen. You know, we're the ones that have to take the flack, that have to bring our community to you, we're the ones that sell the product basically. And, to put it bluntly... we should have a say in what it is we're selling rather than just putting on a jersey and be OK, go do your thing. (Player 1)

Despite this desire for greater participation in sponsorship decision-making, several players felt they may be unable to voice their opinions:

> Normally, obviously the players' focus is the focus on the game. They're not going to be questioning who the sponsors are, who they're working with, because that player wants to be in the team. They're gonna be competing, so a player may be compelled to not rock the boat in that sense. (Player 3)

In the case of players, the precarity of contracts within esports contributes to a sense of power-lessness as they do not want to jeopardise their place on a team by expressing sentiments about a sponsor which might harm their team financially.

The fan perspective reveals a mixed picture around their involvement in sponsorship decisions. On the one hand, several fans explained that they do have a voice, often via social media, which has on occasion led esports teams to end particular sponsor relationships in the face of fan backlash:

> The fans do have a strong I guess governance or strong voice on social media. When they don't like something. . . they tell the companies or whoever is listening that, you know, they're gonna stop supporting that. (Fan 6)

On the other hand, Fan 8 alluded to a sense of powerlessness among fans, again suggesting a power imbalance within esports:

> At the end of the day, I'm just a fan and I don't think most companies value the opinions of their fans as much as they say they do [. . .], I highly doubt my opinion will be as valued as the company making money and winning championships. I would like to, [but] I don't think it's possible.

In this regard, several fans suggested that their role, if any, should be limited given their position and status within the esports ecosystem. As Fan 1 explained 'I don't think the fans should have an influence over that because it's not their money'. Fan 4 advocated for a little more fan voice, but again tempered this with a belief that fans perhaps lack the knowledge of esports team finances to play a major decision-making role:

> Of course, the fans have a say, but I don't think it should be a deciding factor of what the team does. . . That's not in a way to say, like we don't care. It's just a way to say you can very easily sway a decision. . .

Based on our findings, it appears that players and fans can be conceptualised as passive objects rather than active subjects in esports (Strittmatter *et al.* 2021), feeling limited in the power of their voice related to sponsorship matters. In contrast to the stakeholder involvement advocated within the literature on good governance (Geeraert *et al.* 2014, García and Welford 2015, Thompson *et al.* 2022), the findings suggest a lack of stakeholder representation in esports. Considering the power within esports regarding sponsorship, the findings identify fragmented esports governance (Peng *et al.* 2020) and imbalanced power dynamics. This also resonates with Houlihan's (2013) work suggesting that not all stakeholder groups (fans and players in this study) are aware of, and/or active in, their collective interests.

Esports sponsorship governance solutions

As discussed above, there is evidence of certain games banning particular sponsors from their competitions. For instance, Riot Games has excluded gambling sponsors from VALORANT and League of Legends (Esports Insider 2023). However, this approach further exemplifies the fragmentation and diversity within the esports ecosystem regarding which sponsors are and are not permitted. Several respondents called for some form of overarching, industry-level governance surrounding unhealthy brand sponsorship:

> I think that having some kind of governance across all games and all titles. . . would be really helpful in that case so that there is an industry standard rather than it being pick and choose and really inconsistent. (Fan 5)

To achieve this, *a concerted approach with all esports stakeholders* is called for by many participants to address the issues and challenges identified as regards the involvement of unhealthy sponsors in esports. This includes a shared effort amongst key actors and non-actors of the industry such as publishers, tournament organisers, teams, and governments.

Unsurprisingly, *publishers and tournament organisers* were identified to play a role in the governance of sponsorship. Given the power publishers possess within the esports industry, participants concurred that publishers should be more diligent:

> It should be down to game developers or if not them, then it should be down to the people who own the leagues to take the responsibility and say, look, I am sorry, but your sponsor does not meet our guidelines [. . .], they should draw a line in the sand. (Player 7)

> I think that's down to the teams and tournament organisers who actually get paid for the sponsorships as to whether they see fit. I think any regulation should come in when it comes down to things that might endanger or harm the consumer. (Fan 1)

Teams were also identified as playing an important role in governing esports, as Fan 10 commented, regarding alcohol sponsors:

> Teams should refrain from having certain sponsorships because it's their roles to choose healthy partnerships rather than the unhealthy ones [. . .], even if it's [less] economical for these organisations, they should still go with more safer brands and healthy ones that don't promote the wrong lifestyle to these people.

The role of g*overnments* in esports governance was much debated. Several participants expressed a desire for government responsibility in regulating esports sponsorship:

> I think the government definitely needs to get involved. The sooner the UK government realises that esports are just as big as traditional sports and should be treated like that, the better for everyone because you'll get higher quality sponsors, people in there who want to do it for the right reason because they're now tied by the government. (Player 1)

The involvement of the government could bring recognition of the significance of the esports industry. However, as a counter to this, several respondents suggested that governments may not yet be best placed to govern esports given a lack of industry understanding:

> I don't know enough about other governments to comment, but in the UK for example, I think it's quite clear that the government doesn't know enough about esports to make laws that regulate. . . they won't understand how to make that law and how to word it and how to actually implement it. And on the other hand, I also think they don't care about esports really all that much. So I think down the line in the future when it's more of a commonplace thing and when the generation shift happens, I think sure that can be something government takes responsibility for, but until they understand everything about what they're actually doing when it comes to esports I think that shouldn't be something they try to get their hand around, or they shouldn't try and take control of something they don't understand. (Player 7)

> I would look towards the government, but the government is made out of people that, you know, still fax their documents. (Fan 6)

There was also a recognition of the difficulty of a national government influencing international esports:

> I think it's very difficult for a government to do that sort of thing, especially when these games are played so internationally, if you've got a game with four different leagues and four different regions, then do you need four different governments to regulate exactly the same thing for that to work out? I think that's quite unreasonable. (Player 7)

It thus becomes clear that a multi-stakeholder model of sponsorship governance would be required to regulate and oversee the involvement of unhealthy sponsors within the esports ecosystem:

> Like every single problem that the government is tackling. . . they need to have all the information, they need to have all the data available for them and that unfortunately needs a lot of stakeholders to compile and showcase that this is a problem and we need to do something about it. (Fan 6)

Within such a multi-stakeholder approach there is also potential for incorporating the fan and player voices to provide an insider perspective alongside those offered by publisher, tournament organiser, team and government involvement. This aligns with stakeholder network governance which postulates that a successful governance network is one that recognises and appreciates the contributions and 'voices' of primary and secondary stakeholders (Strittmatter *et al.* 2021, p. 5). Hence, it is crucial to create channels for various stakeholders to participate in the decision-making process.

Alongside the extrinsic collective efforts by stakeholders in the industry, several respondents advocated a more powerful role for sponsors in regulating their own activities. While this does not negate the need for the governance structures proposed above, it does shift the narrative towards key actors displaying a greater degree of self-responsibility towards their target audiences:

> I think the sponsors do have a responsibility to maintain a certain level of respect or certain level of identity and a responsibility to the viewers, the followers that they should do right by them, promote the right products, promote the right services and not mislead or wrongly market their products. (Fan 3)

As a counter to this, a recurring theme from the data was *individual responsibilisation*, which highlighted a more intrinsic way of governing esports sponsorship. The findings surfaced the notion that consumers have autonomy when purchasing and consuming products and that they can exercise this autonomy when it comes to the choice of (un)healthy sponsors:

> It's more of a people's choice as to whether they buy these products and stuff, so it's less on the sponsors and the people who are sponsoring and it's more on the person who's watching, consuming to make that decision for themselves. (Fan 1)

> I think it's quite hard with the energy drink sort of stuff. Yeah, you can say it's unhealthy, but it's also like the option's there. It's not like 'here, have an energy and get that down you!' You're not making someone drink it, but it's there, you see it on a lot of casting decks. So its hard, yeah, it's unhealthy, but it's their choice as well. (Player 4)

Thus, instead of taking away consumer decision-making rights by regulating perceived unhealthy sponsors from the industry, participants argued that it was up to individuals to self-regulate and take responsibility for their individual decisions. According to Garland (2003), pp. 181–182) 'individuals are encouraged, provoked, and incited to engage in taking care of themselves, to the extent that [i]n late modernity not to engage in risk avoidance constitutes a failure to take care of the self'. Individual responsibilisation therefore suggests a desire for free market sponsorship, with individuals taking self-responsibility and governments playing a lesser role (Crawshaw 2012, Taylor-Gooby and Leruth 2018).

However, even while advocating for individual responsibilisation, as evidenced above, many participants identify a range of stakeholders who can and should exert influence within a sponsorship governance framework. As such, there was recognition, notably among players, of the need for some degree of input in the form of education:

> I think we're trying to solve the wrong problem here. We're trying to solve the problem of people making terrible decisions by taking away those decisions. A better solution to would be to educate them better so they understand it's a terrible decision. It's not a case of if you hide your Burger King advert, they'll eat healthy. That's kind of a mad way of fixing the problem. [I] think if people understand that it's unhealthy and you shouldn't eat it every day themselves and then, you've solved the problem. (Player 5)

The challenge becomes determining the balance between offering total consumer agency and facilitating some codes of practice to safeguard the integrity of esports and consumer health, all in the context of a current over-reliance of esports on sponsorship:

> It's a difficult one because you don't wanna govern it so much where you push sponsors away, but you don't want it to be so unrestricted that it's just a hurricane, that it is just a mess. . . you don't wanna push the sponsors out, but you don't want them to just flood in and start taking over with things that may be detrimental to the team or the players. (Fan 4)

Here, we again unearth echoes of the reality versus ideality debate, whereby fans and players are aware of some need for sponsorship governance within esports but at the same time are fearful of over-regulating to the point where it threatens the future of the industry. This points to the dilemma existing in the stakeholder governance literature, which is how to 'reconcile the conflicting economic and noneconomic interests of its multiple stakeholders' (Amis *et al*. 2020, p. 500). Some stakeholders such as esports teams and leagues might primarily focus on

economic returns, whereas others such as fans and some players can have interests that go well beyond narrow economic concerns. For example, some players are likely to be concerned about income but also have concerns about personal reputation and physical and mental health. Fans want to purchase products at the lowest price possible but may also have concerns about brands that potentially cause harm to vulnerable consumers. Therefore, managing the interests of multiple stakeholders in the esports governance network is difficult (Wang and Ran 2023).

By way of reconciling this challenge, some participants acknowledged the importance of individual capacity to make free choices, but also the usefulness of some regulation, and therefore suggested an integrated model of individual responsibilisation and light regulation support:

> Gamble responsibly. Drink responsibly. Eat responsibly as long as you're promoting a healthy balance and not just overdo everything [. . .] I also think there needs to be a lot more signage, safeguarding and forewarning into what could happen and a lot more restrictions as well. (Player 1)

> My opinion is that it's down to the individual to be responsible with it. There's not any sort of marketing thing you can do to stop people doing it. There's only like sort of guidelines you should be able to give to people to make sure it's done in in a safe environment. (Player 6)

Therefore, an alternative, individual responsibilisation governance model emerges, which requires individual capacity to make free choice partnered with information, moral guidelines, codes of conduct, and nonbinding rules (Giesler and Veresiu 2014, Pyysiäinen et al. 2017). In the context of the involvement of unhealthy brands in esports sponsorship, the aim of such a model is to permit consumer agency, but to provide information such that their choices are, as far as possible, informed choices (Pyysiäinen et al. 2017).

Conclusion

This paper set out to address two key research questions, namely, to identify what governance challenges are presented by the involvement of unhealthy brands in esports sponsorship and how sponsorship in esports might best be governed. Drawing upon sport governance-related literature, we advance two key theoretical contributions to the esports governance literature.

Theoretical implications

The findings reveal the esports sponsorship landscape to be likened to the 'wild west', characterised by an over-reliance on sponsorship revenue and little, if any, overarching governance, or top-down guidance. This is evident in a pragmatic attitude towards accepting sponsorship from unhealthy brands, largely justified on ensuring the survival and growth of the industry (Scelles et al. 2021). In this context, players and fans feel limited in the power of their voice in relation to sponsorship matters. We thus shed light on the intricate dynamics that impede effective governance revealing a fragmented esports governance landscape (Peng et al. 2020), characterised by imbalanced power dynamics and a lack of stakeholder representation. This represents the first theoretical contribution of the study.

Existing research has explored the stakeholder approach as a solution to esports governance-related issues (e.g. Peng et al. 2020); however, the governance models suggested by the previous studies have primarily centred around major players such as publishers or tournament organisers, with less attention paid to other key stakeholders such as players and fans. In exploring the challenge of how esports sponsorship might be governed in relation to the involvement of unhealthy brands, the findings reveal that a concerted approach from all stakeholders in the industry is needed. One avenue is government intervention, similar to those that apply to traditional sport (Bunn et al. 2019, Gonzalez et al. 2020). However, the findings suggest a lack of confidence in the UK governments' abilities to regulate due to their current perceived lack of understanding of esports. Instead, there is a need for wider representation of key stakeholders such as players and fans in the sponsorship

governance structure, given their knowledge of and centrality to the esports ecosystem (Scholz 2020).

This alone, however, is not enough. Our findings reveal strong support for the role of individual responsibility regarding engagement with unhealthy sponsors (Crawshaw 2012, Taylor-Gooby and Leruth 2018), supported by education around healthy consumption built into the communications and sponsorship activation activities of teams, leagues, publishers and sponsors. This should empower individuals with agency to make free choices, but choices which are informed through education around (un)healthy consumption of sponsor products and services. This is consistent with individual responsibilisation models of governance (Giesler and Veresiu 2014, Pyysiäinen *et al.* 2017).

To tackle the issues emerging from the involvement of unhealthy sponsors in esports and the necessity for a stream of sponsorship income, we thus propose an integrated governance model comprising a multistakeholder approach and individual responsibilisation. This involves a concerted governance approach, in which all stakeholders collaborate to create an overarching industrial network governance system. As part of this, everyone in the esports community is empowered to take responsibility for their decisions and actions, through processes of light regulation support and a greater role for education to promote healthy and balanced choices. Such a model thus supports a continued involvement of (un)healthy sponsors, which is critical to the sustainability and growth of esports but depicts a responsible esports industry in terms of a commitment to educate esports players and fans about healthy consumption. Being, to the best of our knowledge, the first exploration of the concept of individual responsiblisation in esports research, the proposal of such a model of governance represents our second key theoretical contribution.

Practical implications

Our findings provide three suggestions for policymakers and other stakeholders involved in the esports ecosystem. First, we recommend to policymakers that instead of bluntly removing or banning those unhealthy sponsors from esports, policymakers should acknowledge the economic needs of the esports community and learn to trust and empower these esports individuals in taking responsibility for their decision-making, through individual responsiblisation. At the same time, measures such as education initiatives can be introduced to ensure that sufficient knowledge is provided to esports consumers to make free and informed choices.

Second, we recommend that other stakeholders such as players and fans be more acutely aware of the power generated through their collective efforts, especially in protecting the integrity and reputation of the esports community from harmful brands. In addition, players and fans should take actions such as exercising their collective power and having their voice heard on important decisions. Here, stakeholders from the industry (e.g. governments, tournaments, publishers, sponsors) should also work collectively to channel voices and feedback from the community, of which fans and players are a crucial part.

Thirdly, for sports organisation or individuals who consider investing (e.g. NBA and its esports version NBA 2K) or sponsoring in esports (e.g. Mike Tyson sponsoring Fade 2 Karma), this study offers practical insights in terms of how to engage with the esports community for a better governance structure, which consequently will lead to a better investment environment.

Limitations and areas for future research

The esports industry is in different stages of development in different countries, notably around its recognition as a sport as well as in the power exerted by existing sponsorship regulations. Given the existing size and future aspirations for growth of the esports market in the UK, this study focused on UK-based fans and players. Future research should look to explore the views of players and fans internationally, to explore whether any differences emerge across developed and emerging esports

markets. Furthermore, such perspectives need to be kept under constant review, due to the ever-changing nature of the esports industry.

All participants in this study were aged under 50 years old and only a third were female. As the esports fanbase becomes increasingly diverse in terms of age and gender (Colormatics 2023), it would be insightful for future research to amplify the voice of older and female fans and players as key stakeholders within the esports ecosystem. The inclusion of the player voice is a key component of this study, yet we acknowledge the potential for social desirability bias, particularly, but not exclusively, among these participants, as they may feel an obligation to present esports in a positive light given their desire to grow the sport and protect their own livelihoods.

We hope that this study can be the springboard for future research within esports governance. As we identify the need for multi-stakeholder involvement within an integrated governance model of individual responsibilisation and light regulation support, such future work could look to involve additional stakeholders (e.g. sponsors, government, publishers) to further advance our understanding of what a model of esports sponsorship governance might look like and how this might be enacted.

Disclosure statement

ORCID

Matthew Hutchinson 🔗 http://orcid.org/0009-0005-5179-7237
Qi Peng 🔗 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8730-4458
Leah Gillooly 🔗 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1320-2803

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